

**Adventures into Digital Teaching, Learning, and Formation:  
A Case Study from Wartburg Theological Seminary**

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Wartburg Theological Seminary—one of seven seminaries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—is nestled in the rolling hills rising from the banks of the Mississippi River at Dubuque, Iowa. Modeled after the German fortress near Eisenach, where Martin Luther took flight from the Emperor and translated the New Testament into German, the tower stands tall behind the Luther statue, beckoning people to come and see. While not its original location, Wartburg Theological Seminary has dwelled in this location for nearly 130 years. The roots of the Lutheran legacy grow deeply in this soil.

This article invites you into a case study about adaption and change by a highly communal seminary that ironically is now developing a deeper understanding of its identity and how its historic DNA allows it to live out its mission of teaching, learning, and formation in unprecedented ways. We invite readers into this narrative about Wartburg’s adventure of transformation from serving exclusively as a deeply grounded residential school to the implementation of a highly innovative, hybrid curriculum. After reviewing our initial forays into distance education, this article explores what we now are doing, why we are doing it, why it matters, and what we are learning by venturing into a unified curriculum that employs dynamic new methods of delivery to better meet the needs of forming leaders for a church that is constantly changing.

*Wartburg’s Story: The Early Years*

Like most seminaries across the country, Wartburg’s history is grounded in residential theological education. This history originates with the vision of life together by Pastor Wilhelm Loehe, who in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century laid the foundations of the Loehe Legacy that still informs Wartburg’s values yet today.<sup>1</sup> The Mission Statement of the school has shaped its self-understanding for decades: “to serve the church through the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America by being a worship-centered community of critical theological reflection where learning leads to mission and mission informs learning.”<sup>2</sup> This mission shapes its identity as both a

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<sup>1</sup> Ann L. Fritschel, Craig L. Nesson, and Winston D. Persaud, “Loehe’s Legacy and the Apostolic Calling of Wartburg Theological Seminary for the Church and World in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” <https://www.wartburgseminary.edu/download/loehe-legacy/>

<sup>2</sup> Wartburg Theological Seminary Mission Statement, <https://www.wartburgseminary.edu/mission-and-vision/>

teaching organization and a learning organization, with each continually informing the other. Wartburg stands firm in its vocation to live for the flourishing of the church.

The Mission Statement continues: “The community embodies God’s mission by stewarding resources for engaging, equipping, and sending collaborative leaders who interpret, proclaim, and live the gospel of Jesus Christ for a world created for communion with God and in need of personal and social healing.” Note the strong presence of language that grounds the institution in place, location, and geography, especially the references to “embodies” and “sending.”

Wartburg has articulated a set of twelve Pastoral-Diaconal practices as curriculum outcomes to assess to the curriculum and its effectiveness in leader formation.<sup>3</sup>

- Practice of Being Rooted in the Gospel
- Practice of *Missio Dei* in Word and Sacrament
- Practice of Biblical and Theological Wisdom
- Practice of Ecclesial Partnership
- Practice of Complex Analysis
- Practice of Curiosity
- Practice of Pastoral Concern
- Practice of Personal Faith and Integrity
- Practice of Collegiality
- Practice of Evangelical Listening and Speaking the Faith to Others
- Practice of Immersion in the Context
- Practice of Engagement with Cross-Cultural and Global Dimensions

These practices are used to assess student progress at various milestones in the seminary journey, as well as at three and ten years after graduation. Wartburg Seminary’s core curriculum centers on the formation of leaders who demonstrate these Twelve Pastoral-Diaconal Practices for the life and mission of the church. These practices have guided the faculty through ongoing curriculum revision and innovation.

Wartburg undertakes continual assessment of the curriculum in partnership with synods to monitor the emerging developments in the church and world and make revisions that meet the needs of engaged, compassionate, and wise leaders for the 21st century church. These practices cultivate a distinctive set of highly relational leadership qualities.

