J.E. Alcántara

Prof. J.E. Alcántara, Associate Professor of Preaching, George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

(orcid.org/0000-0002-2930-6826)

Jared_Alcantara@baylor.edu

ON THE FUTURE OF TEACHING PREACHING IN THE MIDST OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

ABSTRACT

In this article, I commend a way forward in preaching pedagogy over the next ten years.[1] I propose a turn toward improvisational teaching that is technologically innovative, intentionally collaborative, and strategically diverse. These commitments arise from ongoing pedagogical research, teaching and learning experiences in classrooms and conferences, dialogues with colleagues, and most importantly, from listening to students at various seminaries and divinity schools discuss how they learn, grow, and thrive as preachers.

1.   INTRODUCTION

Why write an article on rethinking preaching pedagogy between now and 2030? 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. None of us can prophesy, which means that a ten-year proposal is provisional at best. A homiletician who predicts realities in the year 2030 can be compared to a bungee jumper who dives off a bridge with a homemade bungee cord. If his designs and

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1   A shorter, more popularised version of this article appeared previously on the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship website in the form of an essay titled, "Preparing our preaching pedagogies for the year 2030" on 6 July 2020 (Alcántara 2020).

calculations are correct, people will view him as an authority. If they are not, they will remember him for different reasons.

Although definitive predictions about the future border on presumption, the need for pedagogical revision remains vital, especially on a topic as important as training the next generation of preachers. The absence of a crystal ball does not authorise passivity or inaction. Although the coronavirus pandemic has introduced much more uncertainty and volatility, it has also forced teachers from *all* theological disciplines to reflect on what, where, how, whom, and why we teach. Do we teach our discipline, or do we teach our discipline to students? If our answer is the latter rather than the former, then a nimble mindset and a reflexive strategy is needed now more than ever. A new approach represents a more-than-worthy undertaking when those who will benefit the most from our reflection are the pastors of the future. A 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 theologically and practically for the shifts taking place in our culture and world, especially in light of the challenges we have seen in the year 2020? How do we pursue academic excellence while also practising respect and responsibility toward a new generation of students? How do we teach with cultural humility in diverse classrooms? How do we pursue innovation in a way that is timely, while also being faithful to the tradition? How do we respond to rampant technological changes that impact the manner in which institutions deliver courses and the mode whereby preachers deliver their sermons? Beneath these and other questions, of course, is a deeper and more fundamental question for professors teaching homiletics: How do we teach preaching better than we do now? A short anecdote offers an *entrée* into the answer that will be proposed.

2.   WHAT DOES WYNTON MARSALIS HAVE TO DO WITH PREACHING PEDAGOGY?

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, happened upon a performance by Wynton Marsalis, the renowned jazz trumpeter. Part way through the set, Marsalis played a solo version of "I don't stand a ghost of a chance with you". Hajdu and the others in the room sat mesmerised. 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 submit that we have come to a "cell-phone offender" moment in theological education. Unforeseen

circumstances have brought us to a crossroads. Prior to March 2020, many seminary leaders in North America were already dealing with unforeseen circumstances, but these were related to financial solvency, declining enrolment, diversifying course delivery online, and launching initiatives that no one could have predicted ten years earlier. Post-March 2020, our biggest unforeseen circumstance has been the coronavirus pandemic and our need to respond to it. In addition to the coronavirus, the killing of George Floyd in May 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, uncovered the deep racial wounds that continue to fester in the context of the United States of America. Covid-19, coupled with the deep pain experienced by Black and Brown students of colour, have introduced new unforeseen challenges, new unresolved issues that amplify and exacerbate the challenges that existed prior to 2020. Regardless of which disruptions happen to be the most pressing, many feel as if they are standing motionless on stage with eyebrows arched.

As Hajdu heard the phone ring and watched Marsalis freeze, he scribbled his frustration down 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 (Hajdu 2003:44, cited in Jones 2004:80).

Marsalis took an unexpected moment and transformed it into an improvisational opportunity. He used an unforeseen disruption as a way to catalyse innovation. As we wrestle through our own disruptive moments and unforeseen circumstances, perhaps a window of opportunity remains open for us to turn disruptions into improvisations, to perform notes off the page, to riff on what we have prepared.

