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The JTLL serves as a scholarly forum for the refinement and dissemination of research pertaining to interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary implications of transformative learning and its applications for leadership in diverse contexts.

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THE APPLICATION OF ADULT LEARNING PRINCIPLES IN EFFECTIVE PREACHING

Part 1 – Section 1: Introduction to the Study¹

Randall C. DeVille, EdD

INTRODUCTION

Lecture is the method of choice for higher education course instructors in the United States (Butler, 1992; Omatseye, 2007). Carlson (2001) provided some reasons as to why the lecture method is a popular method of instruction. According to Carlson, any group size can be taught with only one instructor with some degree of effectiveness. The need for few additional instructional materials makes lecture attractive to teacher and administrator alike (Carlson, 2001). Lecture allows the teacher flexibility in influencing the delivery of the material with their style or preferences (Carlson, 2001). There are, however, difficulties with the lecture method that the instructor must overcome. During a lecture, the learner tends to become passive and unmotivated (Carlson, 2001).

The effectiveness of teaching, especially lecture, is not only connected to a teacher's mastery of content but also to their understanding of adult learning concepts and communication. These three characteristics of an effective teacher form what McCroskey, Richmond, and McCroskey (2002) described as a "three legged stool" where effective communication is as critically important as the other two legs (p. 384). Researchers have examined the role of communication in instruction,

¹ This paper is adapted from the introductory first section of Randall C. DeVille, "The Application of Adult Learning Principles in Effective Preaching," (Ed.D dissertation, Walden University, 2012).

focusing on the concepts of immediacy and relevance (Anderson, 1979; Christophel, 1990; McCroskey & Richmond, 1992). The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the strategies preachers can employ in an effort to increase effective communication.

I used focus groups, as well as personal interviews, in an attempt to capture the perceived effectiveness of a sermon from the listener's perspective and to gain insight into what the speaker experiences. It was hoped that the open-ended qualitative questions would provide insight into participants' perceptions associated with teaching as they relate to adult learning principles and communication. I focused on finding out the kind of sermon that delivers a message that changes adults' lives. The perspectives of the churchgoers, along with my observations, provided data to evaluate the preacher's view of elements that comprise effective sermons.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Preachers in the early 21st century may lack knowledge on the components of sermons that affect their listeners' lives. It is this lack of understanding of how to facilitate adult learning that may explain why churchgoers attend and hear lessons for many years, yet the lessons learned in the sermons are not reflected in their day-to-day lives. Barna (2002) found that only half of church-going adults left church feeling challenged to change. The Barna Group (2002) reported that believers are exposed to many sermons using state of the art technology in a seeker-friendly atmosphere and still are not experiencing any significant change in their personal behavior. Knowles (1984) and Mezirow (1991) argued that learning is indicated by change in behavior; therefore, it appears that churchgoing adults are not learning because their behavior is not changing. This

problem of not changing behavior as prompted by church lessons impacts the congregation, minister, and the community at large. The congregation becomes complacent, the minister discouraged, and the community confused when there is no growth or change in the lives of the churchgoers (Knowles, 1984; Morgan, 2002; Strangway, 2004).

There are many possible factors contributing to this problem, among which are attitudes toward adult learning found within the church, moral relativism prevalent in U.S. society, and ministerial training that may lack classes on the educational process and adult learning (Tanner, 1994). Even though Barna (2002) stated that nearly half of churchgoers leave church without being inspired to change, Barna did not explain why churchgoers felt uninspired to change their lives based on sermon lessons. Knowles, (1980) Tanner (1994), and Carter (2009) indicated that preachers are often unaware of the educational realities associated with preaching. While teachers of adults need to understand and facilitate adult learning, specific suggestions directly related to preaching are lacking in the literature (Brookfield, 1986; Lai, 1995; Murugiah, 2005). This gap in the literature relates to the practice of preachers in many churches throughout the United States who are not aware of adult learning and communication concepts that could enhance their ability to inspire and educate their listeners. Consequently, I investigated the extent to which preachers use and churchgoers benefit from concepts from adult learning. This study may contribute to the body of knowledge needed to address this problem by exploring the experiences and observations of ministers and churchgoing adults as they relate to what they perceive is missing in the preaching process.

