

Toward Excellence in Equipping Preachers: Four Foci for Classroom Instruction

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In their recent book, *Educating Clergy*, (Jossey-Bass, 2005), Charles Foster, et al. explored teaching practices that best shape creative pastoral imagination. Their in-depth research, sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation, suggests that the ideal seminary utilizes four pedagogies – interpretation, formation, contextualization, and performance – to shape a “unitary apprenticeship.” This paper builds on their findings to set forth a paradigm that employs these four foci for classroom instruction that equips preaching students for excellence in the pulpit.

Training for preachers, and for the work of clergy as a whole, is historically rooted in apprenticeship. Through most of the centuries since the early church, preachers learned their craft by working alongside older or more accomplished preachers. From these relationships they learned the theoretical knowledge and practical skills, as well as the ethos of the pastoral office. Within the last century, however, the work of the clergy has become increasingly professionalized. Along with the change has come the development of theological training schools or seminaries to train clergy.

The professionalization of the clergy office led toward the increasing differentiation of the former “apprenticeship” into three different dimensions of learning: cognitive, practical, and normative. (Foster et al. 2006, 5). Perhaps because of the pressure for scholarly recognition, the pedagogy of most contemporary theological graduate schools or seminaries emphasize the cognitive dimension above the necessity of practical application and the normative character formation of its students. This paper seeks to provide a corrective to this trend as it relates to homiletics.

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching recently set out to compare the teaching methods employed by various professional schools, including their approach to apprenticeships. For each of the professions they studied – engineers, lawyers, nurses, physicians, and clergy, they hoped to discover a “signature pedagogy”.¹ A “signature pedagogy” comprises various dimensions, including the “surface structure,” “deep structure,” “tacit structure,” of teaching practices and even what is *not* taught (Foster et al. 33). More simply put, it includes the habitual practices of instruction that are distinctive, pervasive, and essential to the professional training process of a particular professional group (Shulman 2005. 8).

The Carnegie researchers found a much greater variety of pedagogical approaches in the training of clergy than they did in the training schools for any other profession. Therefore, they were unable to isolate a single pedagogical practice that distinguished the teaching practices across theological schools from those in all other professional training institutions. They were able,

¹ For example, Lee Shulman, President of the Carnegie Foundation noted that the practice of “clinical rounds” is the definitive practice which the medical profession uses to teach developing physicians in every medical school.

however, to identify four pedagogies common to all of the theological schools they studied, embodied in a variety of practices. They labeled these as pedagogies of *interpretation*, *formation*, *contextualization*, and *performance*. While these four pedagogies are not unique to theological schools, the researchers determined that all four are essential and pervasive to the training of clergy, not only throughout the curriculum of particular schools, but also across institutions. Thus they felt confident enough to label the combined use of these four approaches as a “signature pedagogical framework” for clergy education (Foster et al. 32).

This paper is an initial exploration of the use of this pedagogical framework as a perspective from which to view the teaching practices in the homiletics classroom. It is a modest attempt to outline the elements of a signature pedagogy on a smaller scale – an essential and unique set of teaching practices for effective preaching instruction in classrooms across theological institutions. I particularly welcome the insights and responses of evangelical colleagues regarding the use of the four pedagogies for preaching instruction as we meet to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Evangelical Homiletics Society.

The teaching paradigm set forth in this paper assumes that the four pedagogies – interpretation, formation, contextualization, and performance – are employed throughout the seminary curriculum, albeit unevenly, in keeping with the nature and ends of particular courses. Some courses are designed so as to weave all four pedagogies into the fabric of the course. Other courses rely most heavily on one or perhaps two of the four pedagogies. For example, courses in spiritual formation or spiritual direction rely heavily on pedagogies of formation. Courses in cross-cultural mission rely heavily on pedagogies of contextualization. Courses in biblical interpretation or hermeneutics rely heavily on pedagogies of interpretation. And, as I shall argue below, courses in preaching do well to employ all four pedagogies, with a particular emphasis on performance. It is through the complex interplay of these four pedagogies, combined with a concern for a unitary apprenticeship, that individual theological schools develop their unique approaches to clergy education and that individual fields, such as homiletics, develop a signature approach to teaching.

Much of what is written in preaching textbooks (or trade books) is focused on what the preacher should know, do, or be. This paper takes one step back to focus on *what preaching instructors can do by means of instruction* through use of the four pedagogies to equip students to become effective preachers in the three dimensions of knowing, doing, and being.

A brief summary of the four pedagogies

The Carnegie study referred to each of the four pedagogies as a form of intent for student learning. Thus, I attempt to identify below the basic intent of each of the four pedagogies, along with a brief explanation of its significance for the preaching task.

