

Preparing Our Preaching Pedagogies for the Year 2030

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June 2020

In this essay, I propose a way forward in designing preaching pedagogies over the next ten years. I recommend a turn toward *improvisational teaching that is technologically innovative, intentionally collaborative, and strategically diverse*. These commitments arise from ongoing pedagogical research, experiences in classrooms and conferences, dialogues with colleagues, and most importantly, listening to and learning from students at various institutions concerning what helps them grow and thrive.

To be sure, a ten-year proposal is provisional at best. None of us has the ability to prophesy. A homiletician trying to predict realities in the world ten years from now can be compared to a bungee jumper diving off a bridge with a homemade bungee cord. If his design and calculations are correct, people will view him as an authority. If they are not, they will remember him for different reasons. Making definitive predictions can be a risky business. If the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we do not know what will happen two months from now, let alone ten years from now.

Although future-casting borders on presumption, the absence of a crystal ball does not authorize passivity or inaction in developing a strategy, especially in the training of preachers. Designing a new approach, even if provisional, is a more-than-worthy undertaking when those who will benefit most are the preachers of the future. A potential way forward also breaks us free from the tyranny of the immediate by forcing us to ask non-immediate questions: How do we prepare our students for the shifts taking place in our culture and world? How do we pursue innovation in a way that is timely and effective? How do we achieve professional excellence while also practicing respect and responsibility toward a new generation? How do we teach with cultural intelligence in diverse classrooms? How do we respond to rampant technological changes that impact not only how institutions deliver courses but also how preachers deliver sermons? Beneath these and other questions, of course, is a deeper and more fundamental question: *How do we teach preaching in a way that is better than our current practice?* Consider a short anecdote as an entrée into an answer.

What Does Wynton Marsalis Have to Do with Preaching?

On a summer night in August 2001, David Hajdu sat down at a small table in the dimly lit room of the Village Vanguard, one of New York City's oldest and most famous jazz clubs. Hajdu, a journalist for *The Atlantic Monthly* at the time and an acclaimed music critic, had happened upon a performance by Wynton Marsalis, the renowned jazz trumpeter. Partway through the set, Marsalis played a solo version of "I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You." Hajdu and the rest of the room sat mesmerized. But as the song neared its climax, an audience member's cell phone rang. As the "cell-phone offender" ran into the hallway, Marsalis stood motionless on stage with "eyebrows arched."

Before I discuss what happened next, let me suggest that theological educators in general and teachers of preaching in particular have arrived at our own cell-phone offender moment. Unforeseen circumstances have brought us to a crossroads that requires us to make real-time decisions about what to do next. Before March 2020, many of the unexpected circumstances we faced related to financial solvency, declining enrollment, diversifying course delivery using online platforms, and launching initiatives no one could have predicted ten years prior. After March 2020, our biggest unforeseen circumstance has been the coronavirus pandemic and our need as educators to respond to it. COVID-19 has introduced new challenges that have only accelerated the challenges that existed before. Regardless of which disruptions happen to be most pressing, many of us feel as if we are standing motionless on stage with eyebrows arched.

As Hajdu heard the phone ring and watched Marsalis freeze, he scribbled his frustration on a piece of paper: “MAGIC, RUINED.” A lesser musician might have succumbed to the moment, but, of course, Wynton Marsalis is not a lesser musician. Hajdu writes:

Marsalis replayed the silly cell-phone melody note for note. Then he repeated it, and began improvising variations on the tune. The audience slowly came back to him. In a few minutes he resolved the improvisation—which had changed keys once or twice and throttled down to a ballad tempo—and ended exactly where he had left off: “with ... you ...” The ovation was tremendous.¹

Marsalis took an unexpected moment and transformed it into an improvisational feat. He used the disruption to catalyze innovation.

As we wrestle through our own disruptive moments, our unforeseen circumstances, let us consider that a window of opportunity remains open for us to turn the disruption into improvisation, to perform notes off the page, to riff on what we have prepared.