The approach that I commend – improvisational teaching that is technologically innovative, intentionally collaborative, and strategically diverse – represents an 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 Lewin (1944:3-29): "There is nothing so practical as a good theory."

3. TOWARD A 2030 PREACHING PEDAGOGY

3.1 Improvisational teaching

A move toward improvisational teaching requires a shift away from teaching as scripted performance to teaching as protean performance. If anything, Covid-19 has reminded us that protean reflexivity with respect to the script is needed when familiar rituals are removed from theological education. I take my cues from at least two places. First, consider the possibilities of improvisation in pedagogy. In this instance, we enlist the help of 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 our lecture, lesson plan, or agenda for the day, Sawyer argues that a *verbatim* performance limits our capacity as teachers and stifles the creativity that would otherwise be possible had we improvised. The old metaphor, Sawyer (2004:12) 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*". Sawyer's point is not that we should abandon the script – just the opposite. He does not suggest that teachers should forsake the syllabus or simply show up and see what happens. His point is this: Expert teachers should know the script so well that they can riff on it. Improvisational teaching requires more rather than less from us.

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, veteran teachers do this, quite often 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. If we really answer the question, "Do we teach our discipline or do we teach our discipline to students?" with the latter rather than the former, then a laser-like focus on students should remain central. Thus, 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 such spaces, creative teaching and learning takes place. Moreover, students reap the benefits when they are co-performers in learning. Constructivist education theorists such as Jean Piaget (2001; 2002), Lev Vygotsky (1978; 1986), and others remind us that students learn best in environments where they are co-architects and co-constructors of their knowledge.[2] Motivation spikes, knowledge increases, and transformative learning becomes more plausible when teachers activate student agency through improvisational approaches that foreground critical thinking, group process, peer interaction, and group collaboration.

Secondly, consider the possibilities of improvisation as a theological construct. In recent years, a growing number of theologians (Crawford 2013; Heltzel 2012; Lash 1986; Vanhoozer 2005; 2009; 2014; Wells 2004; Yong 2008) have drawn on improvisation, in general, or improvisational performance, in particular, as a metaphor for doing theology or for being the church in the world. For instance, Wells argues that a church that maintains a vibrant and faithful Christian ethic in a 21st-century context learns how to "improvise within the tradition". According to Wells (2004:12),

> [i]mprovisation means a community formed in the right habits trusting itself to embody its tradition in new and often challenging circumstances; and this is exactly what the church is called to do.

As a second example, consider the work of Vanhoozer. Following his mentor Nicholas Lash (1986), Vanhoozer argues for a theo-dramatic approach to theology, with improvisational performance as its guiding metaphor. Although the church follows direction and performs a script, its interpretation of the script and its performance of the gospel remain context specific and protean. In other words, its performance occurs as an improvisation in concrete situations; it maintains an ongoing "sensitivity to circumstance" from generation to generation. Vanhoozer (2009:175) describes sensitivity to circumstance as "grasping the relationship between what the Bible says about God and what we know about the contemporary situation, and then act[ing] accordingly". Improvisational performance goes beyond what we say and do in the classroom as teachers of preaching. It includes what we say and do as the people of God, the decisions we make in the real world in our dialogue with Scripture and the contemporary situation.

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2   For an assessment and critique of co-constructivist learning theory in Christian education, see Knowlton (2002).

3.2   Technologically innovative

A technologically innovative pedagogy requires a shift in how we think about student learning as well as an expansion of where and how we circumscribe the classroom. 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. Especially during the coronavirus pandemic, we have been asking important questions about online engagement and innovation:

- How do we "flip" the classroom, in order to maximise 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?

- Should we teach in a synchronous manner, an asynchronous manner, or both? Why?

- How do we build community when we are not together in the same room?

- How do we prevent attrition by maximising human presence, so that people can see and hear one another?

- What obstacles need to be overcome, in order for student motivation to remain high?

- What opportunities exist in a new mode of delivery that might not have existed previously?

- How do we replicate the preaching lab experience in online or hybrid formats?

If we desire to answer these and other questions better over the next ten years, and to empower those who come after us in teaching, then we will learn to make online spaces more hospitable places for teaching and learning.

