

# **Five Professorial Practices that Enhance Effectiveness in the Preaching Classroom**

Ervin R. Stutzman

Eastern Mennonite Seminary

August 1, 2005

Professors in seminaries and theological schools intend that their homiletics courses equip students for greater preaching effectiveness. Yet some classroom settings are more effective in preaching pedagogy than others. This paper advocates five professorial practices that can enhance the standard homiletics classroom processes of teaching and learning.

## **INTRODUCTION**

As a professor of preaching, I assume that most homiletics classes share several “standard” practices: 1) sermons delivered by students in class with professorial feedback, 2) class lectures on preaching theory and practice, 3) study of assigned texts, 4) research or reflection papers written by students on relevant topics, and 5) at least some class discussion. These practices reflect the standard pedagogy of graduate study. In addition to employing these basic practices, I have experimented with a number of others that I have come to appreciate for the value they add to teaching in the classroom. I will advocate for five such practices that have enhanced the preaching pedagogy in my classroom by strengthening the communal aspect of preaching. I testify that these five practices have helped to create a vital and enthusiastic community of learning in my course called Foundations of Christian Preaching.

By strengthening the communal aspect of preaching, I hope to counter the common notion that preaching is simply an individual endeavor. Conceived as a solo act, the sermon is prepared in the confines of an office and delivered in front of congregants who listen and interpret the message solely as individuals. There is little sense in this mode that the congregation has much to do with preaching. I believe the New Testament depicts a more communal or collaborative model for preaching and interpreting scripture. Perhaps the most participatory model of worship is depicted in I Corinthians 14:26-33a, the Apostle Paul’s description of orderly worship.

## **BODY**

In my church tradition, it was once common for at least three individuals – either fellow preachers or lay persons from the congregation – to give “testimony” immediately following the sermon. These individuals were expected to confirm the veracity of the spoken word in light of scripture. This tradition was likely derived from the Apostle’s instructions in I Corinthians 14:29. It was based on the assumption that all purported messages from God through preaching should be tested by Godly listeners. This assumption grew out of a confessional tradition which viewed the congregation as a hermeneutical community, a people seeking illumination by the Holy Spirit as they gathered around the Word of God.

Paul Scott Wilson avers that “we conceive of preaching as God’s event, not as a process that happens at the end of the hermeneutical process, but as something that is an integral part of it, and that gives direction to each stage. The sermon is composed only in continuing dialogue with

all of the preceding stages of interpretation” (Wilson, 1995, p. 192). I agree with Wilson that the sermon does not simply proceed out of an interpretation of the scripture text, but itself functions as part of the interpretation of the text. Much of scripture was written as a form of proclamation. Yet as that scripture is proclaimed through preaching in a new setting, it takes on the form of a new interpretation that must be subject to testing.

The point of my course is not to develop collaborative sermons, but rather to help students become attentive to the communal aspects of preaching as they prepare and deliver their sermons, as well as invite feedback afterward. Although many preachers have emphasize the communal aspect of preaching, I shall cite only two. John Killinger emphasizes the communal aspect of preaching in this way: “Community is, after all, what it’s about. We are part of a great community [the Jewish-Christian tradition]. We are building a great community. We do not stand on our own platform when we preach, but on the community’s. We do not invite people to join ourselves, but the community that is initiated by God, called by God, sustained by God, served by God” (Killinger, 1996, p. 10).

Further, he asserts, “Proclamation is the task of the community, not merely of an individual. By the same token, the Bible, from which we derive our preaching, is a community book. It belongs to the people of God. The community made it, the community lives by it, the community interprets it. If we wish to represent the community in our speaking, and thus preach truly, we must steep ourselves in the pages of the Bible” (Killinger, 1996, p. 13).

June Alliman Yoder describes collaborative preaching not so much as a style of preaching but rather as a way of viewing preaching. She avers that although there are many factors that might contribute to a style called collaborative preaching, the primary task of the preacher is to “listen to and care for the hermeneutical community from which our sermons come” (Yoder, 2003, p. 119).

As stated in the introduction to this paper, each of the five practices is designed to enhance the communal aspect of the classroom. In the remainder of this paper, then, I shall explain each of the five practices in turn. They are enumerated and highlighted in bold headings below.

