

Pedagogy, Preaching, and Place: Online, Hybrid, and In-Person Homiletical Formation

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Abstract: *Building on a panel discussion in the Pedagogy workgroup at the 2025 Academy of Homiletics gathering, this collaborative essay explores the intersection of pedagogy, preaching, and place across three contexts: online, hybrid, and in-person. Place is understood as more than just a designation of a thing, but a reality that shapes and is shaped by our knowledge, experiences, and meaning-making. The essay features three homileticians—Lisa Lamb, Chelsea Brooke Yarborough, and Jared E. Alcántara—who offer reflections on their experiences of teaching preaching in a specific context. The essay concludes with questions and ongoing challenges related to homiletic pedagogy and place.*

Introduction

Preaching is homiletical theology embodied in specific contexts.¹ It is both a theological and a social act.² Likewise, the theological formation of preachers is always rooted in a particular place and shaped by the intersections of places where it emerges. In 2025, the Academy of Homiletics focused its annual conference on the theme of “Preaching and Place.” Our president for the year, Richard Voelz, drew attention to how, throughout the biblical witness and history, “place has been a way that identity, conflict, community, and interactions with the Holy have been mediated.”³ The conference featured illuminating offerings, including a plenary session on “Proclamation and the Public Square,” panel discussions on “Borders, Migration, and Preaching Place,” presentations on specific issues related to preaching in Germany and Fiji, and a host of

¹ For an exploration of homiletical theology in various contexts, see David Schnasa Jacobsen, ed., *Theologies of the Gospel in Context: The Crux of Homiletical Theology* (Cascade, 2017). See also Leonora Tubbs Tisdale's classic work *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Fortress, 1996).

² Arthur Van Seters, ed., *Preaching as a Social Act: Theology and Practice* (Abingdon, 1988), 21.

³ “Annual Meeting,” <https://www.homiletics.org/annual-meeting/2025/>, accessed 15 November 2025.

papers on topics ranging from ecological homiletics to the “execution sermon as homiletical place.”⁴ Alongside the conference contributions, recent scholarship has explored the intersection of place and preaching from different vantage points.⁵ Moreover, while works on homiletical pedagogy in the past and present have attended to place implicitly in various ways,⁶ in the last few years, scholarship has emerged that explicitly focuses on place-based pedagogy and preaching.⁷ Still, there is a need for additional reflection on the vital topic of pedagogy, preaching, and place.

Thus, this collaborative essay takes a step toward further addressing this subject. It offers three different perspectives on the relationship between place and preaching pedagogy, which were first presented as a panel at the Academy of Homiletics annual meeting in the Pedagogy workgroup.⁸ As Tim Cresswell notes, “place” is not just a way to designate “a thing in the world”; it is an epistemological term employed to name “a way of seeing, knowing, and understanding the world. When we look at the world as a world of places, we see different things. We see attachments and connections between people and place. We see worlds of meaning and experience.”⁹ The article asks: What are the unique challenges and opportunities of

⁴ See, for example, Caroline Smith, “Preaching at the Gallows: Samson Occum and the Execution Sermon as Homiletical Place,” Paper Presented at the Academy of Homiletics, Richmond, VA, USA, December 4–6, 2025.

⁵ See, for example, HyeRan Kim-Cragg, “Earth-Bound Preaching: Engaging Scripture, Context, and Indigenous Wisdom,” *Religions* 15, no. 3 (2024): 357, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15030357>; Wing Yi Wong, “Unearthing the Disturbing Ghosts of Postcolonial Lands That Linger After the Sermon,” *Homiletic* 49, no. 1 (2024): 30–38, <https://doi.org/10.15695/hmltc.v49i1.5624>; Jerusha Matsen Neal, *Holy Ground: Climate Change, Preaching, and the Apocalypse of Place* (Baylor University Press, 2024); Timothy Levi Adkins-Jones, “Hoodies and Holy Disruption: Black Protest Preaching and Multicultural Congregations,” *Religions* 16, no. 11 (2025): 1366, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16111366>; David M. Stark, *Preaching that Confronts Confederate Monuments: Religion, Anti-Racism, and United States Politics* (T&T Clark, 2025); Casey T. Sigmon, *Engaging the Gadfly: Reflective Online, Hybrid, and In-Person Preaching in a Digital Age* (Cascade, 2025); Richard W. Voelz, *From Pulpit to Public Square: Faithful Speech beyond Church Walls* (Westminster John Knox, 2025); and the articles in Jerusha Matsen Neal, ed., “Preaching Climate Justice,” *International Journal of Homiletics* 18, no. 1 (2025): 1–123.