### *Early Ventures in Distance Education*

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<sup>3</sup> Twelve Pastoral-Diaconal Practices, <https://www.wartburgseminary.edu/12-pastoral-diaconal-practices/>

With deep roots in the value and practice of residential education and formation, it should be no surprise that the Wartburg faculty was not eager to enter the world of distance learning. Faculty did not yet have access to email until 1998, which exemplifies how this new way of teaching was counter-cultural to everything we knew and believed about forming students for ministry leadership.

Within five years of the faculty receiving their first computers, Wartburg began in 2003 to offer courses online as part of a certificate program for lay leaders in rural ministry out of its Center for Theology and Land. This was followed by additional course offerings in the newly formed Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM) Program, a certificate program for ordination in Word and Sacrament ministry.<sup>4</sup>

In 2006 Wartburg offered its first ever online course in the master's curriculum. Four years later in 2010, the institution welcomed its first cohort in a fully distributed learning masters curriculum. This program was designed according to a five-year model, with on campus intensives in the summer and January. While these developments followed in fairly rapid succession, they were not without resistance. Many argued that Wartburg did not need to do what other schools were doing simply for the sake of keeping up. There was fear that our model of formation, grounded in residential learning from the beginning, was going to be sacrificed.

Yet the faculty persisted. Much to our surprise, the distributed learning (DL) students were fully engaged and being formed. We learned how to include them in the community and they were finding their voices. Assessment processes in place showed similar growth compared to residential students. The skeptics slowly were turning into believers.

It was not long, however, before we realized that we de facto had created two schools: a residential school and a distributed school. Onsite intensives were most often offered when residential students were not in session. Faculty found themselves teaching the same class twice any given semester, online and in the classroom. Institutionally, we were reduplicating our efforts rather than becoming more efficient.

In addition, while the distributed option offered an alternate model for access to theological education, it had real limitations. The DL model required several trips to campus, offsite locations for CPE, and cross-cultural courses in January. These were challenging for DL students, because most were employed and only had limited vacation time off from work. This approach also did not serve to reduce student debt, insofar as scholarships were not as readily available for DL students. Plus, it required that fifth year.

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<sup>4</sup> Theological Education for Emerging Ministries, <https://www.wartburgseminary.edu/theological-education-for-emerging-ministries/>

Faculty began to have serious conversations around these issues in fall semester 2015. At the same time, Wartburg was approached by a synodical bishop about how students from Wartburg might fill vacant pastoral positions while attending seminary. At the same time, the senior pastor of a large church inquired whether Wartburg would be interested in forming a new model, utilizing distance courses while students worked concurrently in their respective congregational sites.

Under the pressure of time, the faculty spent spring semester 2016 assessing and dreaming about possibilities. We asked ourselves tough questions: How do we educate and form leaders for a church that does not yet exist? What will leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century look like? Out of an intense series of creative sessions, a new way of approaching theological education emerged for Wartburg, one that was both wholly different and yet perfectly aligned with our core commitments, who we have been and who we want to become.

### *New Ways of Thinking*

In fall semester 2016, the first class of a newly designed curriculum was admitted. This approach was designed according to three models—residential, distributed, and collaborative—and two tracks—synchronous and asynchronous. It was and is a brave new experiment requiring a new way of thinking on the part of the faculty. Ironically, the initial discussions about curriculum revision did not reveal too many concerns about teaching content. We tweaked some existing courses, added some new ones, and let go of a few of the previously taught courses. By and large, the content we delivered was going to remain consistent. The major change came in delivery: Three learning models (RL, DL, and CL) and two learning tracks (synchronous and asynchronous).

The learning models refer to the path by which students earn a Master of Divinity Degree: Residential Learning (RL), Distributed Learning (DL), and Collaborative Learning (CL). RL students follow the more traditional path, moving or commuting to the seminary campus and being physically present for each class period. RL students normally do not join via video conferencing. CL students are placed in congregations during their entire seminary program (normally four years) and serve in ministry on half time basis while being expected to participate in all classes synchronously (in real time) via ZOOM. DL students also may access the classes remotely but have the option to participate either synchronously or asynchronously. DL students can make the decision on a class by class basis but are expected to commit at the beginning of the term to the same track for the entire semester.