Pedagogies of Interpretation

The intent of interpretative pedagogies is to develop in students “the facility for *interpreting* texts, situations, and relationships,” (Foster et al. 33). Particularly for evangelicals, the purpose of this pedagogy in the preaching classroom is to insure that students faithfully interpret the

Christian scriptures in their sermons. The cognitive dimension is largely in focus here, including the hard work of Biblical scholarship characterized by analytic or critical thinking. However, as Foster et al. (95) aver, “the end of critical thinking is not reflective skepticism; it is to move students through reflective skepticism to service, praxis, or some action.” Particularly in a preaching class, the “interpretation” is the delivery of the sermon.” In the same way that “A bell is no bell til you ring it,” and “A song is no song til you sing it” (Hammerstein 1959), a sermon is no sermon until you preach it.

Again, interpretation implies a normative dimension; the interpretative methods employed in homiletics courses will generally reflect the theological perspectives as well as the different preaching traditions represented by the governing board of the school. In evangelical schools and congregations, the purpose of good interpretation is to bring the written word of God to bear on the lives of the hearers in such a way that they are moved to respond to Christ in faith and obedience.

Pedagogies of Formation

The intent of formative pedagogies is to nurture “dispositions and habits integral to the spiritual and vocational *formation* of clergy, (Foster et al. 33). The normative dimension is most clearly in focus here, the desire to help students “walk the talk” of the faith they profess, to “practice what they preach.” Preaching rings hollow if the preacher does not practice the presence of God in daily life. In the Christian life it is doubly true that “the medium is the message.” “Preaching,” said Philips Brooks (1907, 5), is “the bringing of truth through personality.” And the “truest statement” of the gospel, he added, “is not in dogma but in personal life” (7). Thus the preacher must show in “his character, his affections, his whole intellectual and moral being” (8) the truth of the Gospel. The end of formative instruction in a preaching classroom is to enable students to reflect in their own lives the truth of the living Christ declared in their sermons.

Pedagogies of Contextualization

The intent of contextual instruction is to heighten student “consciousness of the content and agency of historical and contemporary contexts” (Foster et al. 33). For many years, Bible translators have wrestled with the challenges of contextualization -- translating the historic words of scripture into the most meaningful and relevant words of today’s languages. These efforts have raised scholarly awareness of the need to understand both historical biblical contexts and contemporary contexts. In recent years, evangelical scholars have produced a spate of resources to enable evangelists, missionaries and Christian workers to analyze cross-cultural settings for the purpose of more effectively sharing the gospel of salvation.

But contextual considerations are just as important for preaching in one’s own culture. Effective preachers develop their sermons with particular audiences in mind. The forces of modernity such as high mobility and technological innovation have fractured communities and led to widely diverse practices in traditional church audiences. To develop sermons that speak meaningfully to the diverse needs of particular audiences is both an art and a craft, involving cognitive, practical, and normative dimensions. The end of contextual instruction in a preaching classroom is to enable students to develop sermons to best fit the audience they are addressing.

Pedagogies of Performance

The intent of performative instruction is to cultivate “student *performance* in clergy roles and ways of thinking” (Foster et al. 33). Preaching is public performance; along with worship leading it is one of the most public acts performed by clergy. And although modern people often voice disdain for preaching, the quality and/or style of the preaching remains one of the most important measures by which churchgoers choose their congregational affiliation.

The majority of a seminary student’s work in typical seminary class is visible only to professors or classmates. Therefore, student performance in public settings is the means by which larger audiences may witness the result of a student’s educational process. Public performance is the place where “the rubber” of a student’s formative and academic work “hits the road” of practical church life in the most visible way. The standards for effective performance in this setting are notably different from those associated with the writing of a research paper. As Paul Scott Wilson has argued, “The rhetorical gap between [the theological] classroom and pulpit is no small furrow in a wheat field that students might hop. When we get close, we discover a sizable fissure, deep and wide” (P.S. Wilson 1995, 69). As Wilson rightfully argues (47) whereas most of the speech in modern media imitates conversation, much of the speech in the academic theological classroom imitates writing. Therefore, preaching associated with the academy often sounds like a lecture or an essay being read. If we rightfully conceive of preaching as first of all a public, oral event, we will train students to compose sermons with an ear for public performance, not simply an eye for the page.

Coaching as an overarching methodology for preaching instruction

As I argue below, the effective preaching classroom should employ all four pedagogies. But because of the public nature of preaching, pedagogies of performance may be the most important. In this short section, I explain the rationale for “coaching” as the overarching pedagogical strategy to best achieve the goals of preaching instruction for public performance. As I attempt to show, this methodology, which is most commonly used in other fields that emphasize public performance, may be used to achieve all four of the pedagogical ends outlined in the Carnegie study.²

My turn to coaching methodology in this section is a deliberate nod toward an interactive pedagogical approach in the preaching classroom, as opposed to a lecture approach. While lectures may serve well in clarifying the standards for excellence in preaching, they fall far short of equipping students to develop and deliver effective sermons. The performative nature of sermon delivery demands coaching.

It only makes sense that a professor hoping to enable students to excel in public performance (such as preaching) would employ a pedagogy that involves coaching and public performance as part of the curriculum. A preaching class without a significant element of performance will not

² For example, Foster et. al. demonstrated that Professor Richard Benson of St. John’s Seminary assumed the traditional role of a coach to help students appropriate interpretative knowledge and skills. Similarly, (Paul and Elder, p 8) urged professors to use coaching techniques to teach the skills of critical thinking.

likely help students better their public performance, no matter how brilliant the lectures, discussions, and scholarly paper writing in the classroom.