### **1. Student devotionals on preaching**

It has been always been my practice as a seminary professor to begin each class session with prayer. In my preaching class, I have supplemented this feature with a brief meditation on scripture. It seems particularly appropriate in a preaching class (with a focus on expository and exegetical preaching) to meditate on the meaning of a scripture passage before leading the class in a prayer for the class session. I have strengthened the communal dimension of this devotional practice by extending the opportunity to my students to lead this devotional for most of the course.

I generally lead the devotional meditation (5-7 minutes) on the first two days of class as a way to set an example for the students of what I expect. Then I invite student volunteers to lead for the rest of the semester. They must choose from a list of scripture passages that I have provided. These presentations are not graded, but students may earn points toward class participation.

Over time, I have observed that this practice serves at least four useful functions that add value to the preaching classroom.

*It sets the tone for class each day.* I observe that class members are often visibly moved by the scriptural meditation and the sincere prayers of other students in class. By sharing the devotional “limelight” with students, I communicate the clear message that this is not primarily my classroom, but God’s. Together my students and I are disciples under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Further, I believe that God honors the prayers of students as they intercede for the teacher and other members of the class.

*It provides an opportunity to meditate on the significance of a scripture passage that has to do with preaching.* All of the scriptures on my list of devotional passages have to do with preaching. So, by the end of course, we’ve virtually had an inductive study on preaching.

*It provides an opportunity to warm up to speaking in front of the class.* Because many students have little experience in preaching, they suffer speech anxiety. The more opportunity they have to practice in front of the class, the more relaxed they feel when the time comes to deliver a sermon.

*It provides an opportunity for students to view themselves on videotape before they are graded for a presentation.* All of the student devotionals are videotaped by fellow students. Each presenter brings a personal copy of a videocassette to class on which to record their presentation. In order to earn points for participation, they must view their presentation and answer three brief questions on a feedback form. This feedback provides an opportunity for me to hear their response to their viewing of the tape. For most students, viewing this tape is a humbling experience. They become particularly aware of their manner of delivery. This prepares them for the more difficult experience of viewing an entire sermon on videotape.

On one of the first days in the course, I present the list of possible scriptures. Students pick the scripture and their preferred date for presentation -- first come; first served. I have never had trouble finding enough volunteers. When there are less than 25 students in class, students readily volunteer to lead more than one devotional in order to fill all of the slots.

## **2. Small groups for class discussion, sermon preparation and critique**

When I receive the class list at the beginning of my course, I divide the larger class into groups of 4-6 individuals. I give attention to factors such as gender, age, and denominational affiliation in order to provide whatever balance in diversity is readily achievable. I invite one individual from each group to volunteer as a small group facilitator. These small groups function in several ways over the course of the semester.

Early in the course, when we have class discussions on preaching topics, I assign a different integrative question to each small group. Since the tables in my classroom are

readily moved, it is rather easy for small groups to gather in different parts of the room. After 5-7 minutes of small group discussion, I invite small groups to share their insights with the entire class.

During the sermon preparation phase of the course, I give the students an opportunity to share in small groups about their initial sermon ideas. Then they subdivide into groups of two or three to pray for each other about their preparation process. It is common for students to gain new sermon ideas in this context.

During the sermon delivery phase of the course, the entire class listens to the sermons, then small groups meet with the person from their group that has preached that day. They first listen to the preacher reflect on his or her experience of the sermon delivery, then offer their own brief reflections.

During a time for feedback at the mid-point and end of the course (explained below), small groups “weigh in” on the value of suggestions that are offered for improvement to the course.

These small group activities explained above enhance the effectiveness of the course in at least the following ways:

*They provide an opportunity for sharing on a more personal and interactive level than is possible in the full class.* I have often observed that students share more readily with a group of 4-6 than with a group of 20-25 individuals. I customarily walk among the table groups and listen in on the discussions. I observe that nearly every individual contributes to the discussion in each 5-7 minute period of small group discussion. It is very difficult to achieve this level of participation in a 5-7 minute discussion in a group of 20-25 students.