NATURE OF THE STUDY

The case study design used in the qualitative study included one-on-one interviews with pastors. Focus groups made up of church-going adults were also used to inform the study. The study involved participants who fit the description of consistent church-going adults, that is, adults who attend church services on a weekly basis. Pastors were interviewed to probe their experiences concerning their training, perceptions of the congregants, and their views on the elements that comprise an effective sermon. I focused on the perceptions and experiences of church-going adults at their churches, thus supporting a qualitative research design (Knowles, 1984). The focus groups and personal interviews were conducted face-to-face in an effort to capture a description of the participants' experiences. This strategy was chosen because it offers a focus on the essence of the participants' experiences in connecting to the message of a sermon. Interviews and focus groups, while they are the source of indirect information, also give a description of the participants' experience while giving the researcher an opportunity to probe the historical context of the participant's experience (Creswell, 2009).

I consulted with a panel of experts to develop the interview and focus group questions to address concerns regarding the validity of the interview and focus group planned (Appendix A and B). The findings were analyzed with an understanding that I only addressed techniques in the presentation of content, not the spiritual condition or maturity of the participants. I attempted to identify factors and techniques of preaching that are perceived to make a difference in the effectiveness of the sermon.

The conceptual framework provided a resource in interpreting the findings. Data collection took place by using

focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and field notes. Each participant was reminded of the purpose and nature of the study prior to the interview or focus group. The goal was to encourage participants to ask questions regarding procedures quickly but thoroughly before beginning the focus group discussion. The focus groups lasted no longer than 60 minutes. I collected the data with the help of field notes and audio recording. I did not invite my congregation to participate in the study to avoid bias and undue influence on the participants.

Qualitative data analysis was conducted with a focus on statements made by participants and descriptions of their experiences. The data were analyzed for both the generic and specific processes and were subsequently organized and coded (Creswell, 2009). Creswell (2009) advocated analyzing the data in a way a that can yield codes concerning expected subjects, suprising concepts, and concepts that suggest a broader application of the study data.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The overarching question in this study was how do church-going adults perceive the sermon? There were three sub-questions for the study:

1. In the experience of churchgoing adults, how do the principles of adult learning, communication theory, and ambient teaching make a difference in the effectiveness of sermons?
2. What perceptions do preachers have about the effect of relevance and immediacy techniques on the effectiveness of their sermons?

3. How do the views of preachers and churchgoers align on the topic of elements that comprise effective sermons?

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this case study was to better understand the characteristics of a sermon that enhance learning for churchgoers in Christian churches. By exploring the experience of listeners, elements needed to increase the effectiveness of sermons can be identified. I attempted to discover concepts relating to adult learning or communication that exist in and thus may increase the effectiveness of sermons. In the design, I integrated research on preaching with research on teaching. I considered the resources and research in education and communication theory, seeking to come to a better understanding of the characteristics of effective adult preaching to adult listeners (i.e., lecturing, effective). I used focus groups with church-going adults and personal interviews preachers.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The concepts of adult learning, communication, and ambient teaching are the concepts that guided the study. A more detailed analysis of the concepts is presented in Section 3.

Adult Learning Concepts

Adult learning perspectives are used to explore how adults learn and use what they learn and make meaning. Murugiah (2005) stated that “all levels of learners who engage in the practice of learning have certain unspoken (tacit) beliefs about life and how to apply them in life” (p. 899). Proponents of adult learning perspectives challenge the traditional teacher-

centric or “monologue” adult education methods and encourage interaction or “dialogue” between student and teacher (Brookfield, 1990; Knowles, 1984; Vella, 1994). Knowles’s (1984) andragogical principles and two other adult learning concepts were used to develop the issues surrounding the methods or techniques used to teach adults.

Andragogy: Knowles

Knowles (1984) summarized experience and research about the adult learner in the principles of adult learning. Knowles attached the Dutch word *andragogy* to instructional practices to indicate that the learning activities are guided purposefully to produce a change in adult students. The principles of andragogy provide guidelines for adult educators seeking to connect with their students. Knowles suggested the following four guidelines for educators to effectively teach adults: (a) give adults the reason for learning the lesson before the lesson begins, (b) take into account the great and diverse experiences that adults have, (c) realize that adults are ready and excited about learning which will help them deal with real life, and (d) understand that adult learners are primarily intrinsically motivated rather than extrinsically (Knowles, 1984).