This proposed approach—improvisational teaching that is technologically innovative, intentionally collaborative, and strategically diverse—represents my attempt to make good use of the opportunity before us. Though my recommendation is theoretical in nature, I hold to the same conviction as the social scientist Kurt Lewin, who said, “There is nothing so practical as a good theory.”²

Toward a Twenty-First Century Preaching Pedagogy

Improvisational Teaching

A move toward improvisational teaching requires a shift from conceiving of teaching as scripted performance to thinking of it as reflexive performance. Here I take my cues from R. Keith Sawyer, a leading researcher on creativity and pedagogy. Sawyer pushes back against the conventional metaphor of the teacher as an actor with a script to perform. Whether the script is

¹ David Hajdu, “Wynton’s Blues,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 2003, 44, as cited in Kirk Byron Jones, *The Jazz of Preaching: How to Preach with Great Freedom and Joy* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 80.

² Kurt Lewin, “Constructs in Psychology and Psychological Ecology,” *University of Iowa Studies in Child Welfare* 20 (1944): 3–29.

our lecture, lesson plan, or agenda for the day, a verbatim performance stifles the creative opportunities that would be possible if we improvised. The old metaphor, Sawyer writes, “emphasizes important skills for teachers, such as presentation, delivery, voice, movement, and timing. Yet the metaphor of teaching as performance is problematic, because it suggests a solo performer reading from a script, with the students as the passive, observing audience.” Creative teaching is “better conceived as *improvisational performance*.”³ Sawyer’s point is not that we should abandon the script—just the opposite. He does not argue that teachers should abandon the syllabus or just show up and see what happens. His point is this: Expert teachers should know the script so well that they can riff on it.

Anyone who has spent considerable time in a preaching classroom knows that the teacher is not a solo performer and the students are not a passive audience. Nevertheless, the temptation toward an old way persists—to stick to the script exactly as we have prepared it. Sometimes preaching teachers do this because we are new to teaching and are prone to a form of content tyranny; we want to teach our students everything about everything. Other times we do this even though we are veteran teachers because we operate in academic guilds that reward accuracy and precision.

Regardless of what drives the temptation, we know better than to think we can get away with it. The age-old question lies before us: Do we teach our discipline or do we teach our discipline to students? If we really believe our focus is on the students, then a greater commitment to preparation is required. Improvisational teachers know the script so well that they can read and respond to their students as they improvise, summoning students’ active participation in their own learning as co-performers of the script. In spaces like these, creative teaching and learning can take place.

Technologically Innovative

A technologically innovative pedagogy requires a shift in how we think about the classroom and about student learning. We already know that the boundaries of the classroom have expanded. A select number of preaching teachers still have the freedom to teach in a purely residential format, but a growing percentage of us have to think theologically and pedagogically about how to construct classrooms that do not fit the traditional brick-and-mortar category. We ask questions such as these:

- How do we “flip” the classroom to maximize engagement, moving in-class materials to outside the class space and outside materials to inside the class space?
- Will this be a purely online format or a hybrid format, and what are the benefits and drawbacks of each?
- Do we teach in a synchronous manner, an asynchronous manner, or both?
- How do we build community when we are not together in the same room?
- How do we prevent attrition by maximizing human presence so that people can see and hear one another?
- How do we replicate the preaching lab experience?

³ R. Keith Sawyer, “Creative Teaching: Collaborative Discussion as Disciplined Improvisation,” *Educational Researcher* 33, no. 2 (March 2004): 12.

If we seek to answer these and other questions better over the next ten years, along with empowering those who come after us, then we will make online spaces more hospitable places for learning.

Some seminaries already provide great leadership in online theological education, and they should be commended for it. That said, many informal cohorts and nonprofit ministries are outpacing seminaries in delivering high-quality theological training online, especially since formal institutional structures tend to stifle innovation. In April, I taught online for an informal cohort of nearly forty Baptist pastors under the age of 40 in the Dallas–Fort Worth area. In May, I taught a webinar for five hundred Wesleyan pastors over age 40. The nonprofit that hosted the webinar is based in Virginia, but pastors attended remotely from all over North America plus about ten other countries.