This required more than a technical shift for the faculty and staff. While resources were allocated to renovate particular classrooms with the necessary interactive video technology, additional resources have been invested in training faculty how to design courses in a way that allow students to meet course objectives without privileging one model or track over the others. Faculty have participated in teaching and learning workshops lead by pedagogical specialists in digital teaching. Together we are developing a new language around design

thinking, flipped classrooms, and digital learning ecosystems. Wartburg created a new full-time staff position to focus on digital teaching methods to resource both faculty and students in their teaching and learning.

Beyond the challenges of introducing an extremely quick turnaround in learning the basics of the livestreaming technology just days before classes were scheduled to begin, the greater miracle of this shift is that faculty are “all in.” While there is a huge spectrum of comfort levels among the faculty as a whole (from early adapting innovators to those needing more time), moving forward with this new curriculum both in content and means of delivery was a unanimous decision. We all had to make the shift to the three-model, two-track approach, even those who were teaching courses that had been included in the previous curriculum. We have had to rethink all the basics about how we teach: how to design a syllabus, how to lecture, how to facilitate small group work, and even where to orient ourselves when teaching before a camera.

### *Learnings and Ongoing Questions*

This curriculum innovation has meant a paradigm shift for Wartburg Seminary. We are in a continual process of experimentation and assessment as we revisit assumptions about things that have been understood for decades. It is a major shift in our institutional culture. As a teaching and learning community, we are developing habits of ongoing experimentation and creativity. Here are some of the questions that are driving our ongoing work.

#### **What is formation and what is our institutional role in the formation of students?**

The goals of formation are grounded in the Twelve Pastoral-Diaconal Practices, which have guided and continue to direct our institution and in evaluating the effectiveness of the formation process. Through this new endeavor in digital teaching and learning, we are learning new ways not only as to how we measure it, but who is doing the measuring. What once took place through check-ins with students in refectory conversations or before and after class need to be expanded and revisited to include the new student populations.

New partnerships in the formation process with site supervisors and mentors serve as an obvious place for this because of the direct working relationship supervisors and mentors have with the CL students. But what about students in the DL track that are not serving in congregations? We understand the need to create a team of champions for each student that includes faculty advisors, candidacy committees, leaders in the local congregation, and designated mentors. The role of the seminary is key for facilitating and equipping the team of partners working together in the formation process during seminary and beyond.

## **What are the new roles of partners (congregations, synods, mentors, non-profit organizations, and clinical pastoral education sites) across all three models?**

This changing role of partners is significant for this paradigm shift. Historically, a limited number of congregations served as internship sites for students in the third year of their four-year degree program. Now collaborative congregations have the opportunity to walk with students for the entire four years of seminary—teaching, learning, and accompanying alongside the student for the journey.

The vital role and responsibility that partnerships have in all three models, particularly for the CL students, becomes even more indispensable for the ongoing formation of students. Stewarding resources to identify, nurture, and support partners are crucial. Resources for training supervisors and mentors in alignment with the educational and formation process need to be developed, as well as tools for discernment among each of these organizations and roles. Moreover, it is incumbent on the seminary to be in a state of readiness to learn from these partners, including especially the congregations, supervisors, and mentors who are working with our students on a daily basis.

While it is not uncommon for congregations to feel called to contribute to the education of future church leaders, not all congregations are called to be CL sites and to be committed to serving as teaching and learning sites. Some congregations might be better suited to serve as senders of candidates, provide financial support, or host discernment retreats. Wartburg is working on developing criteria to assist congregations to discern how they might best be called to participate in the formation of leaders for the church that goes beyond their capacity merely to serve as collaborative congregations or internship sites.

## **How do we measure student learning, not only in the classroom but beyond the classroom? How do we gather feedback and what do we do with it?**

The addition of new models and tracks in theological education demands new forms of accumulating and assessing data. Wartburg has built on previous methods of assessment collection by adding real time listening posts to gather student feedback. Regular faculty conversation takes place both formally and informally about what we are learning in and out of the classroom.