Transformative learning: Mezirow

Mezirow (1991) viewed adult learning as the teacher encouraging students to be critically reflective of social norms and cultural conduct. The goals of this kind of learning are (a) to help the learner evaluate and understand why they see the world the way they do and (b) to empower the adult learners to discard some of the restrictive perspectives they have held previously. Mezirow challenged adults to reflect on the effects that their perspectives are having on their interaction with

other individuals and ideas. Murugiah (2005) described Mezirow's theory this way, "Transformative learning is defined as a process by which we question our taken for granted frames of reference in an effort to make them more integrative, so that they become more justified in guiding our action" (p. 899). The theory describes the role of adult educators as those who are committed to helping their students become more imaginative and critically reflective of previously held ideas.

Murugiah suggested that certain traits should be considered when approaching adult education. Adult learners have a wealth and variety of life experiences, a desire for problem-centered learning, a capability for self-directed learning, a need for varying presentations according to their learning styles, and a need for continuous learning.

Behavior modification theory: Wertheim

Behavior modification is a theory that is used to understand human behavior and on how people react to certain stimuli. Behavior modification theorists attempt to capitalize on observable outcomes (Wertheim, 2000). Some of the foundational assumptions of this theory are (a) all complex behavior is learned, shaped, and subject to observable laws; (b) a person can change behavior through rewards and punishment; (c) behavior is determined by the environment; and (d) part of what individuals learn results from observing others and the consequences of their actions.

Wertheim (2000) argued that previous assumptions can be applied to learning in the following ways. First, adults learn more rapidly if they are allowed to actively participate in the process, especially when the process includes repetition. Second, feedback, whether positive or negative, aids the student learning and guides their actions. Next, the student who is rewarded needs to know exactly what action is being rewarded

so that there is no possibility that any inappropriate or undesirable behavior is reinforced. Finally, nonresponses of a teacher are often misunderstood so student reactions should be monitored (Wertheim, 2000).

Communication

Communication is the process by which thoughts, data, and feelings are shared (Hybels & Weaver, 2007). Some of the earliest researchers who studied the role of communication in instruction were focused on the concepts of immediacy and relevance (Anderson, 1979; Christophel, 1990; McCroskey & Richmond, 1992; McCroskey et al., 2002). The terms immediacy and relevance can be defined as a connection between the one speaking and the one listening.

Immediacy is the verbal and nonverbal things that allow a speaker to connect emotionally with the listener (Olenowski, 2000; Simmons, 2007). The emotional connection can be facilitated verbally or nonverbally. In the emotional bonding theory, Olenowski (2000) focused on the emotions found in the communication process. Olenowski stated that words have emotion and thoughts connected to them, therefore speakers would do well to consider their choice of words and the emotion and thought they communicate. Olenowski explained, "Creating this "common ground" involves imaging, painting and clarifying our interior emotional lives" (p.10). Olenowski advocated the use of metaphor, illustration, humor, storytelling, and self-disclosure to create a common ground between speaker and listener. Nonverbal immediacy has also been shown to affect cognitive learning and to promote favorable outcomes in learners (McCroskey et al., 2002). Learners interpret nonverbal immediacy in an instructor as being caring, understandable, and indicating better instructors than those who are less immediate (McCroskey et al., 2002). Nonverbal immediacy is nonverbal

behaviors that communicate approval, fondness, or positive affect to others.

Relevance is described as communication that connects in a practical way with the listener. It is the practice of presenting a lesson in a way that helps the listeners to visualize it as the story of their lives (Daggett, 2005; Furman, 1992; Luntz, 2007; Olenowski, 2000; Strangway, 2004). Being practical or giving the “how to” after teaching spiritual principles or truths was also suggested as characteristic of adding relevance (Furman, 1992; Luntz, 2007; Strangway, 2004).