Technological shifts also require a willingness to maximize student learning through technology. No doubt our preaching students will benefit from learning how to record shorter sermons in an empty room while preaching to a green-dotted webcam—and from learning how to edit, upload, and disseminate these sermons. I know several preaching pastors who were caught unprepared when COVID-19 forced churches to move everything online, including sermons. Although many of my preaching students, especially the beginners, did not like having to record their sermons after the coronavirus outbreak, most of them understood that knowing how to record sermons would help them somehow in the future.

Technology can also maximize the ways that we learn. In Howard Gardner’s now-classic *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, he argues that there are eight forms of intelligence rather than one: visual-spatial, linguistic-verbal, interpersonal, intrapersonal, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, and naturalistic.⁴ While Gardner’s research assists teachers in every setting, I find his work especially helpful in preaching classrooms. Many of my students long for an approach that goes beyond reading books. When I was a PhD student without any control over how courses were taught, I would always have students who struggled because of the absence of video and audio examples to illustrate the abstract concepts covered in classes and books. These students thought about preaching in much the same way that mechanics think about how to fix cars. They could read a book about how to do it, but what they really wanted was the opportunity to listen, to watch, and to do.

Preaching classrooms, whether online or residential, can be fertile spaces for listening to and watching audio and video sermons—and for practicing preaching through shorter, low-stakes assignments that gradually build to longer, high-stakes sermons. A multiple-intelligences approach that leverages technology will help us engage auditory and visual learners better than we do now, as well as engaging those who learn through doing.

Intentionally Collaborative

An intentionally collaborative pedagogy requires a shift toward a “side-coaching” approach over a sage-on-the-stage approach. Not coincidentally, the language of side-coaching comes from

⁴ Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

improvisational theater.⁵ The side-coach's job is to take the knowledge and wisdom that actors already possess and help them use it to listen, react, and respond instead of control, direct, and decide. Side-coach preaching teachers understand that just because they possess knowledge and expertise on the history, theory, and practice of preaching, it does not mean that they possess *all* of the knowledge and expertise. Our job is not to download information or dispense indoctrination but to expand collective wisdom and empower best practices. Sages on the stage do the former. Side-coaches do the latter.

To be intentionally collaborative side-coaches, teachers should find ways to leverage the wisdom of their students as well as the wisdom of their students' churches. The goal is to engage a multiplicity of voices in both academic and ecclesial contexts. Some preaching students have preached for twenty years before they go to seminary. Yes, they may have developed some bad habits along the way, but they have also preached more than a thousand times. Other students listen to or watch sermons recreationally, especially if they have been formed in an apprenticeship tradition. Not only do they have access to audio and video sermons, but they have the capacity to articulate why they love their favorite preachers. Still other students come from minority spaces and can offer perspectives on preaching that will both decenter and enhance the learning of majority students.

In all of these instances, students offer their peers knowledge and wisdom of the sort that a side-coach can identify and amplify. Moreover, preaching teachers who facilitate collaboration with churches can increase the benefits for both their students and their students' churches. How might we as teachers facilitate constructive feedback loops in local church contexts—loops that allow students to listen and learn from laypeople? How might we partner with pastor-mentors who can bring students along in their development? How might we invite laypeople into more formal academic spaces to provide feedback on student preaching? How might we teach students to contextualize well since they, not we, are the resident experts on their contexts? Side-coaches know how to collaborate with the students they teach and the communities their students serve.

Strategically Diverse

A strategically diverse pedagogy requires a shift in thinking about how to prepare students to minister in a diverse church and world for the sake of the gospel. We already know that many local churches are not racially and ethnically diverse, just as we know that some regions of North America are less diverse than other regions—and sometimes we use this knowledge as an excuse for failing to train preachers for an intercultural church with an intercultural future. Much worse, some of us associate diversity initiatives with the watering down of our curriculum, or the diversification of our syllabi with an attempt to put limits on academic freedom. Could it be that our fear of institutional diversity has gotten in the way of our pursuit of educational excellence? No doubt many of the most effective preachers of the future will be those who are prepared and equipped to navigate difference effectively: to think, act, preach, and minister in interculturally competent ways.⁶ The real question is whether or not we will do our best to train them.

