

**The Witnessing Community:
Cultivating Face-Attentive Learning Environments for In-Class Sermon Feedback**

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Abstract: *Preaching courses customarily involve elements of public performance and evaluation that stir deep feelings of anxiety and dread among student preachers. This article considers a concept from intercultural communication theory called facework, which is concerned with mitigating perceived face threats for the purpose of optimizing student receptivity to critical feedback. This article explores facework in relation to the development of classroom environments and proposes an ethic of bearing witness as a means by which instructors can shape classroom relationships and tend to the theological formation of preaching students. The article concludes with a review of a student survey, reflecting on the implementation of face-attentive pedagogical practices during in-class sermon feedback.*

Introduction

Academic courses that require an element of public performance regularly produce a sense of dread among students, whose attention is divided between the task at hand and their social standing among their peers and educators. Preaching courses typically include at least one performance of a sermon, followed by a feedback intervention led by the professor.¹ Students may experience varying levels of fear or anxiety leading up to the assignment as they attempt to gauge their own competence, while also negotiating elements of personal identity in relation to others. Though student experiences are varied, this much remains clear: the moments leading up to, and following, a student's in-class performance of a sermon are fraught and require a great amount of pedagogical skill on the part of the professor. This paper explores the concept of *facework* from intercultural communication theory to illuminate the pedagogical challenges of in-class sermon feedback.² The purpose of this paper is to present a pedagogical approach that cultivates a learning environment in which students bear witness to one another as a witnessing community. The mode of witnessing generates opportunities for mitigating *face threats*, thereby promoting student receptivity to feedback and instruction. Additionally, to bear witness to preaching students is to participate in the homiletical tradition of witnessing—that is, to affirm students' capacities to speak about God in a communal context. The cultivation of a witnessing community in the homiletical classroom enjoins students to become witnesses to the theological formation of their peers, to affirm each other's testimonies, and to engage one another's social needs, thereby improving student learning outcomes.

Face Under Threat in Sermon Feedback

¹ Feedback interventions are "actions intended to give information about one or more aspects of another's task performance, ideally without provoking the defensive, negative attributions that can thwart their desired impacts on the hearer." April R. Trees, Jeff Kerssen-Griep, and Jon A. Hess. "Earning Influence by Communicating Respect: Facework's Contributions to Effective Instructional Feedback" *Communication Education* 58:3, 397-416.

² Specifically, this article incorporates the research of Jeff Kerssen-Griep, April R. Trees, and Jon A. Hess on facework and instructional feedback.

It is a familiar sensation to the seasoned instructor of preaching: the rising tension in the room following the delivery of a student sermon. Despite its familiarity, the sensation may be somewhat confounding even to the most experienced teachers of preaching. Homileticians have developed and employed an array of methods and procedures for reducing tension during in-class sermon feedback. Though many of these methods help to alleviate momentary bouts of anxiety, these methods rarely consider the social formation of the student in relation to others beyond the moments of sermon feedback. One exception can be found in Barbara Lundblad's chapter in the edited volume, *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice*. Lundblad treats not only task-mastery, but also the student as a person in relation to a learning environment. She is mindful of matters of identity in the classroom and is concerned with developing a learning environment rooted in respect and openness. Lundblad's attention to cultivating a learning environment that tends to social and theological difference moves toward the concept of a witnessing community developed in this article.³

While homileticians have certainly gained greater awareness of student needs and pedagogical techniques, the palpable tension among students during in-class sermon feedback remains a considerable obstacle for many. What is often brushed aside as garden-variety stage fright is actually a rather complex constellation of student needs emerging in competition with one another. Some communication theorists refer to this constellation as *face needs*. In their article titled, "Earning Influence by Communicating Respect: Facework's Contributions to Effective Instructional Feedback," April Trees, Jeff Kerssen-Griep, and Jon Hess describe the concept of *face* as "the desired self-image individuals present in interaction with others."⁴ Every person in the classroom is working to establish face as they negotiate space, representation, and recognition among peers and with their professor.

In their 1987 study on the construction of polite speech, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson identified two categories of face needs: *positive face* and *negative face*.⁵ Positive face is the need to belong, to feel accepted and affirmed by others. Negative face is the need to be autonomous, retaining full independence and agency, free from constraint or domination.⁶ Both positive and negative face needs emerge and contend with excessive urgency in the context of feedback interventions. April Trees, et al. note that "particular speech acts may threaten these identity needs, and these face threats pervade the teaching-learning relationship."⁷ *Face threats* are actions, verbal or nonverbal, that threaten the negotiation of face needs. Trees, et al. go on to describe the "face-threatening nature of criticism" endemic to feedback interventions in classrooms, arguing that poorly conceived approaches to feedback may produce ineffective and counter-productive results.⁸ Thus, communication theorists have developed *facework* strategies for mitigating face threats, while sustaining the preferred social identities of others.⁹

³ Barbara K. Lundblad, "Designing the Introductory Course in Preaching," in *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 207-222.