⁶ See, for example, Don M. Wardlaw, ed., *Learning Preaching: Understanding and Participating in the Process* (The Academy of Homiletics, 1989); Thomas G. Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, eds., *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy* (Westminster John Knox, 2008); Geoffrey Stevenson, “Learning to Preach: Social Learning Theory and the Development of Christian Preachers” (PhD diss., The University of Edinburgh, 2009); Scott M. Gibson, ed., *Training Preachers: A Guide to Teaching Homiletics* (Lexham, 2018); Lisa Lamb, “Enabling Diverse Learners to Thrive in the Online Homiletics Classroom” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 22, no. 2 (2019): 92–101, <https://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12476>; David Schnasa Jacobsen, ed., “Exploring Intercultural Instructional Communication for Homiletical Pedagogy” *Homiletic* 46, no. 2 (2021): 4–47; John S. McClure and Allie Utley, eds., *Learning Together to Preach: How to Become an Effective Coach* (Cascade, 2023); Courtney Buggs, “Womanist Pedagogy and Teaching Preaching: Black Women Preachers as Sources for Pedagogical Reflection” *Sermon Studies* 8, no. 1 (2025): 58–66; and the articles in Leah D. Schade and Richard W. Voelz, eds., “Assessing Pedagogical Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Academy of Homiletics” *Homiletic* 50, no. 2 (2025): 4–80.

⁷ Miri Yemini, Laura Engel, and Adi Ben Simon define place-based education as “an umbrella term for pedagogical practices that prioritize experiential, community-based, and contextual/ecological learning to cultivate greater connectivity to local contexts, cultures, and environments.” See “Place-based education – a systematic review of literature” *Educational Review* 77, no. 2 (2024): 640, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2177260>. For examples of work that explicitly explore preaching and place-based pedagogy, see David M. Stark, “Confronting Confederate Monuments: Place-Based Pedagogy for Anti-Racist Preaching,” *Religions* 15, no. 2 (2024): 224, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020224>; and E. Trey Clark, “Forming Preachers: An Examination of Four Homiletical Pedagogy Paradigms,” *Religions* 15, no. 3 (2024): 364, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15030364>.

⁸ Richard Voelz and Trey Clark co-convene the Pedagogy workgroup of the Academy of Homiletics.

⁹ Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Wiley and Sons, 2015), 35–36.

teaching preaching in online, hybrid, and in-person contexts, recognizing that place is more than a designation of a thing but a reality that shapes and is shaped by our knowledge, experiences, and meaning-making?

The essay is organized into three sections in which a homiletician reflects on their experience teaching in a particular context.¹⁰ The reflections are meant to be exploratory, not exhaustive. Rev. Dr. Lisa Lamb examines teaching preaching in online environments. Lamb taught Fuller Theological Seminary's first fully online homiletics course ten years ago, and has since taught hybrid, in-person, synchronous, and asynchronous courses for Duke Divinity School and Fuller, as well as for several seminaries in Nepal, the Philippines, India, and Malaysia. Rev. Dr. Chelsea Brooke Yarborough offers insights and reflections on hybrid preaching education, defined here as simultaneously addressing students online and in person.¹¹ Yarborough is Associate Director of Leadership Programming at the Association of Theological Schools and previously served as Assistant Professor of African American Preaching, Sacred Rhetoric, and Black Practical Theology at Phillips Theological Seminary. Teaching preaching in residential contexts is explored by Rev. Dr. Jared E. Alcántara. He serves as the Professor of Preaching, Holder of the Paul W. Powell Endowed Chair in Preaching, and Director of the Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary. Following contributions from Lamb, Yarborough, and Alcántara, the essay concludes with reflections on ongoing issues and challenges in homiletic pedagogy and place.

