

# Vella's Contributions to a Learning-Centered Homiletic

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Recent scholarship from Homileticians Thomas Long, Leanora Tubbs Tisdale, Scott Gibson, David Lose, David Ward, and Marianne Gaarden focuses on teaching preaching as a Christian practice using a learning-centered pedagogy.<sup>1</sup> While commending an understanding of preaching as a Christian practice with an intrinsic learning-centered pedagogy, these scholars focus solely upon the implications of such an understanding in relation to the learning and teaching of preaching in the classroom. Although admittedly not the focus, what is missing from their analysis is how reframing preaching in this manner affects the way that one preaches itself. The critical examination of Vella's learning-centered Dialogue Education design process, principles, and practices uncover key pedagogical, epistemological, and theological characteristics that can contribute to developing a learning-centered homiletic. These characteristics also demonstrate how Vella's ideas correspond to a practice-based worldview. If one understands preaching as a Christian practice with an inherent epistemology that recognizes the construction of meaning and knowledge within social practices, then how one preaches should center upon a corresponding pedagogy.

## Pedagogical Characteristics of Dialogue Education

There are three major pedagogical characteristics from Vella's Dialogue Education that can inform a learning-centered homiletic. The first is the focus on the students as the *active decision-makers during* the learning event. Pedagogically, learning-centered teaching focuses on what will occur during the course. The teacher, informed by interaction with the students, and stakeholders of the course, designs the interaction by asking themselves, "How will the participants actively engage the content during the time together?" and "How does the teaching design hold the teacher and participants accountable to each other as subjects of learning?" The teacher's role, therefore, is to design a process of content engagement for the students. Therefore, most of the work of the teacher occurs before the course. During the course, it is time for the learners to work with the new material, contextualize, and engage critically in dialogue with the resulting ideas, skills, and attitudes that emerge.

Pedagogically, the goal of teaching shifts in Vella's process from the *quantity of content* communicated by the teacher to the *quality of content engagement* by the students enabled by the learning tasks. The action during a learning event is the action of the learners; the teacher designs for praxis, which includes reflection and action, during the learning event. This

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas G. Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, eds., *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy*, Kindle ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008). Scott M. Gibson, ed., *Training Preachers: A Guide to Teaching Homiletics* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019). David J. Lose, "Preaching as Conversation," in *Under the Oak Tree: The Church as Community of Conversation in a Conflicted and Pluralistic World*, ed. Ronald J. Allen, John S. McClure, and O. Wesley Allen Jr. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013). David B. Ward, "Our Lives as Well: Teaching Preaching as a Formative Christian Practice" (PhD Dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 2012). Marianne Gaarden, *The Third Room of Preaching: The Sermon, the Listener, and the Creation of Meaning* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).

pedagogical shift corresponds with the epistemological perspective (see further below) evident in Vella's Dialogue Education that one constructs knowledge. The shift highlights the difference between "knowing more" and "seeing differently," which means, as Taylor and Marienau articulate, "Rather than acquiring new information, one's intention is toward constructing meaning."<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Vella stresses that one must design learning tasks that incorporate ideas, feelings, and actions. Learning is not only rational but connected to emotion. How one feels during a learning event, perceptions about the content and the situation all affect learning.

When developing a learning-centered homiletic, the application of this characteristic of content engagement from Vella's approach shifts the sermon focus. The sermon becomes a process the preacher develops by which the congregation engages new content. Content engagement means that people do something with the content to make it their own at that moment. Participants then contribute to a process of communal dialogue, sharing what they are learning, questioning their thoughts and the thoughts of others, and forming theological meaning and understanding that they can live practically.<sup>3</sup> The sermon moves from focusing on what the preacher says, to the congregation's work as they participate in a process of reflection and action with God and others.

The second major pedagogical characteristic is that *context* plays a crucial role in meaning development.<sup>4</sup> Pedagogically, meaningfulness is the driver of engagement. One learns an idea, skill, or attitude because it has a purpose in life. This means that Dialogue Education is not about the transfer or memorization of content detached from contextual understanding. Dialogue Education's goal is to empower participant action via learning tasks that help apply the new content. The desire pedagogically is that such action will enable participants to make the content their own and contextualize meaning. Therefore, a significant role for the teacher is to listen to the participants and challenge them to think critically, and give reasons for how they understand and use new knowledge. To fulfill this role, the teacher asks open questions.

Again, the students are the decision-makers of their learning. The response(ability) of the student is to connect new content with their experience, critique, discuss, apply, evaluate, and

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<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Taylor and Catherine Marienau, *Facilitating Learning with the Adult Brain in Mind: A Conceptual and Practical Guide* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), p. 292.