Some seminaries already provide great leadership in online theological education, and they should be commended for it. That said, many informal cohorts and non-profit ministries are outpacing seminaries in delivering high-quality theological training online, especially since formal institutional structures tend to stifle innovation. In April 2020, I taught online for an informal cohort of nearly 40 Baptist pastors under the age of 40 years from around the Dallas-Fort Worth area in Texas. In May, I taught a webinar for 500 Wesleyan pastors over the age of 40 years. The non-profit that hosted the webinar is

based in Virginia, but pastors attended remotely from all over North America, in addition to about ten other countries. The two organisations, for whom I taught, organised these learning spaces with ease, efficiency, and precision. Many churches and non-profits are reaching constituencies that seminaries and divinity schools are not able to reach on account of their ability to utilise technology.

I will provide an example from a group of churches. In June 2020, I preached five sermons (that I recorded several weeks earlier) for a Christian conference in New Zealand. Because the conference could not take place in person on account of Covid-19, the organiser held it over Livestream instead. Participants attended keynote sessions on the ministry's YouTube channel. They utilised the Live Chats as they listened to the sermons, so that they could interact with hosts, ask questions, and encourage one another. Although many conferees lamented not being able to meet in person (which is not surprising), a number of conferees from the less-populated southern island of New Zealand rejoiced in being able to attend a conference on the northern island that they would never have been able to attend otherwise. As the conference concluded, I engaged in a "live" question-and-answer in the final session. Participants would ask me a question. I would record an answer from my webcam in my home and upload it to the "cloud". The hosts would download it and play my recently recorded video response, in order to answer the question.

Technological shifts require a willingness on our part to maximise technology so that we can maximise student learning. Even if it spikes our levels of un-comfortability, our preaching students will no doubt benefit from learning how to record shorter sermons in an empty room preaching to a green-dotted webcam and from learning how to edit, upload, and disseminate their sermons. Many preaching pastors 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 hit in March 2020, most of them understood that recording and uploading sermons would help them somehow in the future.

One does not need to teach preaching online or in a hybrid format to leverage technology toward a good end. In-person classroom settings also benefit from innovation. In his now-classic *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*, Gardner (1983) argues that there are eight forms of intelligence rather than one: visual-spatial, linguistic-verbal, interpersonal, intrapersonal, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinaesthetic, and naturalistic. While Gardner's research assists teachers in every setting, I find his work especially helpful to preaching classrooms. Many of my students

long for an approach that goes beyond reading books. For instance, 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 learn through listening, seeing, and doing.

Preaching classrooms, whether online or residential, can become fertile spaces for listening to and watching audio and video sermons – and for practising preaching (learning-through-doing) through shorter, low-stakes assignments that gradually build to longer, high-stakes sermons. A multiple-intelligences approach that leverages technology helps us engage auditory and visual learners better than we do now, as well as those who learn best through doing. When used properly, technology maximises student learning by appealing to a multiplicity of learning styles.

3.3   Intentionally collaborative

An intentionally collaborative pedagogy requires a shift from a "sage-on-the-stage" approach to a "side-coaching" approach. Such a shift represents a pivot from teacher-centred learning to student-centred learning, from an older transmission model to a more democratised model. The older transmission model

> places importance and emphasis on the initial dissemination of subject matter, which is delivered publicly and under the direct control of the instructor (Information Resources Management Association 2017:50).

It gives the sage-on-the-stage most of the power and agency over the learning process, by assigning

> passive roles to learners: vessels to be filled, sponges to be soaked, or (perhaps a little more imaginatively) piles of wood to be ignited (Information Resources Management Association 2017:50).

By contrast, a democratised model ascribes much more power and agency to learners in the cultivation of their own learning. To use the language mentioned earlier, they become co-architects and co-constructors of knowledge. Intentional collaboration elevates student roles and responsibilities, expects active engagement, vests students with greater autonomy, and activates the spirit of learning. However, it requires a shift in how we think about teaching "from *transmission to* learners to a *flow among*

and between learners" (Information Resources Management Association 2017:51; emphasis in original).