The Place of Place in Online Homiletical Education (Lisa Lamb)

When we look through the lens of place at the opportunities and challenges of a fully online preaching course, we hold in tension the values of access to education and physical proximity, of real-time collaboration and delayed reflection, and more. Embracing the online modality involves grieving real or perceived losses related to the potentially transformative power of the physical classroom. But each loss comes with a gain for skilled instructors and willing students. We will consider here four losses, or at least differences, offering with each various strategies that can mitigate the losses and optimize the opportunities that the online modality presents.

Home Court (Dis?) Advantage

Students who learn remotely do not leave home, and so they are less likely to experience the potentially transformative opportunity that comes with uprooting themselves. The obvious barrier to entry of a physical, campus-based seminary education is (for many) the need to pack up and leave home. This is costly for almost every student, and downright prohibitive for some. Students who can access seminary education online do not need to be displaced from their local communities. The experience is usually less disruptive for families, friendships, and community involvement. This pragmatic advantage of online learning is so compelling that it silences many valid concerns.

But as the journey motif in literature throughout the centuries attests, much transformation happens when a character leaves home. From as far back as the departure from Eden and Abram and Sarai's exit from Haran, leaving has been part of our story. Leaving makes

¹⁰ To be clear, each homiletician has experience teaching in a wide variety of contexts beyond the one they reflect on in this essay.

¹¹ Future research should consider the role of place in hybrid intensive courses where some instruction occurs fully in-person and some occurs fully online.

space for learning as we sever ties with what is familiar and open ourselves to what is new. Sometimes, home is not only familiar but downright toxic; it is the desert for which seminary is the oasis. This is especially true for students who dwell in spaces where their preaching voices are not affirmed. This can cut both ways, of course, as for some, home is the oasis and seminary the desert.

One way I seek to mitigate the loss of a shared place is to highlight the goodness of the diverse places in which we are situated. I always ask my students in their introductory videos to share where they live, with whom they live (if anyone), one thing they love about where they live, and one thing they do not love about the place they call home. This is a way of establishing place and context as factors in our preaching and evoking Wendell Berry's concept of the importance of nurturing affection for our place and its people.¹² It often connects them to each other and me to them.

For online students, in general, their listening audience is their familiar place. They do not shed the calcified embeddedness that can mark home, as they preach to their spouses, mothers, and the occasional cat wandering through the room—the “Nazareth” that Jesus found so tough a crowd. On the other hand, some seminarians experience home as a nurturing and grace-filled environment, one that mirrors and affirms their preaching style, in contrast to the sterility of the classroom, where peers and professors can be a tough crowd in different ways.

When students study preaching online, the first feedback they receive is often from their mother-in-law or old friends, who are usually kind and sometimes bring real insight. But this is very uneven. In my most recent course, one of the ten students had a listening group that offered substantive and helpful feedback. The rest affirmed excessively, picked at inconsequential minutiae, and made trivial suggestions. This can provide an unhelpful cushion against feedback that they really need to hear.

Physical Settings

Another place-related challenge of online preaching is that access to ideal settings in which to preach is extremely uneven. In a classroom, everyone gets a level playing field—maybe a lovely chapel, maybe a sterile classroom, but they all at least get space to move, a stand for their notes so they can gesture, the built-in need to project their voices and hold a larger room, and the ability to make eye contact with a group of peers who are hopefully becoming their friends. In classrooms, there is a sermon length and other standards we can all commit to.

An online preaching course promises that students can preach to their home congregations or to listening groups of loved ones, but that promise too often translates into huge frustration for those whose preaching traditions call for 40-minute sermons when the course requirement is much shorter. Female students in churches that do not allow them to preach struggle to find settings. Students in dying, dwindling churches must preach into lifeless settings with folks nodding off, as I have watched happening online. Three of my ten students this past quarter had what we think of as ideal: engaged congregations or listening groups to whom they could preach. One of those three had to preach for 40 minutes to bring that about. The rest of the class preached in far from ideal settings, including straight into their laptops when their listening group bailed. This limits gestures, eye contact, vocal projection, the chance to practice working well with notes, and obviously, a genuine, embodied connection with humans.