Ambient Teaching

Ambient teaching is described as the use of a space and the characteristics and conditions of the space to enhance the oral message and thus support learning. Knowles (1984) observed that the climate for adult learning is impacted by the physical characteristics of the space in which it is to take place. Environmental features are important because they have a direct and powerful impact on learning (Colanduno, 2007; Kennedy, 2002). White (1972) approximated that one fourth of learning is dependent upon the effects of the physical environment. Adult students are more likely than children to be affected by the physical learning environment with an increase in their motivation due to sufficient space, attractive decoration, and functional furnishings (Lane & Lewis, 1971). Ambient teaching is not just the way a speaker uses the space, but it is the way the space is perceived, felt, and reacted to by the learner. There are four areas of concern that are elements in evaluating adult learning environments (Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990). *Anthropometry* means the dimensions of the human body (Colanduno, 2007). Adults are found in different shapes and sizes. These dimensions are important to consider when designing learning spaces (Colanduno, 2007). Hiemstra and

Sisco (1990) posited that the choice of chairs, their size, padding, shape, and arrangement are areas of concern. Another concern is *ergonomics* which deals with bringing comfort to those who occupy a space or use an instrument (Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990). The size and shape of the classroom influence the philosophy or expectation that a teacher may have for the instruction within that space (Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990; Kennedy, 2002). *Proxemics* includes gestures, touch or avoidance of touch, eye behavior, and posture (Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990). Teachers who are sensitive to these student dynamics are better prepared to connect with a diverse student body.

Sociofugal and *sociopetal* are two different kinds of settings that affect the use of that space for adult learners. Sociofugal settings are used in environments where interaction among the students is discouraged, and attention is primarily forward towards the lecturer. This arrangement creates a status distinction where students see themselves as nonspecial and having no distinct identity compared with the instructor (Colanuno, 2007; White, 1972). Sociopetal settings are environments which encourage interaction and can facilitate conversation by having the learners seated facing towards one another (Colanuno, 2007; Fulton, 1991). *Synaesthetics* involves the study of how students are affected by the simultaneous use of several of their senses. Comfort concerns can be noted in temperature and humidity levels as well as in the availability of suitable chairs, bathrooms, and refreshments (Vosko, 1991). Hiemstra and Sisco (1990) and Knowles (1980) indicated that much more research needs to be done on the relationships between the human senses such as touch, smell, and taste the outcomes adult learners experience in an adult learning environment. Colanduno (2007) investigated learning space design and its effect upon academic success. Colanduno demonstrated that students' attitudes towards learning were

directly influenced by the design of the learning spaces. It is important for teachers to understand how the physical learning environment impacts the students' senses in ways that enhance student participation and productivity (White, 1972). Hiemstra and Sisco suggested that the physical environment "enhances learner commitment" (p. 246). Since environmental features have an impact on learning, preachers can use the space and characteristics of the space in which they preach to enhance their sermons and thus support learning.

The frameworks of adult learning, communication, and ambient teaching guided the approach, design, and interpretation of data for the study in the following ways. The adult learning concept of self-direction influenced the qualitative design using focus groups and guided the choice of questions that were to be used. Communication concepts were integrated into an instrument that I designed for the observations of preacher participants in the study. The concepts of ambient teaching concerning the characteristics and conditions that support the learning environment were used to guide the development of an instrument to assess the physical learning environments found in the churches involved in the study.

Operational Definitions

Ambient teaching: The use of the space and the characteristics and conditions of the space that enhance the message of the oral communication and support adult learning (Lynch, 2010).

Andragogy: "An organized and sustained effort to assist adults to learn in a way that enhances their capacity to function as self-directed learners" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 199).

Communication: The process by which thoughts, data, and feelings are shared by people (Hybels & Weaver, 2007).

Effectiveness: The measure by which the teacher nurtures perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991).

Immediacy: The verbal and nonverbal things “that allow a speaker to bond emotionally with the listener” (Olenowski, 2000, p. 11).

Preaching: The passionate explanation of the message of the Bible in practical terms for personal use (Furman, 1992).

Relevance: The quality of a lesson that describes whether or not the teacher connects the lesson to be learned with the real life situations of the students (Brookfield, 1990; Robles, 1998).

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope and Delimitations

Assumptions

1. The questions used in this study accurately captured the concepts necessary for understanding if effectiveness was achieved in the preaching identified.
2. Participants were candid and truthful in their responses.
3. The concepts of comprehension and challenge to change are terms that can be used to describe the effectiveness in sermons.
4. A sermon can change an adult listener’s behavior for the better.