Consider the pedagogies of performance in other disciplines. It would be most unlikely for an individual to master kinesthetic activities such as ballet dancing or piano performance by simply reading a textbook or engaging in discussion. To master such performances most students require demonstration and extensive personal practice under the tutelage of a coach. Pedagogies of performance concentrate on enabling students to master a set of body movements in such diverse activities as varsity sports, playing a musical instrument, dancing, acting on stage, singing solos, speaking in public, preaching, or leading worship. Church members may shrink back from labeling the last four activities named in the above list as performance when they are part of a church service, but they certainly are public activities which require a good deal of practice in order to achieve excellence.

At its heart, coaching methodology requires the following elements – 1) providing clarity about the requirements of performance (often through modeling), 2) observing the student’s performance, 3) giving feedback about the performance with suggestions for improvement, then 4) observing the revised performance. Performance, coaching feedback, and adapted performance function sequentially in a loop that may be repeated endlessly until the student has achieved the goal behavior. Most world-class professional performers (whether in sports or entertainment) work through such coaching cycles (with increasingly competent coaches) for twenty years before reaching international acclaim. Neither worldly acclaim nor world-class status are appropriate goals for preachers, but preachers who seek to give their best to Christ and his kingdom should invest sincere efforts to master their craft.

Most seminary classrooms don’t allow for enough interaction and feedback to be characterized as a coaching environment. In many courses a letter grade offered late in the course, perhaps with the briefest of explanatory notes may count as sufficient feedback on student papers or class presentations. In many seminary classrooms, instructors do not expect students to improve and re-submit an assignment based on feedback. They simply assign a grade with the hope that students will improve on similar assignments in the future, perhaps in a fellow instructor’s course. Whether such pedagogy is shaped by a philosophy of teaching or the demands of large classrooms, it does not qualify as a coaching strategy. Coaching requires students to complete enough iterations of the same activity to make it possible for an instructor to monitor the student’s improvement in performance over time.

A high ratio of students to faculty may render it impossible in most preaching classrooms to coach students extensively³. But there are strategic points where coaching strategies provide the biggest payoff in regard to all four of the pedagogies in the signature framework.

A paradigm for preaching instruction based on a coaching approach to the four pedagogies

Let us turn, then, to consider what teaching practice might constitute a “signature pedagogy” for homiletics instruction. What teaching practices, if any, are distinctive, pervasive, and essential in the preaching classroom? I suggest the following four teaching practices for consideration: 1)

³ For this reason, it is appropriate to limit the number of students in the preaching classroom.

Establishing the criteria for excellence in preaching, 2) Coaching students in the development and delivery of sermons to meet standards for preaching excellence, 3) Providing an appropriate preaching venue for students, and 4) Providing feedback to student sermons based on the specified criteria for excellence.

Each of the four teaching practices mentioned here may itself comprise a cluster of activities. Let us examine each of these clusters in turn, noting how the instructor may draw upon the four pedagogies of interpretation, formation, contextualization, and performance in the development of that particular activity.

Establishing the criteria for excellence in preaching

Preaching instructors (and their students) do well to ask, “How would you recognize a good sermon if you heard one?” The act of preaching is a complex phenomenon that could be analyzed in multiple ways on multiple levels. Thus, it is highly unlikely that we could find a single list of criteria for excellence in preaching on which all instructors in homiletics would agree. Yet it is essential that professors of preaching present their students with both their lofty sermonic ideals and the more mundane specific criteria by which they will judge student sermons. Gaining clarity on these criteria will greatly enhance the capacity of an instructor to provide good classroom pedagogy. The development of such a list for a course may depend on the use of a particular homiletics textbook. In my classroom, I offer three separate lists,⁴ composed by others in diverse settings, as theoretical background for classroom discussion for my own criteria for feedback. Lists generally contain fairly high level concepts so they must be fleshed out by more specific questions to better aid the student to develop a sermon and to provide a helpful guide to give feedback to a sermon.

I suggest the following questions as a means by which an instructor might evaluate or produce a list of criteria for preaching, based on the four pedagogies. Some of the questions, particularly the very first one below, are general enough that they invite a subset of more specific questions.

Interpretation. To what extent was the purpose/content of the sermon faithful to the chosen text, the whole of scripture and/or the Christian tradition?

In what ways did the public presentation of the message utilize aural and visual elements to provide nuances of interpretation beyond the limits of a written text?

Formation. In what way(s) did the speaker identify with the audience?

What did the speaker reveal of himself/herself in the message that the audience would not know otherwise?

To what extent did the preacher seem to be personally moved by the message?

What was the level of consistency between the “walk” and the “talk” – the words that were spoken and what is known of the preacher’s character and lifestyle?

To what extent did the preacher seem to be aware of the effect of the message on the audience while it was being preached?