¹² See Wendell Berry, *It All Turns on Affection: The Jefferson Lecture and Other Essays* (Counterpoint, 2012).

One other setting-related challenge is the need to master new technology. Last year, I worked with very smart students at a top-notch seminary, and yet I fielded over a dozen emails from students who could not figure out how and where to save their sermons in the new Learning Management System. Students often struggle with camera angles and uploading, when I would rather be coaching them on how to preach. I am also unable to offer substantive feedback on delivery for many of the videos I get.

Collaboration, Place, and Time

One of the skills I worked hard to cultivate as a classroom professor was the capacity to facilitate a feedback session following student sermons that brought a potent blend of truth and love. I sought to model this and occasionally had to give feedback to students as to how to deliver their comments in more hearable ways. These sessions were lively, marked by both laughter and occasional tears. I always found this second hour to be both exhilarating and exhausting, every bit as effortful for me as giving a good sermon. Research on organizational collaboration bears out the idea that physical presence increases the sheer quantity of feedback. As corporate consultant Jordan Mattson writes:

Research on proximity and collaboration is unambiguous. A University of Michigan study found that researchers on the same floor are 57 percent more likely to collaborate than those in different buildings. For every 100 feet of shared walking path, collaborations increased by 20 percent. MIT research on the ‘Allen Curve’—named after MIT professor Thomas Allen—shows that even basic conversations become much less likely when workers are more than 10 meters apart.¹³

But there are students who neither thrive nor shine in such settings. They are slow, deep thinkers. They may come from cultural backgrounds that value indirect, face-saving communication. The pressure to craft insightful peer feedback in the compressed time frame of the classroom hinders their contributions. In the charged moment of the classroom feedback setting, they go silent. But given time to ponder a sermon, attending carefully to how aspects of it land within their minds and hearts, they will post responses that are marked by deep insight, often with concrete suggestions that are of real help to their peers. On the receiving end, some students do not thrive when feedback is given immediately after such a stressful endeavor. The delay brings the needed objectivity and distance. Not everyone can process feedback when it comes raw and unfiltered, and with a tightly limited amount of time to absorb and clarify what is heard. For these students, the online discussion thread becomes a life-giving space.

Negotiating Spaces of Shared Learning

Some of my favorite memories of my teaching career involve moments of triumph, such as when a shy student who persevered through a sermon sits down to cheers from their peers. Or when 60 Indian students worked on a storytelling exercise together and were stunned by the beauty of what they created. A classroom gives us a shared place, and when we meet twice a

¹³ Jordan Mattson, “AI Augmented Development: Hype vs. Reality,” <https://e27.co/ai-augmented-development-hype-vs-reality-20251217/>, accessed 29 December, 2025; For more information on the study, see “Sharing Space: Proximity Breeds Collaboration,” <https://news.umich.edu/sharing-space-proximity-breeds-collaboration/>, accessed 20 January, 2026.

week in that space and do something as vulnerable as preaching for each other, that space can come to feel sacred indeed. I can work hard to replicate these moments in an online setting, but let's be honest, it is not the same.

I have sought to cultivate, if not shared physical space, at least a sense of shared learning in three ways: First, I offer, and sometimes can require, what I call Coaching Calls, half-hour Zoom sessions where we reflect together on the first sermon. I like to do this early in the term to build persistence and a sense of belonging. Second, I strive for highly active participation in discussion threads. I try to respond at least briefly to every post, and I give ample feedback on their sermons in a public thread. Thirdly, I set up discussion posts to maximize peer engagement. Every post reflecting on the course content must close with a question, and the highest possible grade on a post without a reply to a peer is 80%. I am lenient about maximum word counts because some students who are learning remotely highly value the chance to process course content, and I want to give them a wide space in which to do that. While concision is an important skill for students to cultivate, faculty harping about maximum word counts seems to communicate that teaching them is a hassle; I want to communicate that it is a privilege.

