

Article

Forming Preachers: An Examination of Four Homiletical Pedagogy Paradigms

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Abstract: Teaching preaching effectively in the twenty-first century requires instructors to engage a multiplicity of pedagogical approaches. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of homiletical literature that surveys diverse pedagogical paradigms and practices directly related to preaching. This article takes a step toward filling this void. Specifically, the author argues that embracing varied preaching pedagogical paradigms and practices is essential to foster a more holistic, contextually sensitive, and liberative approach to the formation of preachers. The first part of the article examines three major contemporary homiletical pedagogical approaches that attend to the formation of preachers in interrelated yet distinct ways: teacher-centered, learner-centered, and learning-centered preaching pedagogy. In the second section, building on place-based educational theory, a new paradigm is explored that the author calls place-centered preaching pedagogy. To explicate this paradigm, the article briefly considers four homileticians who, in different ways, reflect aspects of this pedagogy in their teaching: HyeRan Kim-Cragg, Frank A. Thomas, Richard W. Voelz, and Leah D. Schade. The third section offers an assessment of place-centered preaching pedagogy by examining its strengths, weaknesses, and areas for future research. The article ends with a conclusion that revisits the primary aims of the essay and calls for further exploration of the subject.

Keywords: pedagogy; preaching; homiletics; formation; place-based education; land education; place-centered preaching pedagogy



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1. Introduction

Teaching preaching effectively in the twenty-first century requires instructors to engage a multiplicity of pedagogical approaches.¹ In our complex, globalized, and postcolonial world, “no one-size-fits-all pedagogy for preaching” is sufficient (Kim-Cragg et al. 2019, p. 110). Unfortunately, there is a paucity of homiletical literature that surveys diverse pedagogical paradigms and practices directly related to preaching.² Building on the work of others, this article takes a step toward filling this void. Specifically, I argue that embracing varied preaching pedagogical paradigms and practices in ways that fit our particular background, setting, and gifting is essential to foster a more holistic, contextually sensitive, and liberative approach to the formation of preachers.

Of course, the ability to embrace and embody various approaches to teaching preaching assumes that homiletic professors are familiar with different approaches.³ As Deborah Gin and Mark Hearn state in their helpful article, “Why You Do What You Do: The Power in Knowing and Naming Pedagogies”, “Each pedagogical approach assumes a different epistemology, a different set of practices and beliefs about how people best learn, and a different array of expected results. The best fruit come from intentional design and knowing why you do what you do in the classroom” (Gin and Hearn 2019, p. 30). Reflecting on various preaching pedagogy paradigms can help teachers of preaching clarify their own pedagogical commitments and be more effective as they invest in the formation of students.

While I focus on articulating specific preaching pedagogical paradigms in this article, future work should engage these paradigms in deeper conversation with established and emerging pedagogical (and andragogical)⁴ approaches that are articulated by educational

theorists.⁵ Moreover, future work should consider how a kind of pedagogy of prayer is essential to any endeavor focused on the formation of preachers. Though I have not explored it explicitly in this article, it is my conviction that effective preacher formation requires dependence on the Holy Spirit in and beyond our best efforts.⁶ With this in mind, let me offer a review of the rest of the article.

The first part of the article examines three major contemporary homiletical pedagogical approaches that attend to the formation of preachers in interrelated yet distinct ways. These include teacher-centered, learner-centered, and learning-centered preaching pedagogy. In the second section, I propose a new paradigm that I call place-centered preaching pedagogy. To explicate this paradigm, I briefly consider four homileticians who I contend in different ways reflect aspects of this pedagogy in their teaching: HyeRan Kim-Cragg, Frank A. Thomas, Richard W. Voelz, and Leah D. Schade. The third section offers an assessment of place-centered preaching pedagogy by examining its strengths, weaknesses, and areas for future research. The article ends with a conclusion that revisits the primary aims of the essay and calls for further exploration of the subject.

2. Major Contemporary Homiletical Approaches to Teaching Preaching

There is a long history of preacher formation in the church. Space constraints will not permit me to offer a survey of this history.⁷ Instead, I give attention to some of the major ways that preacher formation has been explored by contemporary homileticians. To be clear, these paradigms overlap in various ways, and they appear in a multiplicity of expressions depending on the specific teacher of preaching and the particular context in which instruction is taking place. Moreover, the homileticians whom I mention in each paradigm might also be identified with other paradigms of preaching.