⁴ Trees, et al., 398.

⁵ Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁶ Trees, et al. 398.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 397.

⁹ Jeff Kerssen-Griep, April R. Trees, and Jon A. Hess, "Attentive Facework During Instructional Feedback: Key to Perceiving Mentorship and an Optimal Learning Environment" *Communication Education* 57, no 3. 2008, pp. 312-332. 313.

Facework strategies for feedback interventions are focused on building trust and rapport with students in an effort to mitigate face threats and increase student receptivity to instruction and guidance. Research suggests that the way a student feels about their instructor and their learning environment shapes the way the student receives feedback from their instructor and peers.¹⁰ The implementation of facework in student feedback positively predicts the student's perception of their teacher's credibility.¹¹ Thus, strategies that aim to personally affirm a student's belonging in the classroom, while also acknowledging their autonomy and agency, are more likely to promote growth in students, which may result in higher learning outcomes.

However, facework strategies are not one-size-fits-all and must be curated as the instructor intuitively discerns the particular face needs of various students. For example, a student who culturally identifies with the instructor may be more inclined to feel a sense of belonging than a student who does not culturally identify with the instructor. Or a first-generation college student or graduate student may negotiate their face needs in a manner different from a student whose parents attended college or graduate school. Or, as is common in preaching classrooms, women may find themselves filling a pulpit for the first time, coming from denominations that bar their bodies from pulpits. These women may experience disproportionate levels of interpersonal stress compared to their male peers. Similar observations can be made about some LGBTQ+ students entering the pulpit for the first time. Such aspects of identity are constantly factoring into the ways in which students negotiate their face needs in the classroom, and especially during in-class sermon feedback.

Cultivating an Ethical Learning Environment

Effective facework requires that the instructor foster a learning environment in which all students can safely pursue learning and task-mastery without defending face at every turn.¹² In a study by Kerssen-Griep, Trees, and Hess, facework in instructional feedback was found to significantly impact student perceptions of classroom relationships and classroom environment.¹³ In this sense, facework does not merely concern learning outcomes; facework concerns accessibility and interactivity within the broader context of a learning community. When students perform in a context that is designed to uphold face needs, they feel more empowered to receive and integrate critical feedback. When students no longer feel that their identities and social needs are being threatened, they are more likely to invest themselves in their professor's instruction.

The cultivation of a learning environment that tends carefully to the wellbeing of others requires a presiding ethic—a pedagogical ethic for the relationship between teacher and student, as well as relationships between peers. In their chapter, “Ethical Issues in Intercultural Communication,” Judith Martin, Lisa Flores, and Thomas Nakayama outline three principles for ethical intercultural communication. The first principle is the *humanness principle*. This principle emphasizes the interpersonal responsibility to respect and care for fellow humans, while also pursuing growing awareness of humanity. The second principle is the *dialogic*

¹⁰ Trees, et al., 398.

¹¹ Ibid., 403.

¹² According to Trees, et al., “Depending on how the [feedback intervention] is perceived, a hearer either activates *self-identity-protection* processes, or, if the self does not feel threatened by the [feedback intervention], the hearer will devote cognitive energy to more specific and useful *task-learning* or *task-motivation* regulatory processes.” 399-400.

¹³ Kerssen-Griep, et al., 323.

principle, which asserts that we become most human in the context of relationships with other humans. This principle emphasizes empathy and the capacity to reach across social divides. The third principle is the *principle of speaking “with” and “to”* (rather than “about” or “for”). This principle emphasizes the importance of maintaining boundaries in communication, determining to speak only for oneself and with others, rather than about or for others.¹⁴ These principles for intercultural communication are helpful when considering how one might develop a learning environment rooted in face-informed ethics. Further, they resonate well with the theological concept of witnessing in homiletical literature, and the concept of social witnessing in philosophy, both of which are taken up in the following section.

Witnessing and Social Obligation

While Martin, Flores, and Nakayama certainly provide important insights for classroom ethics, the cultivation of a witnessing community in homiletical classrooms requires greater attention to two areas: (1) the theological formation of student preachers in relation to one another and the instructor; and (2) a critical engagement with the philosophical concept of witnessing the other, in order to flesh out a more nuanced understanding of social obligation. A brief overview of witnessing in homiletical literature will illuminate the theological formation of preachers in relation to their communities and will then be connected with a deeper exploration of social obligation.