There is an undeniable loss of joy when we are not physically gathered. But perhaps that loss of joy means that a student preacher's five-year-old has the joy of a birthday party with their best friends in the town where she was born. That is hard to quantify, but it seems worth protecting. I can find joy elsewhere.

Holding Hybridity in the Classroom (Chelsea Brooke Yarborough)

Teaching, Particularity, and Place

Teaching is a practice of collaborative world-bending—hopefully bending toward something that looks like justice, wholeness, and possibility. Preaching is also such a practice in its best and most aligned forms. So, teaching preaching is the unique gift of watching change agents find, own, and use their voice—ideally equipping them with the hope and belief that they can do that world-bending beyond the confines of the classroom.

In the spirit of place, I see the theological classroom as a space of risk, where two or more are often gathered from many perspectives, yet work together in a space they may not have found without something like the classroom. It is a place of play—where failure is inevitable—and allowing it to be normal and necessary makes room for folks to be held in ways their failure may not always be. It is a place where contextualities collide with one another, and students encounter the crucial reality that their epistemological frameworks are grounded in hermeneutical particularity that may, and sometimes must, rub up against others. And when done well, these encounters with information, self, and practice bend the world, and when done justly, that bend is toward justice.

I ground my practice in the teaching prowess of Black women and Blackqueer folks whose pedagogical theory and instinct have often asked us to consider what freedom looks like in the classroom, what binaries inhibit our work, and how we see the classroom as not just a receptacle of knowledge but a commission to practice beyond it. I enter that classroom as a Blackqueer woman amongst other things—existing in the many/and versus either/or in my person—which I experience often as an in-between space and multiple hybridity unto itself.

I start here so you can understand my particularity of place in any classroom as I move into how I think about the particularities of the hybrid classroom. For clarity, I am talking about hybrid classrooms where students are physically in the classroom, and others join synchronously via Zoom.

Strategies for the Hybrid Classroom

When I was asked to write about the hybrid classroom, I almost said no because I knew I would have to be honest about something. The first time I had a hybrid teaching course, it was, in colloquial terms, a hot mess. I feel like that is important to say so that I remember teaching is a practice, and that we are grateful for the opportunity to grow. Even more so, teaching is hard, and there is something particularly hard about holding multiple modalities together. At best, I have found that hybrid classrooms create a third space—the space in between virtual and physical space—where students are not just spectators of others’ locations but are asked to consider crossing places and the in-between places of overlap as part of the pedagogy. These classrooms require a commitment to both/and, even as students may be situated in the either/or. While many strategies emerge for me in navigating multiple places within pedagogy, I will highlight three that have felt most critical.

First, it is crucial to prepare the space for all students, which means being clear about which students’ learning is centered at any given time. Blackqueer womanist pedagogy asks us to think beyond hospitality into welcome when we are talking about space. Hospitality often ends with someone preparing a place for another; however, the place is standardized, and the invitation is to come into what I have created. Welcome takes it a step further, saying, “I have created this space with you and your particularities in mind.” It is not saying “you can be here,” as is often expressed in online student data on satisfaction with hybrid classrooms. Instead, it signals that this place has been prepared for your thriving, and I am willing to reimagine the space if you tell me you are not thriving. Before the class, I conduct a pre-survey to get a sense of the modalities students have taken before, what has helped them feel heard, seen, and connected, and what has made that more difficult. I also ask about the places they come from to get to class or take classes from, and what is important to know about those places. In one of our opening activities, students introduce themselves in a long-form, fill-in-the-blank spoken-word format, and one question is: “What is important about where you are and/or where you came from?” followed by “What helps you feel connected?” I have found that this warms up the space for a place to be held collectively, which supports what I name next.