⁴ The one list came from Professor Karns, an early preaching instructor of mine, a second is based on a Baylor University survey of great preachers, and the third was produced by the Preaching Institute at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, cited in (Greiser and King, p. 14).

Contextualization. In what ways did the speaker build a bridge from the biblical text to the contemporary audience?

Performance. To what extent did the organization of the sermon provide a helpful flow of thought for the audience to grasp?

How well did the grammar and vocabulary of the sermon fit the audience and occasion?

What elements of the presentation, if any, seemed extraneous or distracting to the main message?

In what ways did the preacher's display of emotion contribute to or distract from the message?

To what extent did the speaker utilize variances in the elements of speech such as rate, pitch, volume and quality to provide nuanced emphasis to the message?

As noted above, the instructor will do well to assume the role of a coach to help students think critically about the criteria that characterize a good sermon. To help students produce sermons that demonstrate excellence, however, requires even more coaching skill as an instructor.

Coaching students in the development and delivery of sermons to meet standards for preaching excellence

This point brings us to the very heart of classroom pedagogy. How do preaching instructors teach students how to preach effective sermons? How do instructors, after sorting through the plethora of available instructional materials and potential teaching strategies, decide what pedagogical activities will be most effective for a given preaching class? Becoming clear about the standards of excellence certainly helps to point instructors in the right direction. But many pedagogical choices remain. In this section I will simply point toward the value of particular choices based on the four pedagogical ends which are the theme of this paper.

Coaching for interpretation. Most theological schools offer specific courses in Biblical exegesis or hermeneutics, so the preaching instructor may generally expect students to arrive in preaching class with particular interpretive competencies. However, since most seminary courses consider an interpretation to be complete when it is written down in the form of an essay, preaching students must learn that one's interpretation (in the preaching class) is not complete until it has been presented in oral form. Just as expert interpretive readers may render written texts in ways that nuance or significantly alter the meaning for hearers, preachers may render written manuscripts in significantly different ways. Written manuscripts may provide one level of textual interpretation, but the "living document" of a public sermon provides something far superior. How else can one explain the persistence of public preaching in an information age? Surely few contemporary congregations would be satisfied by the delivery of sermons in written form, whether by email or in hard copy.

Even though a course in Biblical Interpretation is required as a prerequisite for my basic preaching course, I find that most students benefit from specific assistance in the interpretive process for preaching preparation. Therefore, I require all students, as part of their preaching preparation, to answer a series of exegetical questions regarding the biblical text *before* consulting biblical commentaries. They are then encouraged to check their emerging interpretations with the work of reputable scholars. Some of the questions are based on literary

perspectives, others on theological perspectives.⁵ Students sometimes complain about the rigor of this discipline, but graduates have returned to testify of its continuing value as part of their regular preaching practice. I find that students are likely to see more creative possibilities for preaching if they approach the text with a variety of questions that take them beyond simple exegesis.

Students must also submit for feedback a thesis statement and a statement of purpose for the sermon before they move to the final stages of preparation. Many students find it particularly challenging to write these two statements with clarity and brevity. They require coaching to help them get clear about their main idea (central thesis, proposition, or “big idea”) as well as their goal for audience response. Once these two statements are in place, students are more likely to succeed in other elements of their sermon preparation, such as their logical organization.

Coaching for formation. Pedagogies of formation can contribute toward a student’s growth in two important ways in the preaching classroom. The first focus of formation takes place in the preparation stage of a sermon. That is to assure that students respond to an assigned preaching topic or preaching passage in a formative way. I often tell my students, “If the message hasn’t moved you, it won’t move anyone else.” For this reason, I require students to prepare and submit a spiritual journal as part of the preaching assignment. The purpose of this journal is for students to record what is happening in their inner being during the preparation phase of the sermon. I invite students to record spiritual movement (progress or regress) and to date their entries on a paper (handwritten or typed) that is handed to me at the time they deliver their sermons. Their entries may include such things as a greater sense of God’s presence or character, deeper self-awareness, an awareness of personal resistance to the scripture text, a deepening faith in God’s promises, a call to greater spiritual commitment, and deeper compassion for others. To help them envision the goal of this assignment, I provide examples of excellent spiritual journals from former students (with appropriate permission granted, of course).

Pedagogies of formation can also help to reduce student *topophobia*, the fear that often accompanies public performance. More commonly called “stage fright,” “performance anxiety,” or “podium panic,” the fear of public speaking is an extremely common phenomenon⁶ that can cripple preaching performance. Much of the fear of public speaking lies in the individual’s self-identity and concern about social status. In short, students fear that their public image will be diminished as a result of poor performance. This is clearly a formative issue. In the language of family systems theory, students will be less anxious as they become clearer about their own beliefs while staying connected with people, even those with whom they disagree (Matthews, 1998). While it may take a lifetime to fully live out these concepts, there are specific ways that an instructor can assist students to achieve clarity about what they believe and become less dependent on the opinions of others. Assuring that students are thoroughly prepared to speak on a topic or scripture passage that reflects their passion is one way that an instructor can help

⁵ To assist them, I provide examples of excellent student work to the class; students must not use the same passage as the example.