<sup>3</sup> Fiddes observes, "By being engaged in God's relational life we can discover what roles the community requires, how it needs us to 'represent' the signs of the Christ in order to be a community open to the needs of all. We can discover how to resist false expectations and type-casting, to reject the masks that others us to wear for their own satisfaction. That is, we shall find our vocation and true sense of responsibility, not in the flight of the soul as the 'alone to the alone', but in the community gathered in the 'name' of Christ." Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 2000), p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> Merriam and Bierema maintain, "Context is the social system that permeates the thinking and actions of all human beings within a particular situation such as a classroom, school, organization, community, or nation. Context may incorporate physical conditions, political conditions, economic conditions, power dynamics, and other influences that impact the people occupying that space. The physical or psychological context may also require its inhabitants to modify their thinking and action when they are occupying the space." Sharan B. Merriam and Laura L. Bierema, *Adult Learning: Linking Theory and Practice* (Somerset, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), p. 253.

make the content their own.<sup>5</sup> Making the material their own does not mean that the student never changes or grows or never challenges themselves to see how new ideas, skills, or attitudes find a place in their worldviews. It does imply that learning requires new connections between existing knowledge and new content. As Zull so succinctly articulates, “Learning is enhanced when we develop explanations and predictions from what we perceive and initiate actions to test those explanations. We must transform the information we receive into ideas, plans, and actions, making something personal and new from what came through our senses.”<sup>6</sup>

For the development of a learning-centered homiletic, this pedagogical focus on contextualization is imperative. The sermon becomes a time of joint exploration related to how one understands God, why one understands God in this way, and what such understandings mean practically for living out faith. This type of sermon design builds connections between theological ideas and concepts and the knowledge web within one’s mind. These connections are important because they help integrate theological knowledge with knowledge from other areas of life. Such integration leads to the ability to apply theological knowledge practically because, “How students organize knowledge influences how they learn and apply what they know.”<sup>7</sup> As Ambrose et al. explain,

People naturally make associations based on patterns they experience in the world. For instance, we tend to build associations between events that occur in temporal contiguity (for example, a causal relationship between flipping the switch and a light turning on), between ideas that share meaning (for example, a conceptual relationship between fairness and equality), and between objects that have perceptual similarities (for example, a category – member relationship between a ball and a globe).<sup>8</sup>

Again, the preacher’s role is to design a process that enables such an exploration that makes these types of connections during the sermon.<sup>9</sup> The people are not only to listen but also to participate through the learning tasks. The preacher also, via guided participation, challenges the congregation to think critically and voice their developing understandings and how they relate to everyday life.

The third major pedagogical characteristic that can inform a learning-centered homiletic is the *communal* nature of Vella’s process. Pedagogically, Vella’s design process is about mutual

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this paper I will employ the spelling of responsibility as response(ability) to draw attention to the point that the ability to respond, to God and others, is a humanizing ability. When this ability is taken away by the actions of others or by a pedagogy, then it is dehumanizing. To practice response(ability) is to be human and is crucial for learning. I build upon this idea theologically in Chapter 4 of my dissertation.

<sup>6</sup> James E. Zull, *From Brain to Mind: Using Neuroscience to Guide Change in Education* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2011), p. 129.

<sup>7</sup> Susan A. Ambrose et al., *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), p. 44.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor and Marienau note, “The fundamental process of learning at any age is based on creating and elaborating networks of neural associations.” Taylor and Marienau, *Facilitating Learning with the Adult Brain in Mind*, p. 41.

accountability and movement of information, ideas, and dialogue between all involved. The pedagogical focus must be on developing a process that asks the learners to use the new content in a way that is related to the context, but the process itself is communal. Learning-centered teaching involves more than just the teacher's voice; one lives, learns, and develops as a human in community.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the process insists on multidirectional activity and dialogue between people related to the new content.

Although it is an individual response(ability) and personal effort to make learning one's own, Educationalist Joel Michael highlights that research on learning points to the fact that "individuals are likely to learn more when they learn with others than when they learn alone."<sup>11</sup> He details, "It is worth noting that there are many factors in a cooperative learning environment, whatever its specific format, that are thought to contribute to the success achieved. One of these is clearly the requirement that participants talk to one another, articulating their understanding of the subject matter, and asking and answering questions."<sup>12</sup> Pedagogically, this means that the teacher is responsible for creating a learning environment in which such an interaction can occur. Therefore, Vella starts her seven steps of design by focusing on who the learners are, why they are in the course, and what they hope to accomplish. This information informs the structure of the course and the learning tasks. The structure also develops clear accountability and sets the expectations via the learning tasks for how the students are to act and engage with each other. Clear expectations and structure create the feeling of safety. Pedagogically, safety sets the ambiance for collaborative learning.