Second, I invite communal accountability to holding our place together alongside the places where we are disparate. When I first began teaching, I was trying to navigate the different modalities on my own and, in some way, protect students from the awkwardness of the both/and. However, I quickly realized they were in an awkward position, whether I wanted them to be or not. Therefore, if we were going to exist in anything that felt like community, we would have to do it together. Hybridity asks for multiplicity to be held together, and I was trying too hard to hold it alone, which was not working. I began to ask myself, “How does the entire community participate in the collective holding and place-making in the classroom?”

Several practices have shaped this work toward collective accountability. In addition to the introductions mentioned earlier, in the opening, I also note that not all classroom activities will be geared toward the location where you are taking this course. There are some things that will feel more awkward to do online, like some of our improv activities. Other times, when we are having a live discussion board in class, it may feel superfluous when you are sitting next to someone you could speak to. However, this allows our online students to overcome some of the delay and difficulty of jumping into live conversations with people sitting next to each other. I make it clear that we will move back and forth in ways that we might all experience ease and stretching at different times.

As part of communal accountability, I am also committed to presence and preparedness. For example, everyone in person brings a device they can use to join Zoom, and those online are expected to have their screens on. We also discuss what conflict looks like across modalities and have frequent check-ins to ensure that what we are working through is effective. In this vein, feedback loops are more frequent for me in a hybrid classroom. Every unit (about every three weeks), I ask what is working well, what is not connecting, and where you were lost. With these notes, we adjust along the way. One student remarked in an evaluation, “Being in our hybrid classroom made me realize I have been making the online community at my church mostly just watch the in-person community . . . I want to think about how they can come together.” I was grateful to hear that the work we did together kept on bending the world beyond our classroom.

Third, I commit to practicing teaching agility as a way of inviting preaching agility. Preaching agility asks us to consider our prowess in changing directions without injury. I believe in changing times, the most effective proclaimers are agile proclaimers that attend to place but are not limited to one.¹⁴ They move between places, contexts, and changing terrains—grounded in who they are, clarified in their voice, and committed to world-bending with words. They move between spaces as call often necessitates, when we are attuned to the many ways call might come. Practicing teaching agility in the classroom has helped me recognize the type of muscles that might be helpful for preaching agility.

Hybrid teaching asks me to cultivate agility across all aspects of the classroom and to think about key takeaways that will help all students grow in their agility. Some of these ways include how students work with each other, how they change to welcome the perceived other, and how they begin to realize how much work the person in the other place must do to connect well with them. Hybrid teaching also asks me to grow the necessary muscles to change directions in the inevitability of shifting terrains and to learn new things, so that we can move together with the least amount of harm.

A Final Thought

Hybrid teaching pushed me to be honest about whether I was willing to learn and to create a space where students would feel togetherness. It is hard work, but it is worthy work. It has pushed me to center students, which means all of them. The greatest gift of hybrid classrooms is that they ask students to consider that, in the mess of trying, we might find something that looks like the hope of community: that it is worth the hard work of welcome, agility, and collective accountability together.

Preaching and Place in the In-Person Homiletical Classroom (Jared E. Alcántara)

The in-person homiletics classroom is not a *perfect* place, far from it, but it is a *fertile* place for redemption and transformation. The in-person classroom is a place for redemption to occur in the sense that, within its walls, one has opportunities to observe, facilitate, or experience the unbinding of bodies, voices, postures, temperaments, and callings; those who begin their journey bound can see deliverance and freedom within the walls and beyond the walls.

¹⁴ For a historical examination of the preaching agility of Black women preachers, see Chelsea Brooke Yarborough, *Proclamation beyond the Pulpit: The Expansive Homiletical Practice of Black Women* (Baylor University Press, 2025). For a popular article on the concept of preaching agility, see Chelsea Brooke Yarborough, “Preaching across Platforms: An Invitation to Preaching Agility,” *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/culture/preaching-across-platforms-an-invitation-to-preaching-agility>.