Witnessing as a Homiletical Tradition

Witnessing in homiletical tradition informs this project in three primary ways: (1) the act of witnessing is a communal act; (2) to bear witness in preaching is to affirm the authority of one’s own lived experiences; and (3) testimony retains the capacity to upset paradigms of social power disparity. The term “witness” in homiletical literature most frequently refers to the action of one who testifies to God’s activity in the world. A preacher may be called a witness, and a preacher may participate in the act of witnessing, while the community may also be called witnesses who witness the preacher’s testimony. In his book, *I Believe I’ll Testify*, Cleo LaRue argues that “[t]he best of black preaching and the oratorical devices through which it is communicated are indeed testimony, for they witness to the power of God to provide, empower, and sustain a people historically and to this present day.”¹⁵ In this sense, the act of bearing witness informs hearers not only of God’s activity, but also indicates something about the people in relation to that activity. In his seminal work *The Witness of Preaching*, Thomas Long focuses on witnessing as the primary task of preachers who are called upon to testify from their own encounters with God in scripture.¹⁶ Yet Long also connects testimony to a community of hearers,

¹⁴ Judith Martin, Lisa Flores, and Thomas Nakayama, “Ethical Issues in Intercultural Communication” in *Readings in Intercultural Communication: Experiences and Contexts* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002), 363-370.

¹⁵ Cleo LaRue, *I Believe I’ll Testify: The Art of African American Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), XIV. Perhaps worth noting, LaRue cites Paul Scott Wilson’s work on confession and witnessing for his own understanding of the concepts. LaRue quotes Wilson to indicate the multifaceted nature of testimony: “The testimony may be the preacher’s own or spoken on behalf of someone in the Bible or contemporary world.” Paul Scott Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire: Putting God at the Center of the Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 149.

¹⁶ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 49.

writing, “Preaching and the community of faith, then, are reciprocal realities. Those who hear and believe the witness to Christ in preaching are thus gathered into the community of faith that continues to tell, to teach, and to celebrate that witness.”¹⁷ Thus, for both Long and LaRue, witnessing is a communal activity.

In her book, *Preaching as Testimony*, Anna Carter Florence ventures (by way of Ricoeur) that all theology is testimony.¹⁸ Thus, for Florence, all *preaching* is carried out in the mode of testimony. She develops this concept of preaching as testimony by locating a history of testimony in the lives of three preachers: Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643), Sarah Osborn (1714-1796), and Jarena Lee (1783-?). Her narration of the lives and ministries of these women highlights the way in which testimony emerged like a mother tongue of those who were marginalized or systemically silenced. In the historic and present barring of certain bodies from pulpits, testimony has opened the possibility of reclaiming authority in the space of one’s own body. The preacher’s body becomes a heuristic standard for gauging the validity of the Word to be proclaimed.¹⁹ Florence’s work marks a significant turn in the homiletical tradition of witnessing toward the body of the preacher.

This attention to bodies in the witnessing tradition finds expression in the work of Lisa Thompson. In her book *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider*, Thompson calls upon her readers to bear witness to the lives of Black women—though she does not overtly employ the language of witness and testimony. She writes,

I posit first and foremost, those we have most excluded from the conversation, by deeming them as the *other* or *outsider*, must set the terms for our rules of engagement. If we do not privilege the lives and truth of the most vulnerable in our communities, then we cannot be faithful to the most fundamental work of preaching itself. Therefore, in these pages I am endeavoring in a process that revisits the rules for engaging the practice of preaching if we are committed to taking the lives and ministries of black women seriously. [. . .] Black women become the lens through which our collective paradigms of preaching and its instruction are revisited, reshaped, and broadened.²⁰

Thompson’s insistence that Black women “become the lens through which” the paradigms of instruction are revisited brings the homiletical tradition of witnessing into proximity with philosophical concepts of witnessing and the other.

Witnessing as a Philosophical Concept and Ethical Obligation

Bearing witness as a philosophical idea is never removed from its ethical obligations. To bear witness is to engage in relation with others. In his book, *Witness to Dispossession: The Vocation of a Post-modern Theologian*, Tom Beaudoin frames his work as a theologian in terms of such witnessing. For Beaudoin, theology has an ethical responsibility to bear truthful witness to the lives of others—particularly those who are oppressed. He draws upon the Lévinasian concept of face when he writes,

¹⁷ Long, 51.

