Imitative Practice and Learning to Preach
By Allan Demond, June 2007
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There has long been a tension between Jerusalem and Athens – the spiritual and the technical – when discussing how we ought to teach preaching.¹ It is often debated, how much we should attend to the science of rhetoric and the wisdom of technique on the one hand, and to matters of theology and the dynamic presence of God in our preaching on the other hand. A sort of “truce” was reached by St. Augustine in his preaching “textbook”, De Doctrina Christiana where he argued the common sense view that both are important and need to coexist in our teaching practice in a sort of creative tension.² But that balance is not easily sustained. We see the pendulum swinging one way in the late medieval period and then the other through the Reformation era and debates concerning where the mid-point actually is continue to this day.³ This tension is important and rightly occupies a significant place in the homiletic literature. However, I have become increasingly interested in another, less discussed but in my view equally important, aspect of our teaching.

I would like to draw attention to a third “strand” of homiletic educational activity – namely imitative practice – which emerges when we attend more directly to the phenomenon of learning to preach. When preachers are asked “How did you learn to preach?” they invariably answer with names and stories of mentors, models and coaches. Consider the recent research of Ronald Allen (and the Listening to Listeners research team) who, having interviewed thirty-two ministers from twenty-eight Protestant Churches in the mid-western USA, writes:

As a teacher of preaching in a graduate theological school, I expected these pastors to speak in rapturous tones of their work in seminary. However, most ministers in this group say they catch a vision for how to preach primarily by listening to other preachers and that they develop as preachers by preaching in congregations and reflecting on their preaching … When asked how they learned to preach, most interviewees first say that they did so by listening to other preachers.⁴

1. Lucy Lind Hogan quotes Tertullian’s famous statement “What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens?” and sets out a succinct and helpful summary of this tension in, Graceful Speech: An Invitation to Preaching (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007).
What Allen reports is no surprise really. Imitative learning has been central to speech communication practice since the sophists but it has not always been regarded as worthy of serious attention by the academy. “Imitation” has been criticised and there are valid dangers that need to be considered if this strand of learning is to be taken seriously. But, if these pitfalls can be negotiated, I contend that there is much of worth in this third strand of homiletic educational practice – much that is at present under-realised, in the literature at least, and perhaps also in our teaching practice.

Imitative Practice in Homiletic Education

There is nothing new about “imitation” as a mode of learning. Sophists such as Antiphon, Gorgias and Isocrates taught their students with little attention to conceptualised rhetorical systems. Students learned by “listening to the sophist speak or read versions of his speeches, followed by the memorization or imitation of these works as models”. In the New Testament the discipleship model of formation is suggestive, if not conclusive, of this strand of learning in the lives of the Twelve and for Timothy and Titus under Paul.

Augustine speaks of imitative practice in favorable terms. He raises practical cautions and privileges wisdom over imitation – “eloquent speakers give pleasure, wise ones salvation” but he is clearly convinced of the educational importance of the imitative strand of learning.

Infants acquire speech purely by assimilating the words and phrases of those who speak to them; so why should the eloquent not be able to acquire their eloquence not through the traditional teaching but by reading and listening to the speeches of the eloquent and by imitating them within the limits of their ability? Isn’t this precisely what we see in practice? We know that there are very many speakers with no knowledge of rhetorical rules who are more eloquent than the many who have learnt them; but no-one who has not read or listened to the disputations or addresses of good speakers is eloquent at all.

Luther’s “table teaching”, Zwingli’s “prophesying groups”, Charles Simeon’s “sermon parties” and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s “preacher’s seminary” at Finkenwalde are all novel learning-teaching contexts with explicit homiletic educational intentions which are suggestive of imitative practice.

6. Augustine, DDC, 4.23.
Some contemporary homiletic educators have also named the potential of imitative practice. Otis Carl Edwards and David J. Schlafer, two American Catholic homileticians, tell of their experience teaching preaching in short conferences. They compare learning to preach with learning to swim and note the importance of “embodied knowing” – “mental memory must somehow be translated in muscle memory”. Patricia Hunt narrates her experience teaching preaching at Mary Baldwin College, a centre for women’s learning in a paper entitled “Learning to Preach is Like Learning to Sing the Blues”. She advocates finding a model that you resonate with as a learner and then engaging in a threefold process of immersion, imitation and innovation. Calvin Pearson, of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, suggests that teachers of preaching should engage the insights of those who teach composition rhetoric and notes their dependence on classical imitative pedagogy. I have taken up the theme of imitation elsewhere and reflected on the epistemological presuppositions that undergird our homiletic educational practice.