2.1. Teacher-Centered Preaching Pedagogy

The first approach to teaching preaching to which I want to draw attention is a teacher-centered paradigm. In this paradigm, reflective of Paulo Freire's description of the banking model of education, the teacher of preaching is elevated as the one who dispenses or transmits knowledge that students must grasp to grow as effective preachers (Freire 2018). In this sense, learning is centered around the wisdom and expertise of the teacher. Lecturing will often feature prominently in teacher-centered approaches to homiletical instruction. Additionally, among some instructors who identify strongly with this model, lecturing may involve introducing students to a single method of preaching, usually an expositional approach to preaching from Scripture.

A couple of classic homiletic textbooks that evince the teacher-centered paradigm are the nineteenth-century Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students* and the noted twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth's *Homiletics* (Spurgeon [1862] 2009; Barth [1966] 1991).⁸ Spurgeon's book is a collection of lectures delivered to students at Pastor's College (now Spurgeon's College) in London, England. Reflecting on the lectures, he states, "I am conscious of no motive in printing them but that of desiring to keep my counsels alive in the memories of those who heard them years ago and impressing them upon others who dwell beyond the precincts of our classroom" (Spurgeon [1862] 2009, p. viii). Karl Barth's homiletical textbook is based on student notes from lectures Barth gave in a seminar entitled "Exercises in Sermon Preparation" that took place in Bonn, Germany, in 1932 and 1933. Committed to the discipline of theology as "nothing other than sermon preparation in the broadest sense", Barth's lectures discuss the work of "sketching and developing the sermon", criteria for "reading and listening to sermons and learning from them", and "dogmatic questions about the nature of the sermon" (Barth [1966] 1991, p. 17). Though it differs drastically in some respects from the aforementioned texts, I wonder if a more recent work that reflects a teacher-centered preaching paradigm might be Katie Cannon's *Teaching Preaching*, a book that articulates the homiletical pedagogy of the legendary Isaac Clark of the Interdenominational Theological Center (Cannon 2003).⁹ Designed to help Black ministry leaders embrace "preaching as holy intellectual inquiry", the book is written as a

series of lectures by Cannon's former professor (Cannon 2003, p. 13). While clearly shaped by African oral traditions, the lectures nevertheless reflect the transmissional dimensions of teacher-centered pedagogy.

At its worst, in some contexts, teacher-centered pedagogy may be criticized as a re-enactment of colonial violence in the classroom. This violence is not limited to imperial militarized violence in processes of geopolitical colonization. Rather, it might entail colonizing students' understandings of what counts as expertise, which voices merit attention, and which traditions, sources, and forms of embodiment are authoritative. Moreover, often pejoratively termed the "sage-on-the-stage" model, teacher-centered pedagogy gives the teacher disproportionate power over the learning process and can fail to honor the agency of students (Alcántara 2020, p. 18). This is heightened when the instructor embodies "white self-sufficient masculinity" characterized by homiletical mastery, control, and possession (Jennings 2020, p. 32).¹⁰ However, despite its weaknesses, there are some strengths to teacher-centered preaching pedagogy. For example, while she espouses a more student- or learner-centered approach to teaching preaching to African American female doctoral students, Courtney Buggs argues that some level of "deposit thinking" is often needed to "create the conditions" for imaginative thinking (Buggs 2021, p. 168). Traditional lecturing can assist students in understanding the fundamentals of a new field so they can situate their unique contributions within a broader academic discourse. Moreover, some minoritized students may find it particularly empowering to see an instructor challenging norms as they dispense knowledge and wisdom in the classroom, especially when the instructor shares some minoritized status with the student because of gender, race, ability, or another factor.

2.2. Learner-Centered Preaching Pedagogy

Influenced by educational theorists such as John Dewey, a second approach to teaching preaching is learner-centered homiletical pedagogy.¹¹ This approach emphasizes the interests, innate wisdom, and potential of the student. Unlike the "sage-on-the-stage" approach of teacher-centered preaching pedagogy, in learner-centered instruction, the teacher becomes a "guide-on-the-side" who accompanies the student, providing coaching and direction that encourages their development as a preacher.¹² This may be through facilitating small groups, offering one-on-one mentoring, or providing various self-directed learning exercises. Moreover, attention may be given to how Scriptural interpretation and proclamation are shaped by the student's unique experience and social location.

A classic text that reflects the learner-centered approach to teaching preaching is *Learning Preaching*, edited by Don Wardlaw with a team of seven other homileticians (Wardlaw 1989).¹³ "Each of us has within us already", the book begins, "the effective preacher God wants us to become. We teachers of preaching know that when we guide wisely in the process of learning preaching, we help students cultivate and harvest what God has planted in them through genetic inheritance, personality, life experience, and church background" (Wardlaw 1989, p. 1). Among other things, for the learner-centered teacher of preaching, students simply need to cultivate the inherited gifts and graces they possess. Contemporary homileticians have, in various ways, gone deeper in exploring learner-centered homiletical pedagogy. For example, Eunjo Mary Kim has proposed a feminist pedagogy for homiletical instruction that she calls "conversational learning", which reflects aspects of a learner-centered approach to teaching preaching (Kim 2002). She states: "Conversational learning recognizes the importance of women's experiences in a sexist culture and explores the students' diversity in such areas as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. Conversational learning seeks to help students retrieve their lost voices for their preaching ministries" (Kim 2002, p. 176). Kim emphasizes a student-centered approach to education that is egalitarian to challenge the ways in which sexism has violated students inside and outside the homiletic classroom.