Not coincidentally, the language of side-coaching also appears in improvisational theatre.[3] In this context, 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 follow a similar directive. They understand that, because they possess knowledge and expertise on the history, theory, and practice of preaching, this does not mean that they possess *all* of the knowledge and expertise. Our job is not to download information or disseminate indoctrination, but to expand collective wisdom and empower best practices through guidance and direction. Sages-on-the-stage do the former. Side-coaches do the latter.

To be intentionally collaborative side-coaches, teachers can discern how to leverage the wisdom of their students and the collective wisdom of their students' churches. The goal is engagement with a multiplicity of voices in academic *and* ecclesial contexts. Some preaching students have preached for 20 years before they go to seminary. Although they may have developed some bad habits over time, they have also preached more than 1,000 times before ever stepping into a preaching classroom. In other words, they bring much-needed experience with them to a teaching and learning environment, especially if some of their student colleagues have not yet preached once. Other students may listen to or watch sermons recreationally, especially if they have been formed in an apprenticeship tradition. I have had at least some of these students in my classes every school year, regardless of the seminary or divinity school where I happened to be teaching. They have a natural ability and a keen interest in downloading audio and video sermons, and they also have the capacity to articulate why they love their favourite preachers. They love preaching before they ever set foot into the classroom; this means that they have something valuable to offer their peers. Still other students grew up in minoritised preaching traditions. They come from and preach in spaces that make classrooms stronger by their presence in them. They bring perspectives that both de-centre and enhance the learning of majority-culture students. In each of these instances, students offer their peers knowledge, wisdom that a side-coach would seek to identify and amplify.

Preaching teachers who facilitate collaboration with students' churches can increase the benefits for both their students and the churches where their students serve. As teaching partners, we could ask how we might facilitate constructive feedback loops in local church contexts – loops that allow students to listen to and learn from supervisors and from laypeople.

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3   For example, see the Glossary of Side-Coaching Phrases in Spolin (1999:374-376).

In addition, how might we empower pastor-mentors whose leadership and guidance can bring students along in their development? How might we invite both pastors and laypeople into more formal academic spaces, perhaps to provide feedback on student preaching? How might we teach and learn from students on matters of contextualisation, especially since they and not we are the resident experts on their contexts? Side-coaches know how to collaborate with the students whom they teach and the communities that their students serve. Great coaches bring out the best in their team.[4]

3.4   Strategically diverse

A strategically diverse pedagogy requires a shift in thinking about how we prepare students to minister in a diverse church and world for the sake of the gospel. In many ways, our commitment to strategic diversity hinges on our doctrines of God and of humanity. As merely one example among many, consider the significance of our theologies of image-bearing. Many theologies of the *imago Dei* fail to account for the insidious and debilitating impact of racialisation on the theologies that they espouse and more broadly on individuals, institutions, and societies. A growing number of theologians observe the connection between anaemic theologies of the *imago Dei* and distorted understandings of race. According to Kilner (2015:27), some of these theologies "accord African Americans no more than a diminished image-of-God status at best, leading directly to their 'degrading' and 'marginalizing'". The same racial logic that was used on Native Americans is also used on them:

> People see African Americans as subhuman and not really/fully in God's image. Accordingly, the respect due to those in God's image does not apply to them (Kilner 2015:28).[5]

False beliefs in racial hierarchy cannot persist alongside a sound theology of divine image-bearing.

Our theologies should also guide our behaviours on matters of strategic diversity. In *Crossover Preaching* (Alcántara 2015), I argued that Taylor's preaching teaches current preachers that faithful contextualisation requires *more* than theological, exegetical, and communicative proficiency, the proficiencies that students most often learn in seminary. Preachers also need improvisational proficiency and intercultural competence proficiency, in order to meet the demands of an intercultural church with an intercultural future. Since I described the former earlier, I will consider how much *more* important

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4   For more on expert coaching and expert performance, see Ericsson (2006:685-705).

5   See also Grey (2003:223-234); Primavesi (2003:187-191), and Rogerson (2003:25-30), cited in Kilner (2015:27).

the latter has become since the book's publication in 2015, especially in 2020. In other words, intercultural competence is needed now more than ever. In racialised societies, intercultural competence proficiency should not be equated with the kind of reductive caricatures that equate it with functional effectiveness in a cross-cultural context so as not to offend one's interlocutor. Especially in historical moments, intercultural competence proficiency requires a persistent cultivation and deployment of culturally informed and actively antiracist beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, and actions that produce a more just and equitable society (see Kendi 2016; 2019).