The communal nature of Vella's process requires one to evaluate and question how individualistic the practice of preaching is. A learning-centered homiletic must consider pedagogical strategies that involve both individual and communal interaction. Vella's seven steps of design and twelve principles and practices of Dialogue Education, although not intended for preaching, give a basis for developing a homiletic that considers and includes multiple voices. The process involves these voices from the beginning, designs learning tasks for their communal interaction, and asks for the participants to express the implications for the new learning that is developing for their lives.<sup>13</sup> A learning-centered homiletic invites the

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<sup>10</sup> Jenny Leach and Bob Moon argue, "A social view of learning recognises that learning is ongoing in every aspect of our lives. It takes a broader view of learners' trajectories through the world – their sense of self, where they are coming from, where they think they are going, what sort of person they want to be." Jenny Leach and Bob Moon, *The Power of Pedagogy* (London: Sage, 2008), p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Joel Michael, "Where's the Evidence that Active Learning Works?," *Advances in Physiology Education* 30, no. 4 (2006): p. 161, <https://journals.physiology.org/doi/abs/10.1152/advan.00053.2006>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>13</sup> This process enables the congregation to practice the paradigm of practical theology which Richard Osmer maintains, "is an alternative to other paradigms that are very much alive in the church today. I am thinking particularly of the paradigms of applied dogmatics found in Protestant orthodoxy and applied Scripture found in contemporary Christian fundamentalism. Both of these paradigms work with similar understandings of applied theology. Application involves the movement from dogmatic or biblical norms to present experience and practice in a one-way fashion. In sharp contrast, the paradigm of reflective practice makes room for reflection on experience and practice and for dialogue with the social sciences as it engages the

congregation and all who are present to participate in the creation of theological meaning-making, and its expression, in the moment of the sermon itself.

## Epistemological Characteristics of Dialogue Education

Vella's ideas and process hold epistemological characteristics that emulate a holistic understanding of knowledge development, meaning that knowing is rational, emotive, and connected to life's actions.<sup>14</sup> First, Vella maintains that both the teacher and the students construct meaning and knowledge.<sup>15</sup> The learning event itself is both communal and formative as everyone actively engages with ideas, skills, and attitudes.<sup>16</sup> Knowledge is not something that is disconnected and outside of human action. Knowledge development connects intrinsically to relational contextual action.<sup>17</sup>

This epistemological perspective compels a move away from understanding knowledge solely as a collection of mental possessions detached from life. If knowledge is only information, statements, proofs, and facts, then excluded from knowledge are things like values, beliefs, art, faith, wisdom, discernment, emotion, and practical understandings.<sup>18</sup> This dualistic understanding of knowing can lead to a dualistic conception of personhood where what is real

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normative resources of the Christian faith." Richard R. Osmer, "Practical Theology: A Current International Perspective," *HTS Theological Studies* 67, no. 2 (2011): p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy set the Theological Agenda* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2007), p. 88; Willard van Orman Quine and J. S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief* (New York: Random House, 1978).

<sup>15</sup> Jane Vella, *On Teaching and Learning: Putting the Principles and Practices of Dialogue Education into Action* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2008), p. xxi.

<sup>16</sup> Nancey Murphy and James McClendon posit, "In short, language and the search for knowledge are practices, dependent upon tradition – they are communal achievements." Nancey Murphy and James McClendon Jr., "Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies," *Modern Theology* 5 (1989): p. 205.

<sup>17</sup> Leach and Moon observe, "By emphasising the interaction between the learner and the activity, the focus moves away from the teacher and the content to learning mechanisms and learners' cognitive processes. From a constructivist perspective, teachers need to adopt the role of facilitator, with the critical goal being to support learners in becoming effective thinkers. Rather than assuming a didactic approach which aims to cover selected subject matter, the teacher as facilitator helps learners to reach the level of understanding. This dramatic change of role implies a totally different set of skills: from the teacher telling, to the facilitator asking; from the teacher lecturing from the front, to the facilitator supporting from the back; from the teacher giving answers according to a set curriculum, to the facilitator providing guidelines and creating activities designed to support and challenge learners' thinking and to arrive at their own conclusions." Leach and Moon, *The Power of Pedagogy*, p. 58. Paavola and Hakkarainen call for a learning-centered approach which they call "triological", they state "that beyond metaphors, according to which learning is a process of knowledge acquisition by individual learners (a "monological" approach) or participation to social interaction (a "dialogical" approach), one should distinguish a "triological" approach, i.e., learning as a process of knowledge creation which concentrates on mediated processes where common objects of activity are developed collaboratively." Sami Paavola and Kai Hakkarainen, "The Knowledge Creation Metaphor—An Emergent Epistemological Approach to Learning," *Science & Education* 14, no. 6 (2005): p. 535.