¹⁸ Florence cites Ricoeur’s “The Hermeneutics of Testimony,” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

¹⁹ Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), xvi-xxii.

²⁰ Lisa Thompson, *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2018), 7.

A *story* of suffering may become a morality tale or be co-opted by theory. A *face* calls in a different way. The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas famously argued that to be human is to be responsible for the suffering of the other, for the person whose well-being our very existence may be threatening. This obligation to others is encountered and symbolized in a unique way in the face-to-face relation. The faces of others present persons genuinely different from us, exposed to us. The vulnerability of the human face presents us with the claim: do not kill me. In a sense, Levinas says, the bare face of another says “do not deface me”; allow me, it says, my otherness without violation, shame, or indifference.²¹

Indeed, faces and their needs call in a different way to the professor. The call is to not deface, but to honor and make room for the truths espoused and imposed by the bodies in the room. And yet, there remains an unknowability in others. Even in the close proximity of a classroom, professors may struggle to discern the needs of their students. How might a professor tend to face needs of others when the others—our students—are essentially unknowable? How might classmates tend to the needs of their unknowable peers?

Philosopher and ethicist Kelly Oliver argues for an ethics of bearing witness, which accounts for this space between people through the concept of subjectivity. While affirming her indebtedness to poststructuralist theories of identity and relation, she offers a critique of poststructuralist notions of the “Other” in which, “the other is sometimes mute, impoverished, unavailable, still to come, almost worshiped (à la Derrida and Emmanuel Lévinas), or the other is invisible, unspoken, nonexistent, the underside of the subject (à la Foucault and Butler).”²² She raises concern for the manner in which others are consistently objectified for the subject. She asks, “What of the subjectivity of this so-called other? What of the subject position of those othered by these discourses of subjectivity? What of their speech, their present, their existence? Surely they don’t just think of themselves as mute, still to come, invisible, or nonexistent.”²³ Thus Oliver determines that the only way to construct a proper ethic of social relations is to begin with the position of the othered in an effort to uphold their subjectivity.²⁴

To uphold the subjectivity of others, Oliver promotes the mode of witnessing, in which others engage in “address-ability” and “response-ability.”²⁵ That is, others are not merely observed, but are actively engaged and received. Oliver’s concern for the address-ability and response-ability of others finds compatibility with the aforementioned ethics of intercultural communication: the humanness principle, the dialogic principle, and the principle of speaking “with” and “to” (rather than “about” or “for”). However, Oliver’s witnessing involves a more robust mode of engagement. Empathy is good, and consideration for others is essential, but Oliver’s vision of relationship entails something more far more constructive. Oliver insists that

²¹ Tom Beaudoin, *Witness to Dispossession: The Vocation of a Post-modern Theologian* (Mayknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), 33.

²² Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 5-6.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 7.

²⁵ Of address-ability and response-ability, Oliver writes, “What we learn from beginning with the subject position of those othered is that the speaking subject is a subject by virtue of address-ability and response-ability. Address-ability and response-ability are the roots of subjectivity, which are damaged by the objectifying operations of oppression and subordination. Address-ability and response-ability are what I identify with the process of witnessing.” Ibid.

the space between people is not some unknowable chasm, nor is it an untraversable social division. Rather, the space between people is full of shared input, accessible to all parties. She writes,

We create an impossible problem for ourselves by presuming to be separated in the first place. By presuming that we are fundamentally separated from the world and other people by the void of empty space, we at once eliminate the possibility of connection and relationships even while we make desperate attempts to bridge that abyss. [...] Space, however, is not an empty void. It is full of air, light, and the circulation of various forms of electrical, thermal, mechanical, and chemical energies that sustain us and connect us to each other and the world.²⁶

Thus, if the space between people is full of shared sensory input, as well as anything humans impose or self-disclose to one another, then the space itself offers a context in which humans can come to know one another on some level. In turn, the space confers an ethical responsibility upon the one who beholds another: to bear truthful witness to the other. Witnessing opens the possibility of moving beyond simple recognition of another, into intersubjective response-ability and engagement.²⁷

Though one human may not ever *fully* know another, humans are bound together in a social fabric of relations which makes an ethical call upon an individual to pay attention. In her book, *Poetics of the Flesh*, Mayra Rivera cites Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* stating,

[...] because Relation is indeterminate, it cannot be fully known. Not knowing Relation is thus not a weakness, Glissant assures us. But "not wanting to know it certainly is." For our inability to grasp Relation is no excuse for indifference. To the contrary, one shall seek the "entanglements" of worldwide relations.²⁸

Rivera draws upon Glissant's notion of Relation to develop a concept of social identity in which humans are vulnerable to one another, bound in a social matrix with one another, and co-construct one another. To engage with another is to be necessarily imprinted upon. In this sense, both Oliver and Rivera develop social theories which open possibilities for seeing, experiencing, and relating to others in a way that is ultimately constructive.