Gathering information is only the first step, however. We need feedback mechanisms in place to make midcourse corrections as needed. Becoming nimble as an organization has been crucial for our ability to learn and respond, vision and execute. We are learning that there is a fine line between being an institution that responds to the actual needs of students and creating a culture where students expect every desire to be satisfied. This issue is related to the increased expectations made by students in a consumer culture.

## **How does innovation serve our institution and grow out of our DNA, in order to move us deeper into our mission, rather than becoming an end in itself?**

Wartburg Seminary must ask itself continually how it can embrace innovation in theological education without sacrificing its core identity and values. Part of the work we are doing institutionally is to create a culture of creativity. Based on design theory, we have created a process of innovation and experimentation. This approach is based on clear criteria that move new ideas from an initial concept to become fully integrated into the life of the organization.

This means that intentional assessment must be built in to the process, to determine whether an idea should continue to move forward, be placed on hiatus, or completely released and let go. Creating this process has been and continues to be the first step in becoming truly open to the work of the Spirit in our midst in ways that welcome new learnings, including the possibility of failure, and encourages accountable creativity. The final measure of success remains the mission of the seminary and its strategic plan, which is based on the mission of the institution.

## **How do we help students discern which is the right model for them?**

Congregations are not the only ones in need of discernment about the character of partnership. Not every student will thrive or even succeed in the collaborative or distributed learning models. Honestly, some students really need to be in residential learning, not only to meet their own learning and formation goals but to flourish. Wartburg is intentional in listening to prospective students from the very beginning of the inquiry stage. Too often, distributed learning is misperceived as the model of convenience, to avoid the hassle of leaving one's present home and circumstances. This attitude is contrary to our theology of call and vocation. All students need to be challenged to understand that ministry is countercultural in being primarily for the sake of others and the needs of the larger church. Wartburg has developed holistic language to talk about institutional culture, the need for learning and formation, and respecting one's own life responsibilities.

Students in all models make sacrifices. Faculty and staff work closely with syllabi, process, procedures, and student conversations to create a culture where decisions can be made based on the learning needs of the particular student. Sometimes that can mean a model or track change after the program has started. We understand that there is value added for each model and each track. Students in residential learning bring the richness of campus life, including the many extracurricular events to enrich the entire teaching and learning community. Students in distributed learning bring their involvements in daily work, local community, and congregational participation to enhance the learning of others. Students in collaborative learning bring their daily and weekly immersion in congregational ministry to help contextualize the learning of all in relation to congregational realities. It is important that students discover that model and track that most enhances their own learning and formation.

## **In what ways have these new models and tracks changed how faculty understand themselves as teachers and advisors of students?**

This paradigm shift forces each member of the faculty to rethink how one teaches. Traditional understandings of teaching often have been grounded on what the teacher brings to the classroom and how students engage the content provided by instructor. Most of us in this way learned to teach according to how we were taught, primarily toward the mastery of content. In a digitally hybrid learning environment, the teacher's role is transformed. How do we curate and creatively introduce course content employing methods that students in all models and tracks can access and engage to meet the learning objectives in a measurable way? This means that we must become more intentional as teachers, proactive in thinking about course design according to the learning objectives.

The faculty member no longer serves as the only instructor in the class. Moving into a digital, hybrid classroom is not about translating a course from in the residential classroom to an online format. It is about rethinking how all students are taught, both synchronously and asynchronously. Content can be engaged in multiple ways, including these three: 1) From the instructor to the student. Here the instructor brings lectures, readings, and other voices to the learning community and creates the structures whereby students engage the content. The instructor provides individual student feedback through the traditional methods (grades, rubrics, comments, etc.). 2) From student to student. In a hybrid classroom, students are not able to hide in post and reply forums. Learning opportunities are created and structured, so that students across all models and tracks can hear each other's voices. 3) From their respective contexts to the teaching and learning community. Students bring their whole and varied lives to class. For example, when hurricanes Harvey and Irma made landfall, power and internet disruptions meant that students in those areas of the country were interrupted in their ability to 'come to class' in Iowa. Residential students who were physically in the classroom accompanied the DL and CL students affected by those storms.

