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**Pedagogical Interventions in the Teaching of Ethnography  
for Contextual Ministry Education  
A Grant Proposal**

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## I. Abstract

The Graduate School of Theology at Abilene Christian University (ACU) is seeking a grant to conduct research into new approaches for innovative contextual education using mobile technology. Contextual education is a centerpiece of seminary preparation for ministry. ACU is a national leader in the use of mobile technology in higher education and has built an infrastructure that will support this research. The investigators for this project bring together a wealth of mobile learning research experience, ministry preparation, technical expertise, and student perspectives. Short, medium, and long-term outcomes will be measured and based on these results the research will be submitted for publication.

## II. Proposal

The Graduate School of Theology (GST) at Abilene Christian University (ACU) is asking the James A. “Buddy” Davidson Charitable Foundation for a grant of \$10,000 in order to better prepare students for the rigors and demands of ministry by better identifying the expectations of their chosen ministry context through the use of technology.

### 1. Problem

Perhaps the most important demand of a seminary is to prepare students for ministry in the various contexts. One of the best tools for this is *ethnography*, which is the practice of documenting the history, demographics, stories, traditions, people, and events that happen in a ministry context and then reflecting back upon them. As Moschella writes, “Leaders who use ethnographic research can come to understand the currents of institutional life and how they can suddenly become treacherous. The forceful water doesn't go away as a result of studying it and being aware of it, but the study can help you learn how to navigate it.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, navigating these waters is difficult, at best, and is a skill that students should learn in order to be successful in their ministry.

### 2. Solution

The teaching and practice of ethnography is currently taught in Contexts of Ministry (BIBM 640). First, students are asked to identify the ministry context that they are passionate about and select one from a list of multiple tracks, including: Community Development and Social Justice, Congregational Nurture and Transformation, Global Contexts and Emerging Church Forms, and Chaplaincy. The current model of practicing ethnography is to use audio recorders and handwritten field notes to capture interviews and live events. The audio and notes are then processed and presented in class. Ethnographic research results in voluminous data sets that are overwhelming to first-time users. The techniques used to process and analyze the data involve tedious hours, complex coding

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 7.

methods, or expensive software packages like NVivo 9.<sup>2</sup> This slow process is not always successful due to either the student's inadequate technical skills or because of the time difference between original audio capture, editing, and final presentation. Additionally, the purpose of the contextual education program is not to train ethnographers but to enhance ministers' abilities to be contextually reflective practitioners.

This project proposes a pedagogical intervention to introduce technology into the classroom that will increase the efficacy of teaching and learning ethnography. The newest mobile devices can allow students to record video, document it as it is recording, immediately share the video with colleagues, and receive rapid feedback including prolonged theological discussion. In addition to this, the iPad by Apple offers a full-sized keyboard allowing researchers to quickly type notes during an event, can instantly save these reports to the cloud for backup, and the data captured can very quickly and easily be turned into a full presentation. The iPad provides an excellent way to accomplish all the needs of ethnographic research while also organizing field notes, audio, video, responses from teachers and fellow students, and specialized apps to facilitate study. Other mobile devices offer cameras and audio recorders, but no other device offers complete ethnographic research support so effectively. The kinds of interactions facilitated by the iPad can happen long before students reach the classroom allowing them to react to the works of their peers days or weeks before classroom presentation. The benefit of such a high level of collaboration cannot be overstated. With students sharing and discussing their ethnographic work outside the classroom, what happens inside the classroom will become vastly superior to the previous model. Moreover, the required technical skill of the student to accomplish these tasks with the latest mobile technology has become minimal. In order to improve the teaching and practice of this essential ministry skill the newest mobile technology will be provided to the students allowing them to perform innovative ethnographic studies.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.qsrinternational.com/products\\_nvivo.aspx](http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx)

### 3. Qualifications

With a vibrant Contextual Education program already in place (a 15 hour core requirement for the Master of Divinity degree), the GST is poised to successfully implement the new technology piece into an already working program. In addition, there is a larger technology framework available at ACU that will improve the chances of success. ACU is a national leader in mobile learning and the Mobile Learning Initiative at ACU continues to push the boundaries of how mobile technology can be implemented in the classroom.<sup>3</sup> The Adams Center at ACU supports this effort through training sessions, technical support, and custom applications made specifically for the mobile devices.

The Principal Investigator, Dr. Scott Perkins, was integral in bringing the Mobile Learning Initiative to ACU and is currently the Director of Research. Co-investigator Dr. Tim Sensing is the Director of Academic Services for the GST and professor for BIBM 640 Contexts of Ministry. Dr. Sensing has worked with ethnographic research methods in ministry contexts and has taught the research methodologies class for Doctor of Ministry students for the past thirteen years.<sup>4</sup> Co-investigator James Prather has undergraduate and graduate degrees in computer science and related fields and has taught computer science at ACU as an adjunct. Mr. Prather is also a student in the GST and serves as the President of the Graduate Student Association. This team provides excellent collaboration in mobile learning, contextual education, technical expertise, and student perspectives.