⁶ (Mayer, 1999, p. 12) asserted that *topophobia* is the most universal of fears expressed by Americans over the past two decades.

students to reduce anxiety. But I have also found it helpful to speak openly about speech anxiety in the classroom. To depict speech anxiety as normal and to provide helpful guidelines for overcoming it can help to reduce its power. While I will not elaborate further here, there are specific ways that an instructor can help students transform the energy that accompanies high anxiety into good performance.

Coaching for contextualization. In the same way that students must interpret the Bible in context, they must present their messages in context. Every message is prepared for and delivered in a particular spiritual, social and political context. The analysis of this context may be called an “exegesis of the situation.” (P. S. Wilson, 160). This analysis may include, but is broader than what is typically implied by a demographic survey or audience analysis. Robinson’s invitation to “scratch where people niche” (Robinson 2005, 115) helps students to consider the audience profile and diversity of needs in the development of their sermon. Following Wilson, I require students to transpose the “concerns of the [biblical] text” into equivalent statements of “concerns of the sermon.” This process has proven to be one of the best pedagogical methods to help students methodically examine the various ways that any particular Biblical passage has relevance for their intended audience.

Coaching for performance. In this section, I shall concentrate on coaching for the delivery of the sermon. This is the “moment of truth,” as Wayne McDill (1999) puts it. By “delivery” I am referring to both verbal and nonverbal elements of the speech communication act, including the form of sermon presentation. The focus here is not on *what* is said (cognitive content) as much as on *how* it is said (delivery). Students must understand that most church audiences typically place higher value on the sermon delivery than the content. Therefore, we may rightfully expect that preaching classes will touch on these elements with more concern and thoroughness than any other course in a theological school. I shall discuss briefly the pedagogical concerns for the preaching classroom under three headings: 1) verbal elements, 2) non-verbal elements, and 3) forms of presentation.

The verbal elements of preaching have to do with the use of voice throughout the four stages of vocal production – breathing, phonation, resonance, and articulation. For the most part, they are the elements that one could isolate by listening to an audio-taped recording of the presentation. In my beginning course in preaching, I introduce my students to these issues by showing a video called *The Vocal Coach* (Ministry Music 1990) which explains the concerns of vocal production in a winsome and non-technical way, inviting students to follow along as a group with a number of voice exercises. The main presenter, Christopher Beatty, illustrates various speech problems in a humorous way which illustrates proper performance as well as potential difficulties. This method helps to introduce an understanding of voice production theory as well as the vocabulary which may be used for feedback when students face particular problems in delivery. In my experience, the most common of these problems have to do with the rate of speaking, pitch, improper pronunciation or articulation of words, distracting vocalizations such as *ers* and *ums*,⁷ lack of vocal variety and emphasis (monotone speech), or undue strain on the vocal apparatus.

⁷ Some speech theorists categorize such issues as nonverbal vocalizations constituting a form of paralanguage that fits under non-verbal, rather than verbal communication.

Occasionally I have students who exhibit pronounced disfluencies such as a stutter or a lisp. In some cases, it may be difficult to discern whether or not it is worth pointing out a speech disfluency to a student. On the one hand, one may view the disfluency as an unnecessary distraction in preaching. By pointing it out in a non-judgmental way, the instructor can provide the student with an opportunity to move toward greater effectiveness in public speaking. You might even recommend that a student work directly with a speech therapist, since overcoming such problems requires more intense and expert coaching than most preaching classrooms can offer. Because disfluencies, as well as distracting mannerisms, are generally unconscious and habitual body movements deeply engrained in haptic memory, they may be extremely difficult for a student to eliminate without extensive support.

On the other hand, simply pointing out a disfluency may be very painful for some students. Sometimes students have “made friends” with the disfluency; adopting it as a normal part of their identity. To suggest to such students that a particular disfluency is *not* normal may raise such a high level of anxiety about their identity and self-worth that they may be highly resistant to change. When that is the case, it becomes a formation issue. In nearly all cases of difficulties in verbal or nonverbal communication, students will be unable to grasp the nature of the problem until they hear or see their own presentations on audio or videotape.⁸

The non-verbal elements of delivery include concerns that could, for the most part, be isolated by watching the videotape of a presentation, even without sound. These elements have to do with posture, body movements, eye contact, gestures, and facial expressions. I take the same pedagogical approach with non-verbal elements as with the verbal, the classroom viewing of a videotape along with some group exercises. The most common problems displayed by beginning students are poor posture, poor eye contact, inappropriate gestures, and lack of facial expression. Occasionally I must speak to students about inappropriate or distracting attire.