Thus, from the homiletical tradition of witnessing, one may derive the idea that individual bodies have testimonies to share, rooted in their own personal, lived experiences. And as Thompson points out, the lives of those who have been silenced, rejected, or marginalized ought to push back against dominant paradigms of preaching and instruction. Philosophical considerations of witnessing open the possibility of pursuing understanding of the other, while also placing an ethical call on the individual to tend carefully to social difference. Together, the homiletical and philosophical traditions flesh out a theological orientation for facework. To tend to the face needs of students in the classroom is not merely an exercise in effective teaching; it contributes to the theological formation of students in relation to one another. To cultivate a witnessing community is to cultivate a community in which students and instructors step into the responsibility of witnessing God's activity in and through one another. To bear truthful witness

²⁶ Ibid., 12.

²⁷ Ibid., 15.

²⁸ Mayra Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2015), 3-4.

to that activity is to be attentive to matters of identity, and to engage one another at the level of face needs.

Witnessing as Face-Attentive Pedagogy

The mitigation of face threat in preaching classrooms requires something more than simple kindness.²⁹ Indeed, it requires active witnessing—the continual pursuit of understanding and responsibility with others. As Glissant noted, *not* wanting to know or understand relation is a weakness. In a pedagogical sense, increasing understanding between professor and students and among peers opens greater possibility for successfully anticipating face needs across social difference. As facework theory demonstrates, if a student perceives that their professor wants to understand them, and exhibits earnest openness and welcome, the student is likelier to perceive the professor as trustworthy and credible, and the learning environment as conducive to their success. Thus, witnessing—that is, seeking truthful understanding about people and their social relations in the classroom, and responding with responsibility and care—offers a helpful framework for face-attentive pedagogical practices.

To bring a witnessing pedagogy to bear upon in-class sermon feedback, one must carefully consider how classroom interactions impact student face needs, both positive and negative. Intercultural communication theorists have tested several hypotheses regarding best practices in the classroom in relation to face needs and have produced a number of recommendations. For example, Trees, et al. found that students favor informative, elaborated, specific, and personal feedback, when face needs have been met.³⁰ The temptation for instructors might be to default to non-specific and impersonal feedback during feedback interventions, as to avoid defacing of the student. Yet, impersonal feedback gives the impression that the student is not seen or known. Bearing witness to the student's particularity, when combined with face-affirming practices, is more likely to result in student receptivity.

Similarly, students respond better to motivational feedback that conveys high standards while affirming and encouraging the student's capacity to reach those standards, than "unbuffered criticism, simple performance praise, and invocation of high standards alone."³¹ Again, the tendency may be to default to mere praise in order to preserve the student's face. However, mere praise deprived of high standards may actually threaten the student's sense of competence and value in the classroom. Holding students to a high standard is certainly riskier than offering praise but bringing the two together optimizes the possibility for student receptivity and growth.

Several behaviors that denote the instructor's capacity to see students and empathize with them, such as expressions of solidarity, words of encouragement, use of a considerate tone, and recognition of student effort, have also been shown to support student receptivity to feedback.³² Teaching-learning relationships always pose threats to face.³³ The power dynamic between instructor and student presents ample risk for intellectual and emotional violence. Students are

²⁹ Trees, et al. note, "Because they are complex interactions that address multiple goals for multiple parties, skilled [feedback interventions] clearly require conditions and abilities well beyond simply being nice or friendly with hearers. Evidence overall suggests a pervasive dilemma good teachers must navigate: detailed, personally tailored [feedback interventions] are both more desirable *and* inherently more face-threatening for students." 399.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 400.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid, 412.

often able to sense the risk intrinsic to the educational experience. Thus, when a professor mitigates this risk by honoring the humanity of the student (along the lines of the aforementioned humanness principle) with personally affirming behaviors, students feel safer. A study carried out in 2002 found that one-third of all teacher-student conflicts resulted from student's perception of their professor's damaging personal interactions.³⁴ Behaviors perceived as "defensive, insincere, retaliatory, or humiliating" chisel away at a student's relationship with their instructor and their learning environment, infringing upon the student's capacity to receive instruction and feedback.³⁵