Clearly, there are many strengths to learner-centered homiletical pedagogy. For instance, it aims to honor the particularity of students' background and lived experience,

empowers students who might be marginalized, and focuses on the embodied wisdom that students bring into the class, which andragogy teaches is especially important for adult learners. One potential weakness of the learner-centered approach is that its focus on students' innate potential can underemphasize the collective wisdom to be gained from the broader history of the preaching tradition. It may also be that learner-centered preaching pedagogy is prone to some of the same critiques as teacher-centered pedagogy, particularly when it entails focusing on the potentially narrow interests of students at the exclusion of engaging a broader range of voices and sources as authoritative. Moreover, for students who come from cultures with high power distance—that is, cultures with pronounced social hierarchies or perceived power inequities among persons or roles—it may be disorienting or confusing to have an instructor who democratizes learning through emphasizing a student's interests, agency, and potential.¹⁴ Of course, some students may find the experience culturally liberating, too.

2.3. Learning-Centered Preaching Pedagogy

In the early 2000s, homileticians began increasingly to question and rethink teacher-centered and learner-centered approaches to preaching pedagogy. There was a growing sense that while each approach had some important contributions to the field, neither was sufficient for the task. Various approaches to teaching preaching that centered on the practice of teaching itself, including some that had existed for quite a long time, began to gain traction.

This emerging pedagogical paradigm was described as “learning-centered” homiletical pedagogy in a foundational text edited by Thomas Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale entitled *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice* (Long and Tisdale 2008). Building upon a two-year consultation with homileticians in the field, the text explicitly aimed to “encourage the field of homiletics to move away from teacher-centered and learner-centered pedagogy and toward a *learning-centered* methodology” (Long and Tisdale 2008, p. vii, emphasis original). To put it succinctly, a learning-centered methodology of teaching preaching approaches preaching as a Christian practice with universally recognized norms that have been established over time. While various teaching methods are employed in learning-centered pedagogy, a core conviction is that “students learn most effectively when they are actively engaged in the material at hand”, so priority is placed on helping students engage in the act of preaching itself as much as possible (Lose 2008, p. 48).¹⁵ Among other things, in this paradigm, students learn how to integrate components of Scriptural interpretation, sermon design, and sermon delivery through repetition. A more recent manifestation of learning-centered preaching pedagogy can be seen in Jared Alcántara's popular homiletic textbook, *The Practices of Christian Preaching* (Alcántara 2019). Drawing on K. Anders Ericsson's notion of deliberate practice as the act of practicing a certain way to improve over time, the primary argument of Alcántara's book is that “preachers who cultivate life-giving preaching habits through deliberate practice will enhance their proficiency, grow in their commitment, and flourish in their homiletical ministry” (Alcántara 2019, p. 5, emphasis original).¹⁶ Alcántara goes on to identify five essential practices for preachers to develop: conviction, contextualization, clarity, concreteness, and creativity.

Some of the strengths of the learning-centered approach to teaching preaching include providing a balance between commonalities and distinctives in preaching, prioritizing on-the-ground practice, creating space to value learning from the broader history of preaching, delineating concrete standards of excellence, and offering more explicit measures for establishing teaching strategies (Long 2008, pp. 14–16). One weakness is that learning-centered pedagogy can potentially universalize what are taken to be broad norms of the practice of preaching in ways that bolster Eurocentrism, White normativity, and heteropatriarchy in homiletical formation.¹⁷ Moreover, while proponents of teaching preaching as a practice suggest the approach is “unavoidably concerned with the formation of preachers”, one wonders if foregrounding practice may lead to a neglect of the Spirit's role in shaping the person of the preacher outside the act of preaching (Nieman 2008, p. 37).