Limitations

Limitations of this study included the following five points: First, the study was limited to a group of five preachers and nine of each of their listeners. Only consistent church-going adults and a small group of preachers were the focus for the study. Next, the meaning of effective was limited to the quality of a lesson which describes how well it is comprehended and whether it challenges the listener to change. I examined only the factors that contributed to meaningful communication and

predictable reaction. Third, the focus groups, interviews, and observations provided the sole data for the research. Some participants may not have been able to adequately verbalize their experience if the questions did not connect to their particular background and experience. Fourth, I only addressed techniques while not considering spiritual condition or maturity in the participants. The participants brought much more to the study than what was probed, leaving some contributing factors neglected. The fifth limitation in this study was the research design. I focused on the subjective and interpretive experiences of participants. The purposeful discovery of the subjective experiences of participants means the findings could be subject to other interpretations.

Delimitations

There were three delimitations for the study. The number of respondents was 45 adult church-goers in five geographically distinct areas. In addition, five pastors representing several denominations were interviewed for a total of 45 respondents for the study. The scope of the study was narrowed by interviewing and observing only the five churches from five different denominations. A second delimitation was the limited amount of time spent in the interview and focus group process. The limited number of locations constituted the third delimitation. I observed only one worship service at each church. It was further delimited by restricting the time of interviews and focus groups to only 60 minutes.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Barna (2002) reported that only half of sermons delivered in churches were effective in challenging churchgoers to change. This study was significant for two reasons: (a) I filled a gap in

the scholarly literature on effective preaching by determining the elements of adult learning practice and principles that constitute an effective sermon, and (b) positive social change may be achievable as a result of this study. Churchgoers might have their values challenged in educational opportunities where equality, justice, democracy, and freedom are critically discussed along with consistency in living according to these principles.

Knowledge Generation

Updated research on effective preaching may give preachers a better understanding of the dynamics involved in educating, motivating, and transforming the thinking of others so as to affect change in their lives. Preachers may discover that there is a need for change in their sermon preparation and delivery (Knowles, 1980). Preachers can draw upon seminaries, seminars, and professional publications to support and inform curriculum that can be used to educate aspiring religious communicators. Hopefully, it will encourage them to embrace that truth by itself may not always persuade and that preachers are called to be more than “mere pulpit disc jockeys playing God’s records” (Morgan, 2002, p. 4).

Social Change

The beneficiaries of the study are those who find themselves in places of worship where effective preaching is practiced. It is also hoped that churchgoers will no longer simply attend religious services and receive a spiritual buzz, but have their values challenged and evaluated to assess their consistency in living according to them (Knowles, 1984). It is also hoped that the churchgoers in congregations where effective preaching is practiced will be challenged by participation in educational opportunities where equality, justice, democracy,

and freedom are critically discussed (Mezirow, 1991). The results of this study may be a resource other congregants can use for choosing a church or teacher that will meet their needs most (Knowles, 1980).

I assumed that if speakers understand the key elements and practices that make up effective sermons, they may change the way they lecture and potentially stimulate a life change in their listeners (Mezirow, 1991). While I focused on a religious or faith-based topic, the emphasis was on the skills and characteristics that can be employed in order to achieve desired results in lecture as well as preaching (Brookfield, 1987; Merriam, 1991).

SUMMARY

In Section 1, I introduced the research problem which focuses on the experience of church-going adults while listening to a preacher's sermons. The purpose of the study was to explore the experience of listeners of sermons in an attempt to discover concepts relating to adult learning or communication that exist in and thus may increase the effectiveness of sermons. The theoretical and conceptual framework that guided the study were drawn from the adult learning perspectives of Knowles (1980), Mezirow (1991), and Wertheim (2000). In Section 2 the literature review is presented as a means to support the research purpose, methodology, and questions. The section also includes an analysis of the literature related to the methodology for this study. The review of literature provides an analysis of adult learning concepts as well as an exploration into the role of relevancy and immediacy in aiding the listener to gain a deeper level of meaning (Daggett, 2005; Luntz, 2007; Mezirow, 1991). In Section 3, I present the justification for the study using a qualitative design. I also present details concerning the

population, how the interviews were administered, and the data analysis. The findings are presented by themes and subthemes in Section 4 and the interpretation of the findings as well as conclusions and recommendations are found in Section 5.

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