We need to add a fourth dimension to this expansive learning community. Congregational sites where CL students are serving in ministry also become part of the classroom learning community. It is not uncommon for insights from a class on the Lutheran Confessions in the morning to find their way into a confirmation class in the evening. In lieu of a final paper for a particular course this past semester, one student co-taught a course with a faculty member using livestreaming by ZOOM with members of their congregation. Another co-hosted a four-week Facebook live Bible Study with the course instructor.

In a grant provided by the Association of Theological Schools for innovative initiatives, Wartburg Seminary's theme has involved "Building a Shared Learning Community Among Seminary, Congregations, and Synods." At the heart of the grant activities has been the development of a new paradigm for thinking about academic advising. We have aimed at transforming faculty advising from focusing mainly on meeting academic and candidacy requirements to a paradigm that encompasses holistic formation of students in all three models from the time of admission to seminary to graduation and first call theological education. The faculty has explored "advising as formation" by developing best practices with students in all three models, including the use of digital competencies for advising as formation.

In this grant initiative we have begun to provide training for congregations, supervisors, and mentors for becoming more effective partners in the teaching, learning, and formation of students in the collaborative model. Through faculty visits to collaborative students,

supervisors, and congregations we have sought to develop mutuality between collaborative congregations and the seminary, so that the seminary curriculum is transformed by experiences from congregations hosting collaborative students and that collaborative congregations are enriched by the teaching and learning resources of the seminary faculty. Additional teaching experiments between faculty and collaborative students also have been undertaken.

### **Who are the students and how do they relate to and learn from one another?**

Part of the ongoing work of Wartburg Seminary is to constantly revisit its institutional understanding of the meaning of “community.” Our rich history of defining community primarily in terms of sharing a geographical location has been tested by our desire to expand into digital learning. We have learned that our paradigm shift in the delivery of teaching and learning does not merely involve replicating traditional understandings of community so much as living into a new definition of community that is evolving in continuity from the previously embodied reality.

We are discovering the value of seeing our diverse set of learners as a wholistic learning community, not as separate types with different labels. Like siblings, each unique student in each particular model within each specific track has certain learning needs. But that does not mean we all cannot share a common identity as members of the one Wartburg community. We start with a focus on community formation from the very beginning of each semester. The first week of every semester, called Prolog Week, is a time where all students, in all models and tracks are required to be on campus. An alternative, intensive week schedule provides six contact hours for each course, where students and instructors gather together in person. Faculty plan that time intentionally for relationship building, not primarily for content delivery. Evening reading or writing assignments are kept to a minimum, so students have time to gather on their own in groups, spending time in conversation, rest, and play. Digital access to courses is not available during Prolog Week. By the end of this week every student knows the face and name of every other student in each class.

In addition, faculty design different degrees of connection among students across models and tracks throughout the semester. Course goals and instructor proclivities dictate the extent and creativity in faculty-student interactions among those in the various models. One faculty teaching team design their course around units, with each unit containing at least one class activity where students pair up across tracks, who meet together to work through a shared project. Pairings are determined by the instructors to assure conversations across models and tracks.

### **How do we distinguish between equity and equality regarding student access and experience?**

Initially we were worried that having students join by livestreaming would be a distraction for the residential students. To be honest, some of the returning residential students struggled at first with having the classroom ‘disrupted’ by the synchronous interlopers. We listened carefully and patiently to their concerns. But in the end we have worked hard not to privilege one group of learners above another. When teaching and learning is done well – intentionally and with creativity – the involvement of students in each model raises the bar for the other two.

Because of Wartburg’s digital learning adventures, residential teaching and learning has become stronger and better. Students in the classroom are invited to login to ZOOM to participate in

breakout sessions with the synchronous students, but they are also not required to do so. Each of the models and tracks inform and shape the others. We become better teachers and students by sharing the same classroom, thus diminishing the possibility of sibling rivalry by avoiding the prioritizing of one over the other. There is value added for the entire teaching and learning community across the spectrum.