3. Place-Centered Preaching Pedagogy: Toward a New Paradigm

While teacher-centered, learner-centered, and learning-centered approaches to teaching preaching continue to play a vital role in formal and informal environments where preaching is taught, there is an emerging array of approaches to teaching preaching that, in various ways, draw attention to the importance of context and culture for preaching pedagogy. Drawing on the literature on place-based education (PBE), I have termed this emerging preaching paradigm a place-centered approach to homiletical pedagogy.¹⁸ For the sake of clarity, it will be helpful to offer a few words about place-based education before articulating a working definition of place-centered preaching pedagogy. PBE is “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” (Yemini et al. 2023, p. 1). In a sense, PBE is “both an old and a new phenomenon”, since prior to the development of the common school in the mid-nineteenth century, all education was place-based (Gruenewald and Smith 2007, p. 1). However, in the twentieth century, some of PBE’s roots can be traced back to the work of educational reformers John Dewey (1859–1952) and William Heard Kilpatrick (1871–1965), particularly their stress on “incorporating students’ experience of particular communities and places into their formal education” (Gruenewald and Smith 2007, p. 1). Toward the latter part of the twentieth century, PBE gained more popularity “in an effort to thwart the rising tide of neoliberal ideologies and educational reforms that decentred cultural connection, community, and environmental stewardship” (Yemini et al. 2023, p. 1). More recently, there has been growing attention to place-conscious or environmental education due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as schools considered alternative approaches to education outside the traditional classroom (Yemini et al. 2023). PBE manifests in a multiplicity of ways in concrete educational efforts and social contexts, but shared values and modalities can be discerned. Tom Vander Ark, Emily Liebttag, and Nate McClennen have suggested six key design principles that inform place-based education: community as classroom, learner-centered, inquiry-based, local to global, design thinking, and interdisciplinarity (Vander Ark et al. 2020, p. 3).

Though PBE has been celebrated by many, it has also been questioned for the ways in which it can sometimes idealize place as “a stable, bounded, and self-contained entity”, endorse the status quo in communities, and fail to connect local efforts of change to broader social and political institutions and forces (McInerney et al. 2011, pp. 9–11). A particularly important critique of early theorizations of PBE has been the introduction of “a critical pedagogy of place” that synthesizes critical pedagogy with place-based education to “contribute to the production of educational discourses and practices that explicitly examine the place-specific nexus between environment, culture, and education” (Gruenewald 2003, p. 10). In different ways, many critical pedagogies of place aim to expose the ways in which “place in Global North contexts is rooted in systems of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and anthropocentrism” (Yemini et al. 2023, p. 3). Ultimately, they aim toward recovering erased, displaced, or ignored cultural histories and cultural commons and “deconstructing existing oppressive relationships” (Yemini et al. 2023, p. 3). Scholars such as Eve Tuck, Marcia McKenzie, and Kate McCoy have gone beyond simply advocating for a critical pedagogy of place to propose a need for “land education” that explicitly foregrounds “Indigenous epistemological and ontological accounts of land” and “Indigenous critiques of settler colonialism” in educational efforts (Tuck et al. 2016, p. 13). For promoters of land education, place-based education must reckon with how “place in the US has been inexorably linked to the genocide of Indigenous peoples and continued settler colonialism” (Calderon 2016, p. 25).¹⁹

As this all-too-brief overview of some of the literature intimates, there are many dimensions and ways of conceptualizing the vast field of PBE. For our purposes, I draw attention to educational theorist Dafna Granit-Dgani’s articulation of four distinct dimensions of PBE: learning in place, the study of place, learning from place, and learning for the sake of place (Granit-Dgani 2021; Yemini et al. 2023, p. 2). Building on Granit-Dgani’s framework,

I propose that place-centered preaching pedagogy focuses on helping preachers learn *in* their context, exegete Scripture and other sources *with* their context, learn *from* their context, and teach and preach *for* the flourishing of their context.

My understanding of place-centered preaching pedagogy is grounded in three key convictions. One is that students inhabit multiple places in their context of life and ministry. Forming preachers to be attentive to place does not limit them to one domain of proclamation in the preaching classroom. Rather, while being grounded in the fullness of their embodiment as a beloved child of God, a student may learn the crucial skill of preaching in diverse contexts in their local community. For example, in online classes, I've had students upload a video of them preaching to a small group in their home for one sermon and in the sanctuary of their local church for a Sunday service for another sermon. A second conviction undergirding my understanding of place-centered preaching pedagogy is that while it is impossible for an instructor to become knowledgeable about all the varied contexts in which their students preach, it is critical for them to stretch themselves beyond their own tradition to serve their students effectively. A homiletic instructor should name, appreciate, and draw from their particular heritage and tradition(s) while also intentionally broadening their experience for the sake of students (Alcántara 2015). Lastly, given the colonial violence that continues to affect Indigenous communities and others, place-centered pedagogy must avoid romanticizing place in preaching. Among other things, this requires attending to the history of the places in which instruction and learning take place so instructors and learners can engage in the complex process of "unlearning settler identities" and enacting God's shalom with and for displaced peoples and places (Calderon 2016, p. 33). While this is a notably underdeveloped emphasis in most place-centered preaching pedagogies, including my own, it is my conviction that it should become more prominent.