Criticisms and Dangers of Imitative Practice

Not everyone in the homiletic family is convinced of the wisdom of imitation. Some see its weaknesses and sound a caution. No less an authority than Fred Craddock says:

Let us keep in mind that learning does not mean imitating. Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but it produces caricatures in the pulpit. We learn from preachers poor, fair, good, and excellent, but not one of them is to be copied. David cannot fight in Saul’s armor.

Clearly Craddock is concerned about a dysfunctional mode of practice that leads not to dynamic learning but to bad habits and poor preaching. If we are to consider the potential of this strand of learning for our teaching of preachers we need first to address such valid criticism.

Criticism of imitative practice tends to take two primary forms which I will call “mere” and “little”. Let us consider these in turn.

“Mere Imitation”. This is usually spoken as a dismissal of what is taken to be weak and unreflective mimicry – “just copying” or “aping”. Such a criticism may be valid if a student is not serious about learning, makes light of imitative practice, does not understand what is expected and how it can serve his or her homiletic learning, or shows no capacity to find an independent preaching “voice”. The criticism may also hold if the activity is seen as a shortcut or a way to avoid independent professional work. When imitation becomes plagiaristic it must be censured (see below).

But the charge is not always valid. Not all imitative practice is unreflective, childish, or lacking in intellectual rigour. The blanket dismissal of “imitation” frequently assumes an epistemology of practice that favours technical modes of knowing and assumes that students can “think” their way to effective practice. This is suggested, for example, in the words of John McClure who asks of a student: “Should she learn to imitate a popular homiletician or preacher? Or shall I teach her to think for herself and to become a practical theologian of the pulpit ministry so that she can create her own homiletical strategy from the inside out?”

The approach suggested by McClure’s words does not take seriously the embodiment of practical knowledge – that is, the extent to which preachers know more than they can say because much of their genius they “know-in-action” – and thus it can tend to undervalue the need to learn by doing.

“Little Imitations”. Students of Charles Spurgeon were sometimes derided by the label “little Spurgeons” as were the students of Berthold and Aquinas in the middle ages, Charles Simeon in the late 1700’s and early 1800’s and Harry Emerson Fosdick in the early 1900’s. The practice continues today. It is usually intended to belittle either the student or the teacher (or both) and is most often spoken by those outside the particular community which values the modelling contribution of the name in question. Such criticism may be valid when a student displays uncritical acceptance of a teacher’s particular voice and wears it like clothing that does not fit (or Saul’s armour to repeat Craddock’s image), when imitative practice reproduces peculiarities of personality rather than effective preaching, or when the students consistently fall far short of the mark. The term can of course be used affectionately, but we are only concerned here with the challenges to imitative practice.


15. The adult education theorist Donald Schön addresses this issue pointedly and offers what he calls a “new epistemology of practice” for professional artistry. His work can be seen to rehabilitate the imitative strand of learning. Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Towards a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987).
Again, like the charge “mere”, the characterisation “little imitation” is not always valid. Remembering that all homiletic evaluation is situated – sermons are judged “good” or “not good” by a particular group of people with particular views and communally formed homiletic value systems – a negative judgement concerning a particular emerging preacher, a “little Spurgeon” or a “little Fosdick”, may actually be a critique of the entire Spurgeon/Fosdick community and value system. The student is not being evaluated against the norms of the community that have formed her or him, but against the framework of another community altogether – that of the critic who would like the student to be something different. Sometimes the charge, while levelled against imitative practice, is actually a critique of a theological or cultural point of view, and ironically becomes an argument in favour of imitative practice, inasmuch as the student is seen to have successfully learned – albeit the wrong thing in the mind of the critic.

We need also to consider dangers of imitative practice and to define boundaries. Two concerns in particular are named here, plagiarism and ego.

*Plagiarism* is always wrong. But knowing when you are doing it is not always a straightforward matter. From the word’s Latin root, *plagiare* meaning to kidnap, we get the sense of what is at stake. To take someone else’s words, ideas, creative genius or intellectual property and hold it up as your own is unacceptable. Imitative practice as an educational activity must remain intensely aware of this boundary and the practical challenge of honouring it.