We already know that many local churches are not racially and ethnically diverse, whether in the United States of America or in other parts of the world. Sadly, professors often use this knowledge as an excuse for failing to train preachers for the church that is emerging. Much worse, some professors and administrators associate diversity initiatives with the watering down of their curricula; they push back on conversations related to the diversification of syllabi, associating it with attempts to put limits on academic freedom. Could it be that fear of institutional diversity has got in the way of educational excellence? Many of the most effective preachers of the future will be those who know how 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.

Many teachers of preaching know intuitively that rapid demographic shifts are taking place in both the larger society, in general, and theological education, in particular. For example, in the United States of America, current data reports and future data projections only confirm that intuition. In 1960, the White majority population in the United States of America stood at 85 per cent and the non-White population at 15 per cent. In 2012, these numbers stood at 63 per cent and 37 per cent, respectively. Current projections predict that, in the year 2042, the scales will tip to a non-White population of 51 per cent and a White population of 49 per cent. The year 2010 was the first year in which more non-White than White babies were born in the United States of America. The year 2014 was the first year in which more non-White than White children were in public schools (Frey 2008; El Nasser 2008; Morello & Melnik 2012; Coughlan 2014). In 2018, the median age in the United States of America was 40.8 for Whites, 37.3 for Asian Americans, 34.4 for African Americans, and 29.5 for Hispanics.[7]

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6   For more on intercultural competence theory and assessment, see Deardorff (2009).

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

Changes in theological education in the United States mirror many of the changes taking place in society. From 2009 to 2018, among seminaries and divinity schools accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) in the United States of America and Canada, White student enrolment declined by 10 per cent, whereas enrolment rose 12 per cent for African Americans, 8 per cent for Asian Americans, 27 per cent for F-1 visa holders, and an astonishing 65 per cent for Latin students. In 2009, White students accounted for 59 per cent of all students, while in 2018 they accounted for just under 51 per cent.[8] According to ATS president emeritus Daniel J. Aleshire, the

> scale and cultural presence of communities of colour [are likely] the most compelling issue for the American church and for the seminaries related to the American church.

The seminaries that fail to account for these shifts and engage the opportunities inherent in them run the risk of fostering a "boutique culture" that is out of step and out of touch with the churches they serve and the world in which they teach (Jameson 2014).

Those who answer the question, "Do I teach my discipline, or do I teach my discipline to students?" with the latter rather than the former 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 world demand it.

4.   CONCLUSION

In this article, I proposed a way forward in preaching pedagogy between now and 2030: improvisational teaching that is technologically innovative, intentionally collaborative, and strategically diverse. By making this proposal, I did not mean to imply that preaching professors (along with professors in other disciplines) should abandon other commitments that they hold dear such as biblical-exegetical competency, theological precision, communicative excellence, spiritual formation, and God-infused theologies of proclamation. In my judgements, these values already matter to most of us. As a result, I chose to foreground the commitments that are often omitted from our pedagogies, the gaps that need to be closed, in order for our teaching to be vibrant, vital, faithful, and fitting for the next generation of students.

Especially in the age of the coronavirus, we realise in a fresh way that a great deal can happen in ten months, let alone ten years. We can only

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8   See the Annual Data Tables [2009-2018] at https://www.ats.edu/resources/institutional-data/annual-data-tables.

control what we can control. That stated, we *can* control whether or not we prepare today for the realities that we foresee in the future. We *can* work now to leverage disruptive, unforeseen moments, in order to create better, more faithful performances in teaching and learning. Since great improvisation happens on the other side of great preparation, we *can* remember that only those with a script are set free to riff on it.

Wynton Marsalis practised the trumpet at least two hours a day as a boy growing up in New Orleans, Louisiana. 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 him why he devoted so much time to practice. His answer not only helps us understand why he responded so well to the "cell-phone offender" on that particular night, but it also reminds us why we should pursue excellence in preaching pedagogy and, for that matter, pedagogical excellence in other disciplines. His response: "One thing about excellence, it's an exclusive club. And it's only for those who really want to pay dues." (Touré 1997, cited in Jones 2004:86).

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