Though there are several homileticians who embody the essential characteristics of place-centered preaching pedagogy in their teaching, including some of the educators mentioned above, very few have written scholarly explorations of it. Still, there is some important work being carried out that reflects aspects of it (Neal 2022; Sharp 2022; Stark 2024). For the sake of increasing the visibility of this emerging paradigm, I highlight four of several possible scholars of whom I am aware who, in different ways, evince at least some of the dimensions of a place-centered approach to teaching preaching: HyeRan Kim-Cragg, Frank A. Thomas, Richard W. Voelz, and Leah D. Schade.

3.1. HyeRan Kim Cragg

The first homiletician I would like to focus on is HyeRan Kim-Cragg. In her book *Postcolonial Preaching*, Kim-Cragg draws attention to the importance of interrogating place in preaching in its historical, geographic, social, political, and theological dimensions (Kim-Cragg 2021). For her, "the place of preaching is shifting and unstable" given the complexity, hybridity, and violence of our postcolonial world (Kim-Cragg 2021, p. 47). Along with attending to places in our modern context, Kim-Cragg stresses the need to interrogate places or lands in the biblical witness. For example, drawing on the work of literary critic Edward Said (1935–2003), she advocates for a contrapuntal reading strategy as a means of highlighting overlooked voices, themes, or contexts in Scripture. For her, such a strategy helps to challenge the ways in which stories of conquest in Exodus and Joshua have "fueled the political rhetoric of conquest" against Indigenous peoples and others (Kim-Cragg 2021, p. 114). Some of Kim-Cragg's pedagogical proposals that reflect a place-centered preaching pedagogy appear in a coauthored paper with Shauna Hannan and Sarah Travis entitled, "Preaching in a World Exposed: Vulnerability, Accountability, and Accessibility" (Kim-Cragg et al. 2019). The paper articulates what the authors call a "pedagogy of vulnerability" for postcolonial homiletic classrooms (Kim-Cragg et al. 2019, p. 104). Here, I will highlight one insight and one practice from their work that reflect aspects of place-centered pedagogy. The authors propose that part of a pedagogy of vulnerability is recognizing that every person needs to be "held accountable to the earth itself" (Kim-Cragg et al. 2019, p. 110). Reflecting on a Canadian context, they suggest that

humbly learning “Akwe Nia’ Tetewa: Neren, which is Mohawk for ‘all my relations,’ as a basic principle for preaching”, would lead us to examine critically whether or not our proclamation is affirming or abusing the earth and other creatures (Kim-Cragg et al. 2019, p. 110). Such homiletical accountability, they argue, is vital for everyone who seeks to “become a more faithful preacher and more pedagogically sound teacher of homiletics” (Kim-Cragg et al. 2019, p. 110).

One of the practices that Kim-Cragg and her coauthors suggest that reflects place-centered preaching pedagogy is “collaborative sermon preparation” (Kim-Cragg et al. 2019, p. 112; cf. Hannan 2021). For example, they advocate teaching students to engage in the exegesis of the Scriptures and the world with congregation members. Engaging the Scriptures with congregants allows them to consider how the Spirit might speak in and through the sacred texts to address their particular community. Moreover, including congregants in reflecting on current events “assists in making sure that the events that are front and center for the hearers are not ignored by the preacher” in the sermon preparation process (Kim-Cragg et al. 2019, p. 112). Ultimately, teaching students about collaborative sermon preparation with one’s congregants reshapes sermon preparation. It is no longer “preparation for ministry, it is ministry” (Kim-Cragg et al. 2019, p. 113). In this way, learning happens in students’ contexts in ways that cause those in their local contexts to participate in ministry.

3.2. Frank A. Thomas

A different approach to place-centered preaching pedagogy is seen in the work of homiletician Frank A. Thomas. In an article entitled “Pedagogical Insights on Teaching African American Preaching”, Thomas narrates the pedagogy he developed on his journey from pastoring to becoming a teacher of preaching (Thomas 2019). Though he started his professorial career with a teacher-centered preaching pedagogy, he began to develop a more learner-centered approach as he sought to “rely less on lectures and more on interaction and student ownership of the learning process” (Thomas 2019, np.). In time, he began to evince a learning-centered paradigm as he became convinced that a “preaching class is a community of practice, a safe space where learners experiment with preaching methods” (Thomas 2019, np.). Most recently, Thomas has begun to reflect on place-centered preaching pedagogy through his leadership in starting the first PhD program in African American Preaching and Sacred Rhetoric in the world at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Thomas’ place-centered preaching pedagogy can be seen in at least two ways in the design of the program. For one, PhD students do not need to relocate from their current communities to partake in the program (Thomas 2019). Instead, they participate in intensive and hybrid courses that allow them to bring into the program the concerns and questions of their local community and ministry as they engage in their graduate work. From personal experience as a visiting student in the program during my doctoral work, I can speak to the wisdom and perspective that emerges through this kind of class format. A second way place-centered pedagogy is seen in the program is in the fact that as one component of their graduation requirements, PhD students must “teach two preaching courses in their home community—classes that target non-seminary trained students” (Thomas 2019, np.). In this way, the educational formation of students is tied to their ability to invest in the formation of other preachers in their local contexts. This approach to teaching preaching honors the importance of using one’s gifts, education, and skills to contribute to the flourishing of one’s place.