Kerssen-Griep, et al. recommend a mentoring model of pedagogy for optimal face-attending. They define mentoring as an "individualized, mutually respectful relationship between a student protégé and an expert invested in guiding the student's professional and personal development."³⁶ Instructional mentoring is described as "a high-quality social and reciprocal relationship where a teacher is seen to nurture students' intellectual growth, self-efficacy, resourcefulness, and sense of identity by helping guide their professional and personal development."³⁷ Mentoring relationships may be harder to establish with larger class sizes, but elements of a mentoring relationship can still inform face-attentive practices in sermon feedback. With direct, personalized, motivational, affirming, yet challenging criticism, a student may feel seen and recognized, while also receiving individualized cultivation. When the student feels seen, recognized, and empowered to self-present before their peers and instructor, witnessing becomes possible.

Witnessing as a Shared Classroom Ethic

To cultivate a face-attentive classroom environment rooted in ethics of bearing witness, the instructor must facilitate in developing an environment that encourages mutual witnessing between all parties. Kerssen-Griep, et al. cite a number of studies when they claim that "Optimal classroom group environments themselves have been shown to exert influence on learners and transform their achievements."³⁸ Witnessing is not merely a set of behaviors; witnessing establishes a presiding classroom ethos in which mutual subjectivity is upheld. In order to revise practices around in-class sermon feedback according to face-attentive witnessing, instructors must tend to the classroom culture as a whole. In turn, the manner in which the instructor conducts face-attentive feedback impacts student perceptions of classroom environments.³⁹ Kerssen-Griep, et al. found that "the facework students experienced from instructors during feedback had a significant impact on their classroom relational and environmental perceptions." Thus, the classroom offers a social system in which individual actions shape perceptions of the whole, and experiences of the classroom culture shape the individual.

³⁴ Tantleff-Dunn, S., Dunn, M. E., & Gokee, J. L. "Understanding Faculty-Student Conflict: Student Perceptions of Teacher Competence and Trustworthiness." *Communication Quarterly*, 55, 433-450.

³⁵ Trees, et al., 412.

³⁶ Kerssen-Griep, et al., 312.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 315.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 313.

³⁹ The third hypothesis tested in the study reported by Kerssen-Griep, et al., states, "Students' reports of positive and negative facework received from instructors during evaluative feedback positively predict students' perception of a supportive classroom climate." Of six different standard multiple regressions, findings of the study supported the hypothesis on five climate dimensions. Thus, the hypothesis is generally supported by the research carried out by Kerssen-Griep, et al. 321-323.

Classroom cultures participate in and consist of social matrices like those described in Rivera's work, in which all parties are vulnerable to one another in processes of identity negotiation. In these vulnerable spaces, wherein some students experience varying levels of relative privilege and power while others struggle to assert their value and strive harder for a sense of belonging, the instructor holds mighty influence. The dedication to bear witness to social matrices in the classroom translates well into face-attentive practices. Instructors have the opportunity to mentor students into such practices, guiding students into seeing, respecting, and receiving their peers. While such practices may be modeled and instilled in the most mundane activities, day in and day out, these practices become exceedingly clear and crucial during in-class feedback interventions. During such interventions, instructors are not only responsible for their own responses to students, but also for cultivating face-attentive responses among the student's peers. Many preaching classrooms invite peer engagement during feedback interventions. For many students, offering such feedback may be an entirely new experience. If the instructor has been cultivating a classroom environment rooted in respect and mutuality, students will likely play into the trust and rapport they have already established with one another. But the students will also be looking for cues from the instructor for how to properly communicate feedback, especially critical feedback. In such cases, the mentoring approach may prove quite useful.

The Witnessing Classroom

Face-Attentive Procedures

The facework principles and pedagogical ethics outlined in this paper have been exercised with great intention with four different groups of students. The first group consisted of undergraduate preaching students at Abilene Christian University. The subsequent three groups were all graduate students enrolled in Boston University School of Theology's Intro to Preaching course, for which I assistant taught. This section of the article will reflect on experiences with the students at Boston University School of Theology and will reference the results of a survey distributed to one particular group of students.

Beginning in the spring semester of 2019, I joined Dr. David Schnasa Jacobsen in teaching revised curriculum for Intro to Preaching which sought to incorporate insights from intercultural communication theory. Our goal was to tend to students' face needs through mentoring groups of 7-8 students per group. The teaching team was encouraged to employ pedagogical techniques that would affirm face needs like autonomy, agency, and belonging. In my own group, the development of a witnessing community started in the very first group meeting. I gathered my students at a round table, so that we were sitting in a circle facing one another. This kept me from becoming the touchstone for all student relationships, enabling students to get to know one another better. I created ample time for student introductions and sought to establish a personal connection with each student. I facilitated in making connections between students and encouraged interactivity. Though I had removed myself from the focal point of the room, I demonstrated my competence as their instructor by communicating expectations and high standards, while also declaring my confidence in the students to meet those standards. By cultivating practices of witnessing from the first day of the course, I sought to develop a face-attentive classroom environment that would culminate in a smoother in-class sermon feedback process several weeks into the course.