### 4. Implementation

A large part of the grant money will be used to purchase new mobile technology. A small group of students going into Contexts of Ministry (BIBM 640) will be trained in device usage at the Adams Center. This training will consist of one session where students are taught how to use the device for the purpose of ethnography. Students will then use these devices to carry out innovative ethnographic

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<sup>3</sup> Abilene Christian University. "2009-10 Mobile Learning Report." <http://www.acu.edu/promise/innovative/mlreport2009-10.html> (accessed October 18, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

research within their chosen context. The ethnographic research created by these students will be measured by standard evaluation methods for qualitative research. Throughout their work the students will be monitored in order to gauge effectiveness and allow the investigators to make corrections in program implementation as necessary.

## 5. Outcomes

(1) Short-term outcomes: Students will be given comprehensive preparation for ethnographic study in their chosen context. Students will also prepare reflections on the process and present their work on campus, at conferences, and in journals. Because of the nature of this project, it has the potential to be of interest to conferences and journals focusing on the topics of technology, biblical studies, and education.

### Short-term outcomes measured:

- Practicing ethnography on such a high level will foster the pedagogical efficacy of the assignment by enhancing students' ability to see their chosen context in deeper ways.
- Students will submit a presentation proposal for ACU Summit, which is one of the largest annual ministry conferences.
- Researchers will submit results to at least one journal.
- Researchers will submit to present research findings at Association for Theological Field Educators, January 2013, Williamsburg VA.

(2) Medium-term outcomes: If the intervention is successful, a larger implementation could be considered. ACU has other graduate programs that could all benefit from innovative uses of new mobile technology. Examples include seminary students who could use touchscreen devices for improved language studies and the Master of Marriage and Family Therapy program where mobile devices could be used in innovative ways within counseling sessions.

### Medium-term outcomes measured:

- Pending the success of the project, more grants will be sought to carry on the research in larger ways and various cohorts. The findings of this project will serve as the cornerstone from which to build greater innovation in graduate study.
- Collaboration with all departments within the ACU Graduate School is already under way and will continue. Most of the graduate departments at ACU could benefit from the features of the iPad that we are proposing for ethnographic study. A technology survey has already been taken, polling students to find out other ways they would use new mobile technology in their fields of study. This poll has revealed many excellent ideas.
  - Graduate Psychology students have noted that they would use the iPads in therapy sessions to do the initial intake information, do worksheets like thought diagrams, and also have session ratings scales (ORS/SRS) be digital.
  - Some other ideas within the GST have been for the use of language study where apps allow the student to see the ancient language on the screen and tap any word to immediately find its lexical definition or search through thousands of texts using one Hebrew or Greek word. This level of study is not possible with textbooks.
  - Graduate Speech-Language Pathology students have recommended the use of the iPad for therapy sessions as multiple apps can be used as therapy tools.<sup>5</sup>
  - Students in graduate history, English, social work, global IT, and more all responded with numerous ideas on how they would use this technology in their study and practice.

(3) Long-term outcomes: The complete long-term outcomes are yet to be fully determined.

Assuming that the use of new mobile technology in ethnographic study will enhance the efficacy of the

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<sup>5</sup> An entire website is dedicated to iOS apps that benefit these professionals: <http://www.geekslp.com/>



pedagogy, a few questions remain unanswered. What does it look like when students leave seminary equipped to do excellent ethnography? How does it affect their ministry and the lives of those they minister to? It is possible that such a study could even impact major problems such as ministry burnout by providing students with more realistic expectations.<sup>6</sup> There are, however, some long-term goals that the GST already seeks and measures in its graduate students. Some of these objectives can be used to measure the success of this project.

Long-term outcomes measured:

- Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs):<sup>7</sup>
  - Ministerial Identity: Do students have a better understanding of their internal and external vocations? Do students have a better grasp of their motivations to pursue ministry or other related fields?
  - Communication: Did this project improve student ability to communicate within their context? Did this project improve student ability to communicate effectively the nature and challenges of their context with outsiders?
  - Contemporary Culture: Do students have a better grasp of the unique culture of their context? What role did the mobile device play in a student's ability to synthesize culture and ministry in their context?
- Each of the above outcomes will be measured by three focus groups:
  - Insiders: a subset of the students will form a focus group to measure their own competency in achieving these outcomes.
  - Outsiders: a select group of those who worked with the students in their chosen

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<sup>6</sup> Maureen H. Miner, Martin Dowson, Sam Sterland, "Ministry orientation and ministry outcomes: Evaluation of a new multidimensional model of clergy burnout and job satisfaction," in *Journal of Occupational & Organizational Psychology* (Mar 2010, Vol. 83 Iss. 1): 168. This study concluded that as many as half of the questioned ministers were either burnt out or at risk of burnout.

<sup>7</sup> The select SLOs are taken from the GST's Assessment Plan for evaluating the educational goals of the seminary.

ministry context will be chosen to form a second focus group.

- Researchers: the investigators will gather and analyze field notes following a prescribed protocol.