3.3. Richard W. Voelz

A third homiletician who engages in place-based pedagogy is Richard W. Voelz. He makes important contributions to this discussion in his essay, “Wrestling with Whiteness in Homiletic Pedagogy”, in the edited volume *Unmasking White Preaching* (Voelz 2022). Voelz’s essay is a reflection on a class that he teaches at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond,

Virginia, entitled “Proclaiming Justice in the Church and Public Square.” I would highlight two particular ways in which his work demonstrates place-centered preaching pedagogy. For one, Voelz is committed to a deep exegesis of context. “Attempts to unmask Whiteness in homiletical pedagogy”, he writes, “account for the ways that institutional, historical, and geographical contexts are shaped by White supremacy and the social forces which have produced Whiteness” (Voelz 2022, p. 143). Liberative homiletical pedagogy must be attuned to the historical, social, and political realities of place. Attentiveness to the historical legacy of slavery and racism in Richmond helped Voelz craft a course that invites students to reckon with this history as they engage in acts of proclamation in the midst of ongoing racialized injustice today. For example, given the racialized violence against Black bodies in Richmond, Voelz made a pedagogical choice to “center Black/White racialized dynamics” in his course while being aware that decentering Whiteness and White preaching must move “beyond Black/White racial binaries” (Voelz 2022, p. 144).

Another way in which a place-centered approach to pedagogy can be seen in Voelz’s work is through his conviction that “pedagogy that unmasks White preaching is accountable to the public” (Voelz 2022, p. 148). To live into this conviction, he assigned what he termed “community engagement activities”, such as completing an interview with a local pastor about “proclaiming justice from the pulpit”, engaging with a civic leader, elected official, or public gathering addressing a social concern, and participating in a seven-minute public proclamation in “a public forum livestreamed over the internet” (Voelz 2022, p. 148). In their own way, for Voelz, these pedagogical strategies were an attempt to create “a publicly accountable classroom” (Voelz 2022, p. 148).

3.4. Leah D. Schade

The final homiletician whom I consider an exemplar of place-centered preaching pedagogy is Leah D. Schade.²⁰ In her illuminating article, “Who Is My Neighbor? Developing a Pedagogical Tool for Teaching Environmental Preaching and Ethics in Online and Hybrid Courses”, Schade demonstrates a profound commitment to place-centered education (Schade 2022). She believes that “students and institutions are ‘embedded’ within their communities and ecological contexts” and that this “has implications not just for the institutions in which they learn, but for their formation as ministers or religious leaders in whatever contexts they serve” (Schade 2022, p. 2). For our purposes, I want to focus on the tool that Schade developed to increase students’ understanding of the interconnectivity and interdependence between human life and more-than-human life in their particular contexts.

The tool is called the “Who Is My Neighbor” Mapping Exercise (Schade 2022; cf. Schade 2015, pp. 62–91). Inspired by the parable known as “The Good Samaritan” in Luke 10:25–37, the exercise seeks to help students “expand the notion of ‘neighbor’ to include other-than-human beings” (Schade 2022, p. 3). For the exercise, students are asked to complete six tasks from a list of twelve, preferably while working in partnership with a group of people in their ecclesial context. Some of the possible tasks include walking the grounds of the church building, attending to the land, plants, and air, examining a topographical map of where the congregation resides, and talking with local health professionals to learn about major public health issues that are affecting the community (Schade 2022, pp. 5–6). Through each of the activities, students begin to develop a more robust understanding of “neighbor”, which includes various human and non-human ecological neighbors in their community. Upon completing the required six of twelve tasks, students create a map of their findings and present it through sharing in an educational forum, preaching a sermon, or designing a worship service. Schade’s creative pedagogical tool is a wonderful example of place-centered preaching pedagogy that helps preachers learn *in* their context, exegete *with* their context, learn *from* their context, and teach and preach *for* the flourishing of their context.