Not only do students share more frequently, they also share more intimately and personally. This is particularly true of introverted individuals. At times, I will without obligation invite a student to share with the larger group what he or she had just shared in the smaller group. Rarely do individuals decline such invitations. Yet it is highly unlikely that they would have shared the same information had there only been large-group discussion. These insights from more introverted students enrich the class discussion.

*They provide an opportunity for designated leaders to develop their facilitation skills.* Part of the success of small group interaction depends on the role of small group leaders. I instruct group leaders to make sure that each member of the group has adequate opportunity to make a contribution or join the discussion. Most leaders take this seriously.

*They provide an opportunity for the class to discuss several questions or ideas in depth at the same.* As noted above, I assign integrative questions to small groups. These questions by nature do not have simple answers, but require the integration of knowledge

from different fields. I attempt to write questions that are on level 4.00 or 5.00 (analysis or synthesis) on Bloom's taxonomy. (Bloom, p. 144, 162) Such questions provide the basis for stimulating discussion in small groups.

*They provide a support group for individuals as they face into their anxieties about speaking.* Surveys conducted among Americans in the last two decades demonstrate that "speaking before a group" is the most listed of common phobias (Mayer, p. 12). My classroom experience confirms what Mayer avers, many people experience public speaking as one of the most anxiety-producing activities in life. Even capable students who have carefully crafted their sermons commonly experience "stage fright" when they deliver their sermons. Students testify that the sermon preparation phase in small groups provides assurance and a sense of support for them. It creates a "safety zone" that gives them added courage to face the public speaking event.

By the same token, the small group helps students to develop the level of trust that is needed to give and receive honest peer feedback. Based on observation, I aver that the small group modifies sermon feedback in two seemingly opposite ways – by making it more candid and less harsh. Students are more likely to offer candid feedback to fellow students if they have come to know them on a more personal level. At the same time, their growing personal relationship takes the harsh edge off of negative criticism.

### **3. Responding to videotaped recordings before receiving professorial critique**

I believe that most students benefit appreciably from viewing their sermons on videotape. Both the visual and aural feedback on their presentations provides budding preachers an important window into their own functioning. More specifically, the videotape enables the student to 1) see their own facial expressions and body gestures, 2) observe the level of vocal variety and emphasis in the sermon, 3) notice how their clothing, hair, jewelry, or makeup effects the presentation, and 4) notice the amount of eye contact (or eye "clasp") they had with the audience.

Therefore, I record on video all student sermons that are delivered as an assignment for the class, whether they are presented in the classroom, the seminary chapel, or the occasional worship service in a congregational worship setting. Further, I require students to view the sermon on videotape and respond on two feedback forms before I offer them my own feedback with an assigned grade. The first form they complete is the same one that other students complete during or after the live presentation. On that form, students attempt to view their own sermon from the viewpoint of an unbiased third party. On the second form, they respond to their experience of sermon preparation and presentation.

By doing their own critique, students are more prepared to receive professorial critique. Watching videotapes of their own preaching tends to be a humbling experience for many beginning speakers (as well as some seasoned ones). It prepares students to receive good feedback and instruction. I am sometimes taken aback by the detail of student self-critique. As a professor, I can either verify or provide alternate perspectives to their observations, often with encouragement where they seem discouraged.

#### 4. Mid-term and end-of-course feedback

I sometimes tell students that one measure of maturity is the ability to respond in a helpful way to the feedback of others. In the classroom, I try to model the idea that “feedback is the breakfast of champions.” (I am grateful to the person, unknown to me, who first came up with this innovative variation on the Wheaties cereal marketing slogan.) Successful leaders do not only *respond* appropriately to feedback from others when it is offered, they actively *seek* it. Therefore, I attempt to be just as inviting of feedback to my teaching as I expect my students to be of my critique of their sermons. In the same way that students must learn to welcome feedback on the effect their sermon has on listeners, I must learn to welcome feedback from students on the effect my teaching has on them.