## 6. Bibliography

Abilene Christian University. "2009-10 Mobile Learning Report." Abilene Christian University, a Christian college in Abilene, Texas. <http://www.acu.edu/promise/innovative/mlreport2009-10.html> (accessed October 18, 2011).

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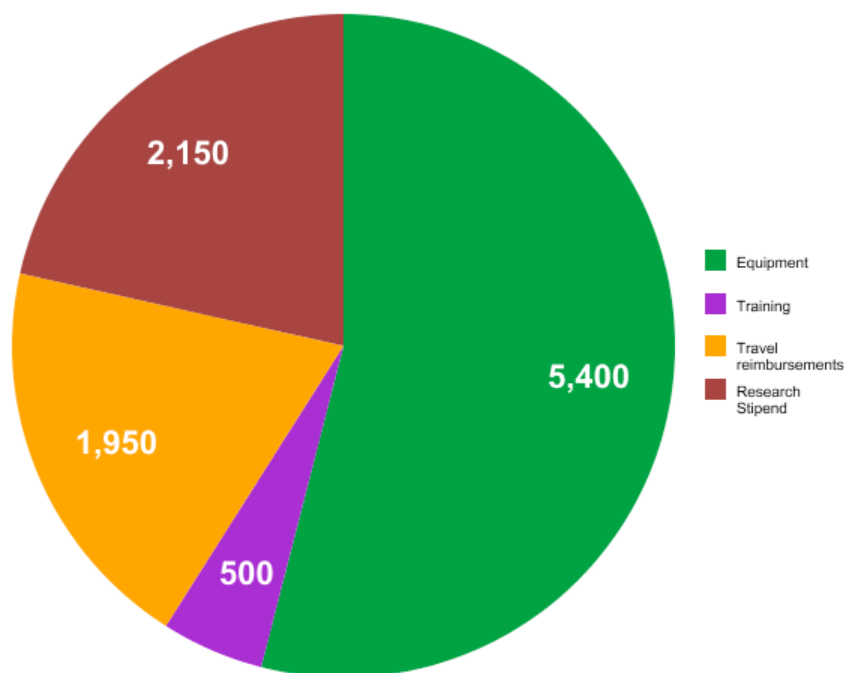
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Sensing, Timothy. *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011.

### III. Appendix A: Budget

Item	Description	Cost
iPads	Equipment to facilitate innovative ethnographic studies for ten students	$\$500.00 \times 10 = \mathbf{\$5,400.00}$ (including tax of \$0.08/dollar)
Training	Cost of putting on training at the Adams Center	<b>\$500.00</b>
Travel reimbursements	Allows up to 3 students to travel to conferences to present their work. Includes flight ticket, hotel for one night, and 3 meals.	$\$650 \times 3 = \mathbf{\$1,950.00}$
Stipend for the investigators	Time reimbursement for investigators to allow some compensation during pursuit of the research.	<b>\$2,150.00</b>
	<b>Total:</b>	<b>\$10,000.00</b>

**Figure 1: Budget Chart**



#### IV. Appendix B: Logic Model

Resources	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Impact	Indicators
<i>In order to accomplish our set of activities we will need the following:</i>	<i>In order to address our problem we will accomplish the following activities:</i>	<i>We expect that once accomplished these activities will produce the following results:</i>	<i>We expect that if accomplished these activities will lead to the following changes 1 year:</i>	<i>We expect that if accomplished these activities will lead to the following changes in 7–10 years:</i>	<i>The following indicators will be measured in order to assess the intervention:</i>
<p>ACU Mobile Learning Initiative</p> <p>ACU Adams Center mobile technology support and design expertise</p> <p>Investigators have previous research experience in this field along with technical expertise in both ministry and technology</p> <p>Equipment to facilitate innovative ethnography</p>	<p>Train students in the use of mobile technology for ethnographic study</p> <p>Conduct ethnography in multiple ministry contexts using mobile technology</p>	<p>Students will be more adequately prepared for their chosen ministry context OR they will discover the need to find a new one before entry into ministry</p> <p>New ways of practicing ethnography will be discovered</p> <p>Present research findings through conferences and journals</p> <p>Expose students to research methods and presentation at professional conferences</p>	<p>The ability to do ethnography in ministry contexts will be improved.</p> <p>The pedagogy of teaching ethnography will be expanded.</p> <p>The use of mobile technology in graduate learning will be further researched.</p>	<p>Churches, hospitals, military units, missions, and more will all be affected by the results of this research. Giving ministers the tools to successfully navigate the undercurrents of a context should dramatically increase their effectiveness and therefore potentially impact the lives of millions.</p>	<p>The select SLOs identified by the GST are described in detail above and include Ministerial Identity, Communication, and Contemporary Culture</p>
Data Sources	Collection Methods	Analysis Strategy			
<p>Student participants, select participants from the students' context, and researchers' observations</p>	<p>Student assignments, focus groups, field notes.</p>	<p>The primary data sets will be analyzed using standard coding practices in content analysis seeking themes and patterns, and data incongruencies and silences.</p>			