4. Assessing Place-Centered Preaching Pedagogy

From the brief survey of place-centered preaching pedagogy above, one of its obvious strengths is that it allows students to grow as preachers in a dynamic, mutually enriching relationship with their local community. Such pedagogy can provide a level of accountability to the public and the earth itself that exerts helpful, ethical pressure on the form, content, and place of proclamation. Furthermore, place-centered preaching pedagogy can foster creative, egalitarian learning in the online homiletic classroom, especially when the teacher is invited to shift from “host” to “guest” as they observe students preaching in their local contexts (Lamb 2019, p. 94).

Of course, a place-centered approach to teaching preaching is not without its weaknesses. For instance, while place-centered preaching pedagogy may hold much potential for online preaching courses, it does raise complex questions that instructors must sort through. As Jerusha Matsen Neal notes, in our globalized world, we must attend to the ways in which new technologies and media can lead us not only to “talk past each other” but to “talk over each other” in ways that privilege the wisdom of some places over others (Neal 2022, p. 111). It may also be that a place-centered pedagogical approach will be time-consuming for students and instructors, given that it often requires establishing partnerships and resources that extend beyond the traditional classroom. Moreover, this approach could lead preachers to hesitate to challenge prophetically the norms and practices of their place of ministry, especially if they are looking to the community itself to validate their proclamation. Finally, to echo Lisa L. Thompson’s work on Black women preachers, teachers employing place-centered preaching pedagogy should be mindful of the fact that some minoritized students may have to exert ingenuity and courage to “negotiate a space for themselves and their voices” (Thompson 2018, p. 32). This is especially the case when the preacher’s embodiment and voice are viewed with suspicion by listeners or are altogether rejected by ecclesial authorities, given the established norms and expectations of their preaching context.²¹

Given the relatively new theorizing of place-centered preaching pedagogy, there are many areas worthy of future research. Let me mention three. For one, as noted above, there is a dire need to bring place-centered preaching pedagogies into conversation with the theorizing of land education. For example, how can students be equipped to engage their preaching context in ways that challenge not only ecological exploitation but settler colonialism in its various manifestations (Calderon 2016, p. 33)? And what role should or should not “preaching as capacity building” play in this endeavor, given the fact that many of us as settlers may be resistant to conversations that explore ways to rectify historical injustices that challenge our current way of life (Travis 2022, p. 103)?

A second fruitful area of research is considering how place-centered preaching pedagogy might be a resource for the growing trend toward practicing what Jesse Stommel has termed “ungrading” (Stommel 2023). Ungrading does not simply dismiss grades. Rather, Stommel suggests it “is a systemic critique, a series of conversations we have about grades, ideally drawing students into those conversations with the goal of engaging them as full agents in their own education” (Stommel 2023, p. 6). As a result, instructors are more prone to “honestly engage student work rather than to simply evaluate it” (Stommel 2023, p. 2). In reflecting on the work of some homileticians who have begun to employ ungrading strategies, I have started to wonder if some ungrading approaches might honor place-centered preaching pedagogy in certain ways (Olson 2022; Voelz 2023). I am especially curious how the practice might affirm online homiletic students’ capacity to assess preaching in their context perhaps better than their instructor can.

Third, building on the work of homiletician Lisa Lamb as well as educational theorist Kelly J. Smith, it would be worthwhile for future research to give more attention to the relationship between place-based educational pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy, especially to how the merging of these pedagogical frameworks might be useful in fostering effective online education for preaching students dispersed across a multiplicity of geographic environments (Lamb 2019; Smith 2021).

5. Conclusions

Teachers of preaching must learn from multiple pedagogical preaching paradigms and their corresponding practices to foster a more holistic, contextually sensitive, and liberative approach to the formation of preachers. Given the dearth of homiletical research that explicitly explores diverse approaches to teaching preaching, I have drawn attention to four specific pedagogical paradigms: teacher-centered, learner-centered, learning-centered, and what I have called place-centered preaching pedagogy. Reflection on these paradigms can help teachers of preaching clarify their own pedagogical commitments. Current and future preachers, students, and scholars will need to assess and articulate additional approaches to teaching preaching in the past and present. I offer these as a helpful starting point for further theorizing and contextually rich exploration of diverse preaching praxes. When teachers of preaching become clear on why they do what they do, they are better equipped to invest in the formation of preachers of the liberating and life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ in our diverse and complex world.