For the purpose of integrating facework into student feedback interventions, we developed a sermon feedback process that consists of four steps. The first step is designed to emphasize the visibility of the preacher. In this first step, the instructor reflects back to the preaching student what they heard. This step is marked by language that affirms the student's autonomy, such as, "What I, personally, heard in your sermon was..." or "What really stood out to me in your sermon was..." By taking ownership of personal perception, the instructor does not impose upon the negative face needs of the student. But by naming a distinct and particular message that the instructor heard in the student's work, the instructor tends to the student's need to be seen and to belong.

In the second step, the instructor guides the class through a peer feedback process. The student preacher should not comment or respond during this process. This second step provides insight into the hermeneutical interactivity between preacher and hearer. The student preacher is given the opportunity to discover whether or not their intended message was received, while also experiencing a heightened level of care and attention from their peers. During this step, the instructor asks the peers a series of pointed questions, such as, "What do you think this preacher wanted you to hear?" and "To what extent do you think the preacher had you in mind as they wrote this sermon?" and "Did this sound like gospel for you?" These questions tend to draw out deeper reflection on student's relationships with their peers, and usually spur deeper theological reflection on the student's selected text.

The third step invites peers to identify strengths, as well as possibilities for improvement. In this step, it is absolutely crucial for the instructor to model face-attentive modes of communication. The instructor should model sincerity and precision when naming strengths, and a dedication to the student's autonomy and agency when voicing criticism. For example, the instructor might suggest, "This critical feedback is offered for your consideration. If it seems valuable or helpful, please accept it as a gift. If it seems ill-fitting or incorrect, maybe put it aside for now." This honors the student's capacity to choose whether they will receive the critical instruction. Honoring their capacity to choose actually increases the likelihood that they will accept the criticism from their instructor and peers. Additionally, according to the aforementioned studies on facework in student feedback, if the instructor has been skillfully attending face needs throughout the course, the student is likelier to deem the criticism credible and worthwhile.

The fourth and final step invites the preacher to have the final word. The preacher is invited to briefly respond to any questions or concerns raised during feedback, or they may simply share what they have learned through the experience. Inviting the preaching student to have the last word gives the student space to renegotiate their identity and sense of belonging in the room on their own terms. The instructor must refrain from speaking over, correcting, or refuting the student's final word, unless the student's final word is overtly damaging or harmful.

The four-step process, by nature, disrupts the power dynamic between instructor and student, and generates collaboration and camaraderie among students. In what is undoubtedly the most face-threatening moment of a preaching class, students may actually experience a profound affirmation of their face needs, thus enabling them to focus on task-mastery and personal growth.

Student Responses

"Your testimony was moving. But moreover, I am moved by the experience of watching you preach. I know that I was supposed to be here today to bear witness to you—to *bear witness*

to you becoming a preacher.”⁴⁰ This was one student’s response to a classmate who had just preached her very first sermon. She preached from Exodus 4, in which a reluctant Moses is finally convinced to step into his calling.⁴¹ The poetry was not lost on the class, as they watched their classmate step into her own calling. And the poetry of the student’s response was not lost on me, either. Comments like this one that emerged in the second and third steps of the feedback process affirmed the research outlined in this article: that facework in sermon feedback interventions shapes the classroom environment, and that the learning environment shapes student perceptions of their relationships with their peers.

In an effort to gauge the impact of facework in the preaching classroom, a survey was administered to one of the Boston University School of Theology classes, which prompted students to reflect on the degree to which they felt their autonomy, agency, and sense of belonging were honored in the course. The survey questions appeared as follows:

- (1) Do you feel your autonomy, agency, and sense of belonging in the class as a preacher/theologian were honored in this course?
- (2) What did you learn about your own “working gospel” or “gut sense” of what the gospel is?
- (3) How did the practices of preaching that you learned in this course challenge you to become a more critical theologian of the gospel in your sermons?
- (4) What role did sermon feedback from your instructional team play for you and your growth as a theologian of the Word?