### *Learning Pastoral Imagination in Congregational Contexts*

The Wartburg faculty has been stimulated in its reconfiguration of our new hybrid curriculum by the *Learning Pastoral Imagination* project of Auburn Seminary. Christian A.B. Scharen and Eileen R. Campbell-Reed write about the aims of this research:

We find through listening to ministry leaders across the country that ministry today is less about exercising the authority of an office or role and more about embodying an authentic contextual wisdom only gained by daily practice of leadership on the long arc of learning ministry. Yet few studies of learning over time have been conducted, leading to this unique, broadly ecumenical, and national study of learning ministry in practice. . . This study deepens engagement of Auburn research on patterns of teaching and learning in theological education, offering a dynamic view into the formation of faith leaders for the twenty-first century.<sup>5</sup>

The deep commitment to learning in context, specifically congregational contexts, informs the Wartburg faculty's commitment to the development of the unified curriculum, which for collaborative students places new focus on learning by apprenticeship.

We are finding that our adventure in digital teaching and learning is directly related to the six key findings of the *Learning Pastoral Imagination* study:

- Learning pastoral imagination happens best in formation for ministry that is integrative, embodied, and relational;
- Learning pastoral imagination centers on integrated teaching that understands and articulates the challenges of the practice of ministry today;
- Learning pastoral imagination requires both the daily practice of ministry over time and critical moments that may arise from crisis or clarity.
- Learning pastoral imagination requires both apprenticeship to a situation and mentors who offer relational wisdom through shared reflection and making sense of a situation;
- Learning pastoral imagination is complicated by the intersection of social and personal forces of injustice;

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<sup>5</sup> Christian A.B. Scharen and Eileen R. Campbell-Reed, "Learning Pastoral Imagination: A Five-Year Report on How New Ministers Learn in Practice," (Auburn Studies, Winter 2016) <http://pastoralimagination.com/>

- Learning pastoral imagination is needed for inhabiting ministry as a spiritual practice, opening up self and community to the presence and power of God.<sup>6</sup>

Wartburg Seminary finds itself on an adventure to explore the implications of this research for theological education as a living case study: 1) The shift from a textual paradigm to a contextual paradigm; 2) Taking account of the education and formation of the whole person—especially concerns for the personal impact of social injustice upon students; 3) To support developmental learning over a lifetime; 4) To cultivate teachers who know the game of ministry; and 5) That relationship to God is at the heart of forming wise pastoral leaders.<sup>7</sup>

The process of theological education and formation is lifelong. In our longitudinal assessment of students and alumni, we have discovered that theological education is far from completed at the time of graduation. Pastors three years after graduation seem stalled in their ongoing development, while those ten years after graduation appear on average to demonstrate steady decline based on assessment in relation to the Twelve Pastoral-Diaconal Practices.<sup>8</sup>

We need to set realistic yet robust continuing education expectations for pastors upon completion of their Master of Divinity degree. Other professions understand that excellence in practice needs to develop throughout the entire course of one's career, extending far beyond the completion of a professional degree. Such a paradigm challenges those of us in the church and theological education to begin thinking about education and formation for ministry according to five stages: novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and expert on the way to mastery.<sup>9</sup>

Normally, a seminary education should be expected to lead graduates to the third stage of competent. This paradigm undermines the conventional expectation that a seminary education should have taught pastors everything they need to know. What measures are necessary to challenge ministry practitioners to continue their professional growth beyond the attainment of competence toward proficiency and expertise in the mastery of the pastoral arts?

The employment of digital methods of teaching and learning has great promise also for transforming the character of continuing education in the church, as we continue to deepen what it means to learn pastoral imagination in context also among those already serving in pastoral ministry. The full implications of Wartburg's adventure in digital teaching have only begun to be

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 46-53.

<sup>8</sup> Longitudinal Assessment by Wartburg Theological Seminary based on the Twelve Pastoral-Diaconal Practices, <http://pastoralimagination.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/CSTE-LPI-030116.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Christian Scharen, "Learning Ministry over Time: Embodying Practical Wisdom," in Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, eds., *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 265-288.

discovered. We will continue to seek out ways to partner with others to extend theological education not only with the new candidates for ministry urgently needed as leaders in the church, but all the more we also will seek out theological education partners for the lifelong learning of pastors and the congregations where they serve.