The form of presentation is also an important issue for pedagogical strategizing. I refer to the various means by which a sermon may be presented, whether it is cited from memory, presented in an impromptu fashion, read from a manuscript, or delivered extemporaneously from some form of notes.⁹ Each form may be used to good effect as coaching exercises in a preaching classroom. In my beginning class, I ask students to write out a manuscript for both of the sermons, even though I do not allow them to use the manuscript for the second sermon. The purpose of the manuscript is help them to work at the flow of ideas. It also provides a means by which I can point out on paper when there are problems of organization. I emphasize that these manuscripts are not essays, they need not follow all of the normal guidelines for good writing. Instead, they should try to write as they might speak – for the ear and not the eye. I provide them with a list of common differences between oral and written style. (J. F. Wilson 249).

For the second sermon, I require that they restrict their use of notes to a 5 ½ X 8 note card. To help them prepare for the assignment, I provide some examples of helpful notes that fit these

⁸ The Carnegie study demonstrated the particular effectiveness of videotape feedback in the case of Professor Richard Fragomeni of the Catholic Theological Union, who used it to coach students in liturgical performance.

⁹ I also provide some training (in an optional lab) on how to speak extemporaneously without the use of any notes in the pulpit. It is common to have at least one student in each class rise to this challenge.

parameters. I do allow them to use additional 3 X 5 note cards on which to record direct quotations. At the same time, I make it clear that the resulting speech may vary considerably from the manuscript they have prepared. That is the nature of extemporaneous speech; it is thoroughly prepared but the exact wording of the message emerges in the context of the delivery. This assignment creates considerable anxiety in my students but by the end of the course, nearly all students “vote” for me to keep that requirement in future classes. Students testify that it helps them to break their dependency on a manuscript and enables them to develop better eye contact.

With the rise in popularity of projected media, it is important that preaching students learn effective ways use such visual aids. My preaching classroom is equipped by projection equipment so I invite students to use “Power Point” or other means to supplement their messages. I use the word “supplement” quite deliberately; projected media must never serve as the primary means to convey a message. In today’s postmodern environment, dazzling a congregation with technical wizardry may too readily distract an audience from catching the theological content.

Providing an appropriate preaching venue for students

On the face of it, providing a venue for preaching seems quite simple. But probing below the surface reveals several pedagogical issues to be considered in locating the best venue for student sermons offered for critique. I will discuss the following two categories of venue in turn: 1) the academic setting of a theological school, and 2) a more public setting.

Preaching in the academic setting. The academic setting may offer two different types of venues – the preaching classroom and a more public worship setting such as chapel or a special worship event. There are several pedagogical advantages of the preaching classroom as a venue. First of all, it offers the ultimate opportunity for the instructor to control the preaching environment. Knowing that fellow students tend to be sympathetic to the challenges of preaching, many novices prefer the safety of the classroom for their first efforts at preaching. Secondly, this venue provides the opportunity for immediate feedback, whether from the instructor or fellow students in small groups. Students in the classroom can have the feedback forms in front of them as they listen. And since they know well the nature of the preaching assignment, they can respond to very specific issues.

Yet students sometimes complain that the classroom feels like a sterile or artificial environment in which to preach a sermon. Even if the class is conducted in a small chapel room with some worship accoutrements, it may feel artificial if the class session does not include music and other elements of worship. In all of my preaching classes which meet in a regular classroom, I invite students to introduce a worshipful environment through music, scripture reading and prayer.

I also remind students that much of the preaching in the Bible and throughout Christian history took place outside the context of a typical worship service, certainly outside the walls of a sanctuary dedicated to worship. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, and even pastor-teachers often preached in royal courtyards, caves, open-air meetings, lecture halls (and other kinds of rented quarters), tents, as well as on street corners in crowded cities. Christian preaching must never be

restricted to comfortable, institutional worship settings. The ability of students to adapt to different venues may be one measure of their ability to appropriately contextualize their messages.

Perhaps the greatest disadvantage to preaching in the classroom is that the listeners represent such a thin demographic slice of society. It is nearly a given that the typical seminary classroom does not include the diversity of age and educational background that is represented by a more public audience. Precisely because it is such a controlled environment it does not offer the same challenges of audience adaptation as the typical worship service in a congregation, not to speak of the diversity represented in special community events. Since the diversity of a worshipping audience offers a greater challenge to the speaker, it also offers more opportunity for coaching and feedback.

Students sometimes ask if they can increase the sense of authenticity in their classroom preaching by presenting a sermon as though it were a typical worship setting in a local church. But I have always insisted that students adapted their sermon to the audience that lies in front of them as a speaker, not some other audience in their imagination. (Even sermons delivered for a radio or television audience are preached to a captive audience; the message is then broadcast to other venues.) I always respond to student sermons on the basis of their effectiveness in the context in which it was delivered. Therefore, I encourage my students in the classroom to use jargon or illustrations that make appropriate sense to their fellow students, even though they might use different terminology in their local church.

Preaching in a public setting. Student sermons that are preached in broader seminary contexts such as chapel worship or special events take on more of the feel of a local church. Still, they do not usually include the ethos or diversity of a more general worshipping community. For that reason, I allow students the option of submitting a videotape of a sermon preached in a more public worship venue, as long as it meets all of the elements of the classroom assignment.