<sup>18</sup> Esther Lightcap Meek, *Loving to Know: Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), pp. 7–9.

is only one's mental and spiritual being and things associated with one's physical bodies are disconnected from being and knowing.<sup>19</sup> Ester Meek maintains,

Among Christian believers, as well as in the West in general, I think that the mind-body distinction is especially severe. We tend to hear the word, spiritual, and associate it immediately with "immaterial." We don't know what to do with our bodies, because we also associate the immaterial with what alone is of value. But everybody in general is inclined to think of their body as an object, something that we "have," rather than "are." The "real me," we can think, is not my body. And we can have little feel of our body's felt involvement in knowing.<sup>20</sup>

Nancey Murphy calls a non-dualistic understanding of personhood "nonreductive physicalism," in which mental and spiritual properties are attributed to the whole person and derive from the body's neurological functioning.<sup>21</sup> Zull affirms this perspective explaining,

In education, the brain perspective helps us realize once again that learning is not something directly transferred by instruction. Rather it is the brain's natural response to changes in signaling produced by experience. Educators who understand that firing of specific individual neurons is changed simply and directly by the firing of other neurons in a network, will realize that it is the experiences themselves that generate change.<sup>22</sup>

Zull is calling attention to the fact that physically, the brain's neurological network is one's web of knowledge. This web of knowledge is dynamic, flexible, and constantly changing based upon one's experience, which depends heavily on emotion.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, knowledge is continuously evolving and involves more than just rational thinking. Epistemologically one moves from understanding knowledge as rational, detached from emotion, to knowledge as connected to ideas, feelings, and actions.<sup>24</sup> Taylor and Marienau assert, "Without emotions, intelligence has no anchor. Without emotion, cognition has no grounding in values and social decision making is fatally flawed."<sup>25</sup> Vella's process intentionally enables the learner to reflect, analyze, develop ideas, skills, and attitudes by putting them into immediate practice. This practice should center upon who the learners are, what is important to them, and what is their context. Thus, there is a shift from understanding knowledge as given, transferred, and accumulated, to

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<sup>19</sup> Taylor and Marienau, *Facilitating Learning with the Adult Brain in Mind*, pp. 33–38; Paavola and Hakkarainen, "The Knowledge Creation Metaphor," pp. 538, 544, 546–547.

<sup>20</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, pp. 93, 150.

<sup>22</sup> Zull, *From Brain to Mind*, p. 195.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 186–189.

<sup>24</sup> It can also be an emotional decision to move toward rationality.

<sup>25</sup> Taylor and Marienau, *Facilitating Learning with the Adult Brain in Mind*, p. 56.

understanding knowledge as constructed, continuously developing, and joined to social interaction.<sup>26</sup>

Second, epistemologically, knowledge development is relational. For transformation to occur, one must reconstruct ideas, skills, and attitudes in one's context, take ownership of the new concept, and use it. The development of knowledge is a relational process based upon what is happening in one's life and with whom one is relating. Vella's use of dialogue in the learning tasks, the "word between us," means that what happens is not predictable. The learning that emerges in Dialogue Education is not given, transferred, or accumulated. It is constructed with others. This learning can, of course, thus even be deconstructive to existing ideas, skills, and attitudes. The relational aspect of Vella's process emphasizes that all learners are equal in their capacity of response to actively develop and use knowledge.<sup>27</sup>