Therefore, I try to be alert to the many informal (and sometimes almost imperceptible) ways that students provide feedback on my teaching. In addition, I provide two formal opportunities during each course. The first occasion is just after mid-term and the second is at the end of the course. I provide a paper form on each occasion. Completing either form is a voluntary, ungraded activity, but students must sign their names. On both occasions, I also take some time in class for students to give verbal feedback in lieu of or in addition to their written feedback.

The mid-term feedback form is designed to help me make mid-course corrections where necessary. More specifically, the mid-term feedback sheet invites them to do three things:

*Reflect on their goals* they listed on the preaching survey which they completed during the first week of class. This reflection can serve as a motivating factor to work on specific aspects of preaching.

*Ask for clarification on any material that we’ve covered* (or failed to cover) so far in class. In essence, it provides students permission to “catch up” with the significance of anything that may have eluded their grasp so far in the course.

*Voice their hopes for the rest of the course.* At this point, students can voice explicit expectations. I can only respond to explicit expectations. If and when such expectations remain implicit, they may well remain unmet.

The end-of-course feedback form is designed to help me prepare a better course the next time around. I tell students that they are the experts on what works or doesn’t work in class since they have most recently experienced my teaching. By this time we have the kind of trust in the classroom that allows students to be quite candid with their suggestions. I have found that some of our most energized class discussions happen on the last day of class as I seek their feedback about teaching the course in the future.

The end-of-course feedback provides an opportunity for students to voice their opinions about what should be retained, discarded, or changed in future offerings of the course. On this basis, I have changed some practices as well as textbooks. But I have found that the assignment most students dread the most at the beginning of the course is always supported by a strong majority

of students as an assignment as one that should be continued. That is the requirement to deliver the second sermon with only a small card for notes. Most students feel that they benefited significantly from this challenge.

### **5. Assigning specified points for class participation**

I developed this practice out of frustration with the standard grading process. Most of my colleagues' syllabi indicate some percentage of the final grade is based upon the student's participation. But how does one measure "participation" in ways that do not show undue favor toward extroverts who enjoy class discussion? How does one keep "class participation" from being an easy ten points out of one hundred on the final grade?

I determined to find a more objective way of defining healthy class participation. So I began by making a list of readily measurable ways that student participation could enhance the preaching classroom experience for all members of the class. I soon experimented with a list of activities that arguably enhanced the community of learning for all. It included such specific activities as assisting with the videotaping, leading small group discussion, recording class attendance, timing fellow student presentations, leading class devotions, and other such activities. Some of the activities are limited to a small number of people; others are available to all members of the class

I have upgraded this list over time so that both my students and I are satisfied that every one of the activities contributes in a meaningful way to the class. I present the written list of specified activities for participation to students as part of the syllabus at the beginning of the course so that students can sign up for the specified activities. While the class activities are themselves ungraded, each activity carries a specified value; thus the term "participation points." At the end of class, students turn in the list of activities they have performed, with the possibility of earning ten points (plus two bonus points) out of one hundred on their final grade. I have been pleasantly surprised to find that many students generate considerably more than the twelve maximum points that can be applied toward their final grade. I have a special appreciation for these students; the kind of people who clearly go beyond the call of duty to make the classroom a place of learning for all. I have the sense that they will someday flourish as ministers, whether in a congregation or in the marketplace.

### **CONCLUSION**

I have attempted to show how five specific professorial practices have added value to my basic preaching course. Each practice contributes in some way to the community of learning in a way that will enable preachers to grow in their ability to preach on behalf of the Christian community. I trust that these will provide the stimulus for other professors of preaching to experiment with these or other practices that enhance the community of teaching and learning in the classroom.

## REFERENCES CITED

- Bloom, Benjamin. 1954. *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals*. David McKay Company, Inc..
- Killinger, John. 1996. *Fundamentals of Preaching*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1996, Minneapolis: Augsburg Press.
- Mayer, Lyle V. 1998. *Fundamentals of Voice and Articulation*, 12<sup>th</sup> edition. Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Wilson, Paul Scott. 1995. *The Practice of Preaching*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Yoder, June Alliman. 2003. Collaborative Preaching in the Community of Interpreters. In *Anabaptist Preaching: A Conversation Between Pulpit, Pew, and Bible*, edited by David B. Greiser and Michael A. King. Telford: Cascadia Publishing House.