Student sermons that are preached in more public venues, such as a local church, present some clear advantages over preaching in the classroom. As noted above, such audiences generally represent greater diversity and challenge for the student. They present the opportunity to adapt a message to a special audience or occasion. Further, it represents the situation for which many students are being trained, that of congregational ministry. Students may also be encouraged to preach in other public venues such as youth rallies, retirement homes, and evangelistic services.

Further, sermons preached in public contexts offer the opportunity to draw a diverse group of listeners into the circle of individuals who offer feedback to the preacher. Feedback circles that include both men and women with a range of age, work experience, educational levels, and even public speaking experience can provide a richness beyond that of the students in a classroom. In these circumstances, it is important for the instructor to provide an orientation to the process of giving feedback. In my experience, many parishioners are honored to be asked to provide feedback to a preacher. Further, while student preachers sometimes dread the feedback event, most express appreciation for the insights they have gained through the process.

Public preaching venues also present pedagogical challenges. Unless the instructor is content to respond to a videotape, responding to students in multiple venues presents a logistical issue. It may be difficult to schedule a time when the instructor and a significant number of fellow students can attend the preaching services outside the classroom.

When videotapes are to be used for purposes of critique, it is helpful to provide some orientation or at least a list of expectations for the videographer. Such orientation should inform the videographer about the elements of the service to be recorded, the desired angle of vision, the size of the subject on the screen, the parts of the facility to photograph, and whether or not audience response should be included on the tape. It may also be helpful to have the speaker prepare a brief introduction to the event (recorded before the service) so that persons providing feedback can view the message in context.

Given the advantages and disadvantages of particular venues as discussed above, it may be most helpful to provide several venues for preaching feedback during a student's time of study. Whatever the venue you choose for students to present their sermons, make sure that your pedagogical methods best fit the venue and the occasion.

Providing feedback to student sermons based on the specified criteria for excellence

In the context of a preaching class, "feedback" means the written or oral responses provided to the student involved in the preaching exercise. The purpose of the feedback is to help the student 1) achieve greater self-awareness, 2) learn how the message affected the hearers, and 3) improve preaching skills. Both the instructor and fellow students may provide feedback. The level and helpfulness of feedback from fellow students will depend upon their experience as well as their level of maturity. At times, fellow students may have greater rapport with a student than the instructor. The class dynamics and interpersonal relationships will also determine the effectiveness of student feedback processes. Small groups within the class may help to build the trust necessary for a deeper level of feedback. In any case, I assume that the instructor is responsible to guide the feedback process and provide the highest level of expertise on most issues surrounding the preaching event.

Providing helpful feedback to students is perhaps the most complex and difficult of the preaching instructor's tasks. Yet it lies at the very heart of the signature pedagogy for homiletics. It may qualify as the most distinctive, pervasive, and essential teaching practice in homiletics classrooms across theological institutions.

I suggest the following eight characteristics of excellent feedback¹⁰ on a student's preaching performance.

1. It demonstrates both honesty and loving concern. In other words, it is full of grace and truth. It does not demand perfection but seeks positive movement and growth. Formative feedback looks for authenticity. Instructors in a theological school live with an inherent tension; the desire to believe and teach about a God of grace in the academic

¹⁰ I adapted this list from one that was passed on to me in a context other than the preaching classroom. I have not been able to locate the original source.

arena, where judgment is endemic. A cliché expresses the balance that is needed: “Students won’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

2. It differentiates between description and evaluation. The focus of the former is on the hearer’s experience of the event based on the five senses as well as one’s personal preferences. The focus of the latter is on the quality of the sermon based on established criteria. The former is a form of sharing; the latter is a judgment which may result in a letter grade. Both types of feedback may be helpful, but the right to give the latter is cultivated by practicing the former.
3. It is specific rather than general. To identify particular parts of the sermon, specific illustrations, or even sentences and phrases is more helpful than to say, “Your illustrations were good.”
4. It considers the needs of the student. It considers the student’s state of development in preaching and the need for both affirmation and suggestions for improvement, taking into consideration the maturity level and emotional state of a student.
5. It is solicited rather than imposed. This paper assumes that regular feedback is invited in the preaching class since it is part of the framework for the course. However, the instructor should make clear to students both the means and the nature of the feedback they will receive in the class. And students may be invited to indicate whether or not they are feeling safe with the feedback they are receiving.
6. It addresses itself to matters which the student can control. It is not helpful to criticize elements that students cannot readily change, such as some elements of their physical appearance or characteristics of their voice. Also, students will likely be frustrated by negative comments born out of projection or transference, i.e. comments such as “You remind me of . . .”
7. It is well timed. In general, feedback on behavior or performance is most helpful when it is most immediate. However, serious feedback on a sermon may best be delayed until several days after the event. In the context of the preaching class, some feedback best follows the student’s self-reflection and critique after viewing a videotape of the sermon. Also, I have found that students are more open to receiving feedback at some times rather than others, due to circumstances in their lives. Times of personal or family stress may make it much more difficult for a student to hear the normal feedback on a preaching event.
8. It is checked to insure clear communication. This is the rationale for having both oral and written feedback. Students receiving feedback are encouraged to ask further questions to help clarify intent. I also ask students, in their self-reflection, to tell me if they believe any student feedback they received was unfair. And on occasion in my written comments, I invite students to come back to me if anything is unclear. Further, in

my course evaluation, I invite students to tell me to what extent they felt “safe” in the class.