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Notes

- ¹ This article builds on presentations prepared for the 2022 Payton Lectures on “Embodied Theological Education in a (Dis)Embodied Age” at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, as well as the pedagogy workgroup session at the 2023 Academy of Homiletics gathering at the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia. I am grateful for the helpful feedback and suggestions from colleagues and attendees at those events.
- ² One notable exception is the work of Jared E. Alcántara. See, for example, (Alcántara 2019, pp. 237–94). I will also mention other important voices throughout this article.
- ³ This includes pedagogies informed by a range of cultural experiences and ways of knowing that decenter what Kenyatta R. Gilbert calls “the pedagogy of Whiteness” (Gilbert 2022, p. 71).
- ⁴ While recognizing that the term “andragogy” is used to refer to adult learning theory and practices, I use the term “pedagogy” due to its widespread usage to refer to various methods and practices of teaching aimed at people of all ages, including adults. For a classic text on adult learning theory that utilizes the term “andragogy”, see (Knowles et al. 2015).
- ⁵ For a survey of different pedagogies, see (Gin and Hearn 2019, pp. 30–51). The authors discuss classical pedagogy, the pedagogy of John Dewey, behaviorist pedagogy, early constructivist pedagogy, social constructivist pedagogy, relational pedagogies, multicultural pedagogy, and critical pedagogy.
- ⁶ For more on the importance of prayer in the homiletics classroom, see (Brown and Powery 2016, pp. 51–77).
- ⁷ For a helpful summary of some aspects of North American preaching pedagogical history, see (Gibson 2018, pp. 5–23). See also Dale P. Andrews’ exploration of homiletical apprenticeship traditions in the Black church (Floyd-Thomas et al. 2007, pp. 220–22). In previous work, I have briefly reflected on two often-overlooked women preachers in the history of preaching—Rebecca Protten and Dora Yu (Yu Cidu)—who, among other things, equipped others to engage in proclamation of the gospel. See (Clark 2021).
- ⁸ Though it is not strictly based on lectures, John A. Broadus’ classic work on preaching also seems to have emerged in a more teacher-centered learning environment (Broadus [1870] 1979).
- ⁹ As “the one singled out by Clark to make sure that his distinct homiletical methodology received the critical attention it deserves in the twenty-first century”, Cannon’s “explicit intent is clearly presentational” (Cannon 2003, p. 15).
- ¹⁰ For a helpful, constructive homiletical engagement with Jennings’ work, see (Jacobsen 2021).
- ¹¹ As Gin and Hearn note, while Dewey valued engaging the interests of the learner and allowed these interests to initiate learning, for him, instruction was still “teacher-driven” (Gin and Hearn 2019, p. 34).
- ¹² I have not been able to find the origin of the phrase “guide-on-the-side”, but it is used frequently in reference to learner-centered pedagogy.
- ¹³ The other contributors to the book are Fred Baumer, Donald F. Chatfield, Joan Delaplane, O.P., O.C. Edwards, Jr., James A. Forbes, Jr., Edwina Hunter, and Thomas H. Troeger.

- ¹⁴ Drawing on the work of cultural anthropologist Geert Hofstede et al. (2010), Lisa Lamb describes power distance as “the level of social acceptance and even expectation of unequal distribution of power, with accompanying assumptions regarding subordinates’ relationship to authority” (Lamb 2019, p. 96). Hofstede speaks of some cultures as having high versus low power distance. This is one of several cultural values that Hofstede articulates.
- ¹⁵ Specific learning-centered teaching practices include regularly exposing students to excellent examples of preaching, creating a supportive context for learning with high expectations, identifying and teaching specific components of the practice of preaching, fostering an action/reflection approach to learning, and encouraging a lifelong commitment to learning and development (Lose 2008, pp. 44–51).
- ¹⁶ For the sake of clarity, Alcántara states the following: “I am *not* adding my voice to contemporary conversations on Christian practices in theology” (Alcántara 2019, p. 5, emphasis original).
- ¹⁷ To be fair, Long writes, a learning-centered approach “does not mean that there is only one way to preach effectively”, but rather that in the midst of the multiplicity of ways one might participate in the ministry of preaching, there is “a common activity known as Christian preaching” (Long 2008, p. 5).
- ¹⁸ For a review of this literature, see (Yemini et al. 2023). While the term “place-based” preaching pedagogy may be broader and more precise, I have chosen to speak of place-centered homiletical instruction for the sake of consistency with the other three aforementioned established pedagogical paradigms in the field. The other term I considered was community-centered preaching pedagogy, but it does not have the ecological connotations of the term “place.”
- ¹⁹ I am indebted to Jerusha Matsen Neal for encouraging me to go deeper in exploring Indigenous critiques of place-based education.
- ²⁰ Along with David M. Stark, Schade is one of the few homileticians of whom I am aware who draws specifically on place-based educational theory in her work.
- ²¹ I am indebted to Crystal DesVignes for helping me think about the challenges some face as they preach in toxic contexts.

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