A total of fourteen students, all members of the same class, responded to the survey. In response to the first question, twelve students responded “Yes,” two students responded “Partially,” and zero students responded “No.” Given the anonymity of the survey, it is impossible to know if the students who answered “Partially” participated in the same mentoring group with the same instructor. What is abundantly clear in the responses of the two students is that both students experienced face threats in their groups and did not perceive threat mitigation from their instructor or peers. There seems to be some connection between their response to the first question, and their response to the final question. One student responded to the final question defensively, stating, “It definitely reminded me that the audience I have might never listen to me, but that’s not always my fault.” Facework research illuminates the connection between the student’s sense that their face needs were only partially met, and their defensive response. This response is consistent with the tested hypothesis from Trees, et al., which stated, “Students’ assessment of instructors’ attention to face concerns will positively predict students’ assessment of feedback usefulness.”⁴² Trees, et al. noted that, “Face-attentive [feedback interventions] should help mitigate the identity threats that otherwise will steer learners’ cognitive attention toward off-task identity-protection.”⁴³ It is possible that this student veered

⁴⁰ Permission was received to share this quote, though the student requested anonymity.

⁴¹ The student specifically focused on the following segment of her selected biblical text:

“But Moses said to the Lord, “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” Then the Lord said to him, “Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.”” Exodus 4:10-12 (NRSV)

⁴² Trees, et al., 400.

⁴³ Ibid.

into “off-task identity-protection” when they encountered unmitigated face threats during sermon feedback.

The other student who responded “Partially” to the first question also indicated a level of face threat in their response to the fourth question of the survey. This student did not exhibit any defensive behavior, but instead resigned to a sense of personal failure and incompetence. The student responded to the fourth question of the survey, saying, “I appreciated the honesty. [...] I focused on the scope of the sermon within 5 minutes and I failed to put myself in the sermon. [...] I did not do a good job.” This student also cited negative critiques from peers in their response to the third question, and offered an explanation for their blunder, saying, “[...] my peers felt I focused on narrative and lacked confession. It was just I ran out of time, I should have scoped narrative down and brought out confession.” In this case, it seems the student was abundantly receptive to criticism, but also left the feedback intervention feeling deflated and disconnected from peers.

Of the twelve students who responded “Yes” to the first question of the survey, all twelve identified in their responses areas of growth, and lessons learned from in-class instruction and feedback. One student, in particular, responded to the fourth question saying, “The feedback I received was spot on. It reinforced my knowledge of a weakness I was aware of in my delivery. And it gave me more confidence in my ability to find authenticity in my preaching even with a difficult text.” This response indicates receptivity to critical feedback, in connection with perceived facework from the teaching team.

Of the twelve students who responded “Yes” to the first question of the survey, seven students indicated elsewhere in the survey a new (or renewed) sense of connection and solidarity with peers and colleagues. In response to the third question of the survey, one student responded, “Having the space to workshop with the readings and with fellow theologians was so valuable. Being able to contribute to others and having my own thoughts nurtured and developed was an important part of being able to grow in my ability to do ministry.” Another student responded to the fourth question, stating, “The questions and feedback I received from both my TF and my classmates was vital in helping me recognize how my words were resonating with others.” These results seem to confirm that a student’s perception of successful facework from their instructor shapes not only their reception to critical feedback, but also their perception of the learning environment with their peers.

Conclusion

In-class sermon feedback interventions are inherently face-threatening situations in which a student’s social and personal needs easily override the student’s capacity to interpret and receive instructional feedback. Adept facework, however, mitigates face threat, and opens greater possibility for the student to receive instruction and work toward task-mastery and skill development. Although facework in sermon feedback is important, developing a classroom environment in which face needs are regularly tended to in the ebb and flow of the course may contribute to threat mitigation. Orienting a face-attentive pedagogy to an ethic of bearing witness joins the instructor and students alike in a shared process of responding to one another with care and openness. The ethical obligations conferred in the power-laden space between instructor and student require ethical intention to uphold the subjectivity of students. To deny the obligation to tend carefully to those gathered in the space of the classroom is to risk bearing false witness to students’ theological formation as a preacher. But in establishing a witnessing community,

instructors help preaching students emerge in their faith communities as ones who bear witness to both God and others.

Fundamentally, instructors who bear witness to the particularity of students, whose face needs find diverse expression in classroom environments, create an atmosphere in which students feel seen and empowered. By modeling such witnessing behavior, instructors create a classroom environment in which students learn how to bear witness to each other. By embracing behaviors that affirm students' positive and negative face needs, and by skillfully discerning when and how to mitigate face threats, instructors optimize learning opportunities for their students, especially in the context of sermon feedback.