Two pedagogical practices to aid the formative process

I have discovered two pedagogical practices that have increased the emotional openness of my students to receive feedback from both me as an instructor and their fellow classmates. For this reason, they greatly aid the formative process of feedback. Both are based on the belief that the preaching event is best viewed as one of action/reflection, i.e., that the student’s self-critique is an essential part of the feedback process.

The first pedagogical practice is to invite students to meet in a small group setting within thirty minutes after the sermon is preached. The preacher is given the first opportunity to speak in the group, to release the natural flush of emotion following the delivery by reflecting on how he or she experienced the event. I observe that students readily share comments such as “I wasn’t really prepared” or “I can’t believe I skipped that last part,” or to ask questions of their fellow students such as “Did I look as nervous as I felt?” or “Did that last point make any sense?” The focus of this initial reflection focuses on descriptive feedback. By releasing pent-up emotion and hearing initial assurances from fellow students, the preachers are better prepared to hear more in-depth feedback on their performance.

The second pedagogical practice is to ask students to view their own sermons on videotape from the perspective of an objective third party, to the extent possible, and to complete the same feedback sheet about their own sermon that other students have completed. After they have viewed their sermon on videotape, they are allowed to read the written comments from fellow students. Then they answer other questions about their message and are invited to make suggestions for their own improvement in future sermon. Students must turn in all of this material before I offer my own written feedback, since I respond not only to the event itself but also to their self-reflection. I have found that students identify many of the same areas for concern or improvement that are reflected in my notes. I then have the pleasure of supporting their insights as well as offering my unique suggestions.

Feedback on formative issues is difficult because it deals directly with the identity and character of an individual. For the same reason, such feedback is essential to good preaching pedagogy. Perhaps few things reveal one’s character more clearly than the way he or she responds to feedback from others.

One’s ability to give good formative feedback to students is itself a formative issue for preaching instructors. It is difficult to provide good feedback if one has not experienced it. Feedback occasionally requires the ability to give feedback on the spot; without time to rehearse the best wording.

Whenever I seek to grow in my own ability to provide effective feedback to students, I am driven back to the other elements of the signature pedagogy set forth above, to ask pedagogical questions such as the following: “What elements of the student’s sermon may have been improved by a clearer explanation of the criteria by which the sermon would be judged?” “How

might the sermon have been improved by better coaching through the developmental phase of the sermon?"

For that reason, it is helpful to ask students, as part of the feedback process on their presentations, what elements of the assignment (if any) might have been made with more clarity. I have made many adjustments to the wording of my assignments for subsequent classes based on feedback from students. I have found that my responses to student feedback (when I manage to be relatively non-defensive) provide a model for student behavior in the feedback process. I remind my students that although I am a preaching instructor and they are students, I like them am still on the path that leads toward excellent preaching. I have not yet arrived.

Initial conclusions

After this brief study of the four pedagogies named as a signature pedagogical framework by the Carnegie study, I share the researchers' conclusion that all four pedagogies are essential to the task of educating clergy. This exploration has helped me to think creatively about the role of the four pedagogies in my own preaching classroom and has helped to fuel my resolve to use more extensive coaching techniques to enhance student performance. Based on this study, I intend to scrutinize each class session on my syllabus to see what adaptations I might make to better instruct students in the pedagogical framework I have outlined above.

This exploration has also increased my resolve to work with colleagues across the institution to find ways to strengthen and unify the apprenticeship that we offer to students. The skills that preachers need are developed in diverse courses beyond the preaching class.

Finally, I am committed to draw more deeply on the pedagogical skills of fellow practitioners in other institutions. The conversations that take place at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Homiletics Society can surely help me to achieve that end.

Suggestions for further study

My work on this paper has spawned a number of ideas for further exploration. First, it might be useful to explore ways that field education could better incorporate the four pedagogies in the work with interns, particularly in regard to their preaching. Because preaching internships often take place in local congregations, it would be fruitful to examine how local pastors might contribute more deliberately to the instruction of preachers who are studying in the academy.

Second, I believe it would be fruitful to explore in more depth the insights of family systems theory regarding speech anxiety. More specifically, it may be helpful to explore the notion that anxiety based on lack of self-differentiation hampers not only sermon delivery, but even more fundamentally, the creative process that produces the ideas for the sermon in the first place.

Third, it might be helpful to engage current students or recent alumni in a discussion about the role of the four pedagogies in their own experience, particularly for preaching instruction. It is, after all, the quality of the learning that taking place in students (as assessed by resultant changes in their knowing, doing, and being) that provides the best measure of pedagogical effectiveness.

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