The in-person classroom is also a place infused with possibilities for transformation. Consider the image of metamorphosis, which comes from the Greek verb for transformation and is used to describe a disruptive change from one thing to another. A caterpillar becomes a butterfly. A tadpole becomes a frog. What might this look like in the classroom? Consider some of the inherent possibilities: a brain-on-a-stick changes into an embodied theologian; an arrogant jerk is deconstructed into a hesitant and vulnerable novice; a dispassionate analyzer is turned into a practitioner of prophetic imagination; an academically oriented student decides for the first time that she is called. A seminarian transforms into a preacher.

The classroom catalyzes both redemption *and* transformation, and not just one or the other. When it is working as it should, the classroom can be a force for exponential and lasting change. bell hooks claims this reality in *Teaching to Transgress* when she reminds us that, “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.”¹⁵

Whether we teach in an in-person, online, or hybrid classroom, many of us have a natural proclivity to imagine that the only ones in need of redemption and transformation are our students. We are quick to identify the ways *they* are bound and in need of loosening; we see them as caterpillars, and ourselves as the butterflies they would like to become someday, after they have preached enough sermons. What if we, as educators, are also bound and need to be loosed? What if we are bound to stale practices and pedagogies, stale exegetical approaches and methodologies, sage-on-the-stage mindsets? Also, what if we are not as close as we think we are to being the dynamic teachers that we think we have become? As professional talkers, perhaps we have lost the ability to listen. As professional evaluators, perhaps we have lost the ability to self-diagnose. To become better teachers, we must also become better learners.

When I reflect on teaching in an in-person classroom, I use the language of “homiletical ecology” to describe my journey and commitments. Usually, in ecology, we think of organisms and their relationships to their environments. I use the word in a similar vein, in this instance, to refer to the cultivation of a pedagogical ecosystem in which certain values are prioritized over others and in which teaching and learning are maximized, not minimized.

Many values guide the in-person classroom ecology I strive to create. For the sake of this article, I will mention just four: openness, attunement, respect, and responsibility. The first value is *openness*. I try to create environments that foster openness to the Spirit’s movement and promptings, as well as to change. Regarding the latter, in *Teaching Community*, hooks contends that democratic education requires “radical openness,” namely, “the will to explore different perspectives and change one’s mind as new information is presented.”¹⁶

The second value is *attunement*. This is a musical term used in improvisational performance. Nathan Crawford argues that improvisational musicians strive for “triple attunement,” by which he means 1) the attunement of the musician to the tradition, 2) the musician to other musicians, and 3) the musician to the audience.¹⁷ In the case of preaching, triple attunement involves the preacher’s attunement to a chosen Christian tradition, to peers and professors, and to laypeople as prospective listeners. Attunement also means guiding students to become more in tune with the physical spaces where they preach and the technological spaces where they record, watch, and prepare their sermons.

¹⁵ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge, 1994), 12.

¹⁶ bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (Routledge, 2003), 48.

¹⁷ Nathan Crawford, “Theology as Improvisation: Using the Metaphor of Attunement to Think Theologically” (PhD diss., Loyola University Chicago, 2011), 101–14.

The third value is *respect*, namely, respect for differences that make a difference in the physical classroom. Here is where my research on intercultural competence becomes more relevant and useful to me in the classroom.¹⁸ Teachers of preaching need eyes to see and ears to hear intercultural differences in ways that bring honor and dignity to diversity.¹⁹ Respect also means seeing and hearing the wisdom our students bring with them as co-constructors of knowledge. I am in the Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky school of education theory in that I see students as co-architects of their learning.²⁰ They bring unique experiences infused with wisdom.

The fourth and final value of my homiletical ecology is *responsibility*. The expectation here is that students and teachers will choose to have binding commitments to one another in the in-person classroom. As teachers, we are bound to serve as coaches, doctors, and mentors, three vocations in which it is still possible to tell the truth and not be fired for it. When truth-telling is at its best, it chooses kindness over niceness or harshness. “Niceness” teachers avoid telling students the truth about their sermons. “Harshness” teachers revel in the hurt it causes them. However, “kindness” teachers seek the welfare and growth of those who receive their coaching and criticism. Students also have a responsibility, in their case, to engage in meaningful critical reflection for the purposes of transformation: to listen and respond well to their colleagues, to their instincts, and to God.