*Ego*. The “I” of the sermon, to use Richard Thulin’s wonderful play on words, needs always to be negotiated in relation to sermonic purpose, healthy self-disclosure and the tolerance levels of the listeners in a particular community. When it comes to teaching, this same tension needs to

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16. Robert Reid explores the issues related to cultural context and homiletic voice in *The Four Voices of Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006).


be negotiated in relation to models for imitative practice. Elevating a person to the status of an “example of good practice” can have varied negative effects, first for those elevated in this way and second for those attempting to imitate excellence. With respect to the model-preacher, neither a false humility which refuses to disclose practice in a way that students can “see” what is happening, nor a self-assured bravado which projects itself as better than others, will serve students’ interests. A sober judgement of self is essential for model-preachers. For the student-preacher, the negotiation of self-identity in the context of imitating another will require seasons of deferred judgement and intentional “submission” in the process of learning, followed by seasons of reflection, critique and personal innovation. The goal of imitative learning is to change one’s self, not to lose one’s self. Effective imitative practice will require that both teachers and students negotiate the “I” of their educational activity in very particular ways.\(^20\)

**Healthy Imitative Practice**

If imitative practice is to avoid the charge of being “mere imitation” or of creating “little imitations” and to rise above the dangers or “plagiarism” and a misappropriation of the “ego”, at least four conditions must be achieved. Imitative practice must be intentional, reflective, critical and undertaken in service to a worthy purpose. To be sure, imitation can produce positive learning without these conditions as is seen in the case of infants and most forms of pre-reflective learning. But our role as educators is to manipulate the environment in order to increase the likelihood of a good result and these are key contributing factors, the absence of which frequently leads to outcomes worthy of the criticisms discussed above.

For imitation to be *intentional* there must be an exercise of the will. When students attend to the particular embodied preaching of a model and choose to “try-on” something of what they experience, they are being intentional. When they further attend to what they themselves are making of this “trial” they become *reflective* in a potentially productive way. Such reflection can be fostered with practical strategies such as journalling and coaching. The more we are able to “look” at what we are doing and “talk” about it in context, the more value we will achieve from our imitative practice. As we have already noted, imitating requires that a student identify with a model and suspend critical judgement, but if the insights of imitative practice are to be integrated into a student’s understanding in a healthy fashion this must be a temporary posture. At some point the student will be served by taking a *critical* look at the results of her or his imitative practice and assessing issues of its usefulness, contextual dependence, power

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20. Donald Schön discusses at some length the challenges of negotiating this relationship in a professional learning context and identifies learning binds and resources for addressing them. Schön, *Educating*, 119-156.
assumptions, and over all “fit” to his or her emerging voice. This critical work assumes a sort of “dance” between identity with a model and differentiation from that model as learning proceeds. A student’s inability to negotiate these transactions will diminish the value of imitative learning. On the other hand, a coach’s ability to assist the student in doing so will increase the power of imitative learning. Finally, such imitative practice needs always to be in service to a worthy purpose. This was Aristotle’s great challenge to the sophists of the classical period who purportedly lost sight of their noble purpose and chased profit while ignoring ethics. So serious was their failure that the very word, sophist, has come into the English language as a term of derision. Homiletic imitative practice must understand its purpose in terms of the high calling to preach Christ and to constantly improve the preacher’s capacity to declare the gospel, not for the sake of looking and sounding better on the platform. As Augustine reminds us:

The Speaker who is awash with the kind of eloquence that is not wise is particularly dangerous because audiences actually enjoy listening to such a person on matters of no value to them, and reckon that somebody who is heard to speak eloquently must also be speaking the truth.

Opportunities and Innovations with Imitative Practice

Imitative learning does not replace the need for elementary conceptualisation. Quintilian, the Latin rhetorician who champions imitative practice more than most, argues that students still need some basics, or what might be called “school book” knowledge, in order to get started. But the invitation of this paper is that we might consider more overtly the place of imitative practice in the “next steps” of our homiletic educational efforts. As it would appear that students learn by watching, listening, doing, trialling and generally imitating what they experience as “good preaching” in the embodied practice of presumed models, it makes sense that we should exploit this phenomenon.

In the last section of this paper therefore, I set out tentatively and with an invitation for dialogue, some practical considerations. First, I have innovated eight categories of reflective practice as a kind of vocabulary for naming and exploring what might be happening in this area. Second, I advance a suggestion for a two-fold homiletic reflective practicum (preparation and practice).

22. See Aristotle’s treatise “On Sophistical Refutations”.
23. Augustine, DDC, 4.17.
24. Quintilian’s Institution Oratoria is viewed by many as the best Latin treatise on rhetoric. It was published at the end of the first or the beginning of the second century CE. He provides explicit guidelines on the use of imitation as pedagogy for rhetoric (book 10, chapter 2). Quintilian The Instituio Oratoria, trans. Butler, H. E., Loeb Classical Library (London: W. Heinemann, 1961).
presentation) that would provide a context for teaching preaching with attention to aspects of imitative practice as discussed here.

**Types of Imitative Practice**

George Kennedy, in his authoritative account of Classical Rhetoric, notes that the early sophists employed “play” in their pedagogy. As we come to consider the practical business of asking students to “imitate”, it may be helpful to keep this notion in mind. The list set out below does not claim to be exhaustive and the categories are non-linear and sometimes overlapping.