⁵ For example, see the Glossary of Side-Coaching Phrases in Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 374–76.

⁶ For more on intercultural competence, see Darla K. Deardorff, ed., *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2009).

As teachers of preachers, we know intuitively that rapid demographic shifts are taking place both in our society and in theological education. Current data reports and future data projections only confirm our intuition. In 1960, the White majority population in the U.S. stood at 85 percent and the non-White population at 15 percent. In 2012, these numbers stood at 63 percent and 37 percent. Current projections predict that, in the year 2042, the scales will tip to a non-White population of 51 percent and a White population of 49 percent. The year 2010 was the first year that more non-White babies were born in the U.S. than White babies. The year 2014 was the first year that there were more non-White children in public schools than White children.⁷ In 2018, the median age in the U.S. was 40.8 for Whites, 37.3 for Asian Americans, 34.4 for African Americans, and 29.5 for Hispanics.⁸

Changes in theological education mirror the changes taking place in society. From 2009 through 2018 among seminaries and divinity schools accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), White student enrollment declined by 10 percent, whereas enrollment rose 12 percent for African Americans, 8 percent for Asian Americans, 27 percent for F-1 visa holders, and an astonishing 65 percent for Latinx students. In 2009, White students accounted for 59 percent of all students, while in 2018 they accounted for just under 51 percent.⁹ According to ATS president emeritus Daniel J. Aleshire, the “scale and cultural presence of communities of color” are likely “the most compelling issue for the American church and for the seminaries related to the American church.”¹⁰

If we as teachers choose to answer the question “Do I teach my discipline or do I teach my discipline to students?” with “To students,” then we must be ready to travel a path toward intercultural competence in the teaching of preaching. Current demographic shifts in our churches, our schools, and our nation demand it.

Conclusion

This essay proposes a way forward over the next ten years: *improvisational teaching that is technologically innovative, intentionally collaborative, and strategically diverse*. Yes, a lot can change in ten years. We can control only what we can control. Even so, we *can* control whether or not we prepare today for the realities we anticipate later. We *can* work now to use disruptive, unforeseen moments to create better and more faithful performances. Since great improvisation happens on the other side of great preparation, we would do well to remember that only those who have a script can riff on it.

Wynton Marsalis practiced the trumpet at least two hours a day as a boy growing up in New Orleans. As the stakes grew higher and he got older, he lengthened his practice time in order to deepen his “emotional and professional commitment to his craft.” In 1997, an interviewer asked

⁷ See William H. Frey, “The Census Projects Minority Surge,” *Brookings* (blog), August 18, 2008; Haya El Nasser, “U.S. Hispanic Population to Triple by 2050,” *USA Today*, February 12, 2008; Carol Morello and Ted Mellnik, “Census: Minority Babies Are Now Majority in United States,” *The Washington Post*, May 17, 2012; Sean Coughlan, “US Schools to Have Non-White Majority,” *BBC News: Education and Family*, August 26, 2014.

⁸ See the 2018 median age detailed tables according to race and ethnicity at <http://data.census.gov>.

⁹ See the Annual Data Tables (2009–2018) at <https://www.ats.edu/resources/institutional-data/annual-data-tables>.

¹⁰ Norman Jameson, “Shifting Sands: Seminaries Are at a Crossroads (Interview with Daniel Aleshire),” *Baptist World News*, October 28, 2014.

him why he devoted so much time to practicing. His answer helps us understand why he responded so well to the “cell-phone offender” that night, and it reminds us why the pursuit of excellence in the teaching of preaching should be so important to us. His response: “One thing about excellence, it’s an exclusive club. And it’s only for those who really want to pay dues.”¹¹

¹¹ Touré, “Wynton Marsalis,” *Icon Thoughtstyle Magazine*, August 1997, as cited in Jones, *The Jazz of Preaching*, 86.

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