These four values, of course, can be cultivated in online and hybrid settings and not just in-person. Even so, the in-person classroom remains especially fertile soil for these values to flourish. Students enter a three-dimensional, incarnational, and embodied space. The setting grants them opportunities to practice openness, attunement, respect, and responsibility before, during, and after class in a manner that is more difficult to replicate in online or hybrid settings. The space creates better conditions for a multi-sensory encounter: if teachers and students are open and alive to the Spirit, and God sees fit to facilitate divine appointments, then those who gather may hear the ground shake, see the air thicken, and feel the wind blowing wherever it wills.

Conclusion

These three perspectives on online, hybrid, and in-person homiletical pedagogy help us recognize some significant roles that place plays for teachers of preaching. Too often, pedagogical evaluations of place as it relates to modality devolve into simplistic binaries, false assumptions, and/or biases based on social location and privilege. Discussions of modality are not merely pragmatic, data-driven decisions made by schools or other institutions that teach preaching. Rather, because modalities are manifestations of place, and place is an

¹⁸ Jared E. Alcántara, *Crossover Preaching: Intercultural-Improvisational Homiletics in Conversation with Gardner C. Taylor* (IVP Academic, 2015).

¹⁹ For an exploration of how this kind of sensibility can help reduce stereotype threat in the physical classroom, see Jared E. Alcántara, “Pedagogy that Purifies the Air: Recognizing and Reducing ‘Stereotype Threat’ in the Preaching Classroom,” *Homiletic* 46, no. 2 (2021): 20–30.

²⁰ For more on co-constructivist learning, see Jean Piaget, *The Psychology of Intelligence* (Routledge, 2001); Jean Piaget, *The Language and Thought of the Child* (Routledge, 2002); Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Harvard University Press, 1978); Lev S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (MIT Press, 1986). See also Dave S. Knowlton, “A Constructivist Pedagogue’s Personal Narrative of Integrating Faith with Learning: Epistemological and Pedagogical Challenges,” *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 11, no. 1 (2002): 33–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10656210209484931>; R. Keith Sawyer, “Improvised Lessons: Collaborative Discussion in the Constructivist Classroom,” *Teaching Education* 15, no. 2 (2004): 189–201, <https://doi.org/10.1080/104762104200021360>.

epistemological expression, modality discussions have significant implications for meaning-making, justice, belonging, and formation. Lamb, Yarborough, and Alcántara do not allow us to hold onto simplistic narratives about pedagogy's relationship to place. Whether we are considering students' relationships to their homes, how they co-construct the classroom as a meaningful place amidst hybridity, how we as instructors consider our relationship to place, or how we design the classroom as a generative place for learning and homiletical formation, these authors help us recognize the range of decisions that teachers of preaching can and must make at each step along the way.

No matter the modalities we might take up in our teaching, these authors help us interrogate our assumptions, reconsider our relationship to place, and encourage us to make pedagogical decisions that respect the complexity and responsibility of teaching preaching, helping stretch our students and ourselves. And yet, these reflections are not definitive nor authoritative. As conversation partners, we might recognize our own resistance to or rejection of elements of what has been articulated above. Neither are these reflections comprehensive and conclusive. We might wonder what a decolonial lens offers to understanding homiletical pedagogy's relationship to place as well as the work of place-making amidst colonial realities and multicultural learning (or place-holding, to use Yarborough's term). A related question can be raised if we center the climate crisis as a central pedagogical theme and not merely as the content of homiletical pedagogy. While Lamb opens up the conversation around the student cost of homiletical pedagogy as it relates to place, what might more attention to class raise to the surface of our pedagogical assumptions and practices as it relates to place? And of course, none of these reflections indicate the particular content or focus of the courses under consideration. For homileticians who believe the "what" and the "how" are related, this is an important consideration, especially if the "how" also includes the "where." This is all to say that even as we note the significance of these reflections and offer gratitude, there is additional room to consider other dimensions (to invoke other spatial themes) of how place relates to homiletical pedagogy.

For Further Reading

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