1. **Naïve Imitation.** Imitative practice is a natural behaviour and often precedes any intentional attempt to learn a particular skill. People who want to learn how to preach often have tacit knowledge which is the result of pre-reflective imitation. This can be both positive and negative and in a formal learning context an effort to become aware of these formative influences will serve a student well. Naïve imitation can also involve unintended behaviours and patterns gathered up in the course of a preaching ministry of which the preacher is not fully aware. The agenda in an educational context is to give students an understanding of the dynamics of naïve imitation and to assist them in becoming more consistently intentional and reflective in their imitative practice.

2. **Manuscript Imitation.** The most available form of exemplar is the written sermon. These can be used to learn how to preach in a variety of ways. They can serve as case studies, provide material for an exploration of the literary aspects of sermon preparation and suggest material for trial structures, moves and images. This type of imitative practice is closest to some current approaches in literary studies. Manuscript imitation in particular raises the issue of plagiarism as discussed above.

3. **Open Practice Imitation.** At the preparation end of preaching there is an opportunity for imitative practice if an experienced preacher invites a student preacher into his or her preparation activity. The coaching-preacher and the student-preacher might both prepare sermons on the same text and this could involve several sessions of joint sermon preparation with the experienced preacher making a concerted effort to disclose what he or she is experiencing and thinking along the way. Open practice imitation is not limited to preparation and can be usefully engaged following a sermon that the coaching preacher has presented. However, the earlier the student is welcomed into the process the greater the value from the exercise. If the coaching-preacher maintains a homiletic-journal and opens

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this to the student the value of the exercise is enhanced significantly. The risks are high and the activity may start off slowly, but it will yield unique material for reflection and imitation.

4. **Experimental Imitation.** Some imitation serves knowing-how in a more experimental and even “playful” way. Repeating paragraphs from an audio recording of Winston Churchill or Martin Luther King and using their cadence, turn of phrase and vocal accent can help an emerging preacher “feel” the power of these forms of speaking. The goal is not to take these moments into the pulpit but to learn about words, phrases, voice, and so on. In a broad sense, all imitative practice is experiment.

5. The **Thickness of Imitation.** Anthropology, the social sciences and even literary criticism use the term a “thick description” to denote an explanation of human behaviour which entails sufficient information about context to make the behaviour meaningful to an external observer. I borrow the word “thick” to suggest a continuum of imitative practice that moves toward a greater degree of identity and embodiment of what is seen in the practice of a model preacher. “Thick” imitation aims to step more fully into the experience of the one being imitated. So, for example, an episode of experimental imitation (discussed above) might be very thick while an episode of frame imitation (discussed below) might imitate an aspect of sermon structure in a way that is not thick at all.

6. **Frame Imitation.** With respect to professional practice Donald Schön argues that professionals think in action by using resources from their repertoire (usually tacit) to reframe indeterminate problems and effectively create a version of the problem that they can solve. The virtuosity of a practitioner arises from her ability to retain a significant array of useful resources in her repertoire and to use these to consistently reframe practical problems successfully. Frame imitation involves the analysis of such successful “experiments” and the appropriation of the frames employed. This type of imitation is suggested in the work of homiletics teacher Andrew Blackwood who wrote several books in the 1940’s and 50’s advocating the case study method and providing resources for what he called homiletic “laboratory work”. While the content of his books is dated, the concept of providing student-preachers with prototype sermon material from which they can mine resources (frames) for new sermon experiments (re-framing) is worthy of consideration. The great diversity of recorded media and its expanding availability through web access opens up new avenues

for exploration.

7. **Character Imitation.** While our focus is the narrow concern of imitative practice in preaching the whole of life is bound up in “speaking of God”. The role of “ethos” has been recognised and debated since Aristotle. Sometimes explicitly, but more often unintentionally, issues of character and ethics will become the focus of imitative practice. Here the imitative strand of learning overlaps with the spiritual strand and the desire to foster spiritual formation.²⁷

8. **Self Imitation.** When a preacher, having “tried out” a move, idea or experience, senses that it worked, he or she will imitate that moment of practice in an attempt to “feel” the success again. Such self imitation leads to the building of a repertoire of strategies, many of which become tacit.

We now turn to a consideration of the practicum as a potential setting to aid homiletic learning. This is not a setting in which our primary aim is to apply the technical insight handed down from the university researchers, but a context in which we attempt to explore together – as an accomplished preacher with emerging preachers – what it is to know-in-action. Learning to preach will involve aspects of the technical and spiritual strands, but the practicum is particularly well situated to exploit the potential of the imitative strand of learning.

