

**Peer-Group Intimacy and Video-Teleconferencing:
A Response and Reflections by a
CPE Supervisory Education Peer-Group**

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The four of us are Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, Inc. (ACPE) Supervisory Education Students located in Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Centers in four different states—Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. We each joined this VA-specific peer group as a special interest group, supervising students about veterans’ issues. Also, each of us participates in a face-to-face peer group in our local areas. We are an example of what Gary Sartain alludes to in his article about a group of students logging in from separate sites. We make use of the VA system-wide technology, V-Tel, which Jeffrey Silberman refers to in his essay, meeting online for two hours every other week with a primary Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) Training Supervisor. Our shared experimentation with the format has enabled us to form a group that is uniquely our own. Initially, we found it awkward to replicate a traditional CPE Interpersonal Relations Group online. So instead, we focused our time together on presenting case studies and theory papers. To our surprise, significant intimacy developed in our relationships. We have not only become an “I-It” group with a task: we have discovered also the power and shared intimacy of being an “I-Thou” group by sharing the vulnerabilities in our respective CPE journeys. Each of us offers a reflection on how we have experienced this digital form of supervisory education.



Holding a Mirror: Awkwardness Facilitates New Behaviors

Kurt Shaffert

Martha Rutland's description of a student learning from the challenges of the medium of communication makes sense to me. Both CPE training and the teleconference format challenge me to practice sharing myself in new ways. For instance, in the technology that we use, I see a picture of myself alongside pictures of each of my peers on the screen. In this way, I have a mirror held up to me—while seeing myself, I see the facial expressions of my peers reacting to my sharing. No matter how much I try to relate in my usual ways, this is both awkward and challenging for me. When there is a delay in the response time of the connection line or when the screen suddenly breaks into crazy patterns, we laugh and vent together. The awkwardness of this group form normalizes the clumsiness of this opportunity to try new behaviors. In these shared uncomfortable experiences, I find we share a kind of graciousness and gracefulness together as we explore new ways of relating. Through, and perhaps because of, these challenges, the space between us is alive to me. The unexpected bonus for me is that I can see myself as I relate to others in this online group. In face-to-face groups, others may give me feedback, but in our teleconference meetings I have the immediate mirroring of my interactions alongside their responses. That shared mirroring has intensified the intimacy for me.

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Pastoral Intentionality Beyond Touch

Patrick Whiteford

One learning-tool from any CPE experience has been the importance of appropriate, and pastoral, touch. Holding someone's hand, anointing at the moments of death, offering a supportive hug—all of these have been sacramental moments that have helped to create a tangible connection between myself and another. My experience of this VA-based online peer group has deepened my sense of how we make connection with each other beyond touch. Despite the inability to offer a peer my physically tangible affirmation, my experience of our group affirms that connection is possible. For ex-

ample, a recent confrontation with a peer resulted in increased understanding and bonding between the two of us. This interaction had a nurturing effect on the entire group because it expanded our sense of connection and community. Our relationship as a peer-group has grown out of our collective intentionality of purpose. Even though we cannot physically touch one another, I feel a sense of loss if I cannot be present for one of our calls—it means that I have missed an opportunity to deepen my connection with my colleagues. I think my sense of loss when missing an interaction with the group reflects the greater intentionality we all share in nurturing and sustaining our group. It is a remarkable experience of intimacy beyond touch.

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A Distance which Frees

Mary Q. Browne

Knowing that we do not work together, or even live in the same state, has enabled me to be genuine and open with this peer-group. Because of the distance, I feel safer in disclosing very personal information. Over the V-Tel, I can see myself in relation to the others on the screen and I can watch their reactions. We have just enough distance to be comfortable, yet intimate. In risking video-vulnerability, I have felt acceptance. I am honored to experience gentle, kind, yet challenging, reactions. While we share personal details and offer feedback and critique, we grow in our relationship on an emotional and spiritual level—there is holiness in this intimate communication. Both our togetherness and our separateness are more obvious, even more intentional, via video than if all participants were in the same room sharing the same space. On a theological level, this demonstrates the tension between transcendence and imminence. The peers are out there, intimately connected to me, but not “in” me until we interact. I then carry them with me in my heart. Even at a distance, we share sacred space.

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Lag-time as Process

Elizabeth Putnam

The lag in communication of my “self” and the group on the screen is itself a reflection of the process of being a part of a group across distance. Early on, if something happened that needed processing, it might wait until the next session, as it took longer for the reaction to be clear. We still have that delay sometimes. Recently I felt that an interchange between myself and a peer raised tension. I checked it out and my peer said, “No, no tension; just interesting differences.” The next time we met online, my peer said, “Yes, there had been a tense reaction.” There was a lag time required to get us both onscreen and communicating. Shortly thereafter, I opened up some of my most sensitive places for reflection and discussion, and found that the group, over a great distance, could bring both learning and caring. On the day of our first hug over the screen as we said good bye, I remembered my Supervisor’s words to me when I first heard about this new format: “CPE groups over the V-Tel screen work.”

In sum, we are all essentially saying that the “screen” acts as a mirror for ourselves in group process, much like the parallel process of ministering out of our own experience. We all value the distance, which frees us to explore our own “stuff” and to interact with less fear. As we have taken risks, we have increased our personal vulnerability, and thereby, grown closer and our conversations have become more intimate. While this format has its inherent limits, this group has been “good enough” for our learning together.

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