**Practicum-I and Practicum-II**

It would seem that learning to preach could benefit from two types of practicum experience, one focused on preparation and the other on presentation. I will call these *Practicum-I* and *Practicum-II*. While the comments below envision a formal educational setting this is not mandatory and a collegial context involving mutually supportive homiletic friends could engage the same insights.

*Practicum-I* relates to sermon preparation. The contours of such a practicum could involve something like the following. The student-preachers (up to three?) and a coaching-preacher would decide to preach in their respective churches (chapels, synagogues, etc.) from the same text of Scripture. Several pages of reading would be assigned from appropriate commentaries and the sermons of others. The group would meet together for two or three, two hour blocks of time in which they would work on their sermons. The time would involve various exercises such

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as: prayer, conversation on the texts and themes, modelling (by the coach), trialling ideas, mini-presentation episodes, critiquing one another, etc. The coach would organise the time together, providing for: some structured activities, free dialogue time, self-disclosure as a “model preacher” (using his or her homiletic journal), and one-on-one spots with the coach – much as a vocal coach might organise her time with pupils, or a master architect might run a studio class for advanced architectural studies. In organising a Practicum-I the coach would attend to the various types of imitative practice discussed above and employ these liberally, noting that he or she is engaged in open practice imitation throughout the exercise. A homiletics course might involve three or four such Practicum-I cycles over a period of months or even years and would likely include follow-up Practicum-II sessions as well.

Practicum-II relates to sermon presentation. We are already familiar, in most homiletics classrooms, with a version of the practicum as a post-presentation activity. A class of students view an in-class sermon (or a videotaped homily), fill out an evaluation form, and offer an analysis variously orchestrated by the teacher. But the processes envisioned here would be somewhat refocused. There would be less concern with the correct “application” of theories learned in advance, and more reflective engagement with the action of preaching itself. The coaching-preacher’s sermon presentations would also be viewed by the group and preaching colleagues would reflect together on the teacher’s preaching as well as their own. Instead of preaching complete sermons, a Practicum-II may involve micro-sermons of as little as three minutes which would allow student and coach to manipulate the experience for closer exploration. This would be particularly important with beginning preachers. Episodes of sermonic action could be repeated and various types of imitative practice – manuscript imitation, experimental imitation, frame imitation – could be used.

As to location, this may vary. Practicum-I may call for new ways of framing our homiletic educational program such as identifying and resourcing “teaching churches” that could be accountable partners in the education process. Some elements of a Practicum-II involving a small group of participants can be undertaken in a normal university classroom – slightly reconfigured. This may serve three minute micro-sermons and experimental imitation very well.

Other aspects would be better explored in a chapel where the dynamics match a church setting. Practicum-II activity can also be moved to a parish setting.

The proposal for two practicum elements emerges from the discussion above. If we do in fact learn by watching and doing, then it makes sense to give students an “inside” look at the whole process and to provide them with more opportunities to “do” preaching in environments conducive to their success. If this imitative aspect of how students learn is ignored in our attempts to craft teaching strategies, the education process may be truncated. On the one hand, when the homiletics classroom swings towards Athens (technical learning) we are likely to use the practicum to critique our students’ ability to apply techniques we have taught them and we may overlook the rich opportunities to explore what we know-in-action but cannot conceptualise for our students. On the other hand, when the pendulum swings towards Jerusalem (spiritual learning) we are likely to use the practicum to critique our students’ use of Scripture and approaches to presenting the Christian gospel and we may attribute too much to the work of the Spirit, simply because there are many things we cannot explain to ourselves. Imitative practice with its focus on “know-in-action” suggests additional opportunities and challenges for the responsible homiletic educators.

Practicum learning by definition will always grapple with the concern voiced by Fred Craddock, that “there is a quality of non-seriousness, of not being the real thing, in rehearsals, and this includes homiletics classes, which limits the learning and invites postponement of the thoroughness appropriate to ministry”.29 The goal is to establish a “virtual world” that will aid learning and to do the best we can given these limitations. What is proposed here may seem to place the coach in an exceptionally vulnerable position and appear overly intrusive for students, but Donald Schön, for one, would suggest that this is the nature of effective practicum learning.

When I think about how I learned to preach I think of Bob, Andrew, Ilsa and others. I remember classes and I can recall salient advice from sage professors, but I have the deep sense that I learned most of what I “know” by watching and doing – by imitative practice. The invitation of this paper is that we, as homileticians, give more studied attention to what this imitative phenomenon might mean for our educational practice.

allan.demond@newhope.net.au

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