The epistemological characteristics of Dialogue Education offer a holistic understanding of knowledge development to a learning-centered homiletic. The preacher must be aware of the characteristics and principles of such an epistemology so that the sermon process they design utilizes and incorporates them. How one understands knowledge and truth determines how one approaches the Bible, God, the community of Christ and determines one's theological method.<sup>28</sup> The holistic epistemology of Vella's process fits with a theological understanding and method centered pedagogically in the active participation of all those involved. Using this process, the preacher creates theological learning tasks strategically designed to fit the specific content for the week's sermon. Implementing Vella's learning task sequence with regard to the sermon, uses each participant's own experience, employs new information, skills, or ideas, asking the participants to do something with this new content. After that, participants continue the theological reflection and discuss how this new content has applicability in their lives individually and as a community.<sup>29</sup> Vella's Dialogue Education design enables the preacher to "mediate" the participants' communal engagement via an active theological process.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Marlene Scardamalia suggests that the challenge of this epistemological shift is "to engage students in the collaborative solution of knowledge problems, in such a way that responsibility for the success of the effort is shared by the students and teacher instead of being borne by the teacher alone." Marlene Scardamalia, "Collective Cognitive Responsibility for the Advancement of Knowledge," in *Liberal Education in a Knowledge Society*, ed. B. Smith (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2002), p. 75.

<sup>27</sup> Scardamalia calls this "Collective Cognitive Responsibility", and her explanation emphasizes the relational nature: "The members of an expert surgical team, for example, will ideally share responsibility not only for carrying out the surgical procedure; they also take collective responsibility for understanding what is happening, for staying cognitively on top of events as they unfold. In a well-functioning office, the staff will not only keep records and appointments in order and get required work out on time; they will also take responsibility for knowing what needs to be known and for insuring that others know what needs to be known. This is what is meant by collective cognitive responsibility. Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>28</sup> Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, p. 35. A. de Kock, "What About Learning in Practical Theological Studies? Toward More Conceptual Clarity," *Sage Open* 5, no. 2 (2015): p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> Jane Vella, *Taking Learning to Task: Creative Strategies for Teaching Adults*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), chap. 4.

<sup>30</sup> Mascolo writes, "Students cannot simply construct disciplinary knowledge through their own action without being informed by more expert others. This is because disciplinary knowledge is mediated knowledge. Language is the living and evolving repository of cultural, social and scientific meaning; it is the vehicle through which shared

## Theological Characteristics of Dialogue Education

The implicit theological characteristics of Vella's Dialogue Education can inform a learning-centered homiletic by leading to questions regarding the role of the preacher and the congregation during preaching. As we have seen, the teacher's role in learning-centered teaching is to design a process that enables the students to be the decision-makers of their learning.<sup>31</sup> The application of this principle to a learning-centered homiletic means that the preacher is responsible for helping the congregation engage in theological conversation that honors each participant's humanity and identity development.<sup>32</sup> Participants of learning-centered homiletic practice have theological agency.<sup>33</sup>

Contained theologically here is the idea that humans are decision-makers of their learning and life. Each person is responsible for their learning. Vella's process and principles assert that people matter. Everyone has meaning and can contribute meaningfully to the community. Theologically, there exists an expectation for the equality of response(ability). All humans can explore their relationship between God and others in this life and construct theological knowledge and meaning. To remove the opportunity for each person to struggle with new content, with how it connects to their history, context, and worldview, and to deny or inhibit decision-making as to how this will inform who they are and their actions going forward is to dehumanize. Vella sees the Holy Spirit actively engaged in the formation of people.<sup>34</sup> Humans can respond to God and others and be decision-makers. Every moment, therefore, is an opportunity for spiritual formation when humans practice being subjects of their own life and learning.

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knowledge is created, communicated and transformed. Disciplinary knowledge and skills are the results of long histories of collective cultural and scientific activity, the products of which have been deposited in the particular sign systems (words) that mediate disciplinary activity. Thus, mastering a discipline requires learning to understand and use the language and other semiotic means through which disciplinary knowledge and processes are defined, communicated and acted upon." Michael F. Mascolo, "Beyond Student-centered and Teacher-centered Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning as Guided Participation," *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2009): p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Paavola and Hakkarainen argue that different epistemological understandings lead to existential differences that must be recognized. Vella's assertion that learners are decision-makers closely reflects their call for an identity change in students: "In order to facilitate knowledge creation at school, a substantial change in students' identities must occur: it is essential to develop an identity of a prospective builder or creator of knowledge rather than just a 'student'." Paavola and Hakkarainen, "The Knowledge Creation Metaphor," p. 554.

<sup>32</sup> "Identities are a key means through which people care about and care for what is going on around them. They are important bases from which people create new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being." Dorothy Holland et al., *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Scardamalia expresses this as epistemic agency which she defines as, "Participants set forth their ideas and negotiate a fit between personal ideas and ideas of others, using contrasts to spark and sustain knowledge advancement rather than depending on others to chart that course for them." Scardamalia, "Collective Cognitive Responsibility," p. 75.

<sup>34</sup> Jane Vella, "A Spirited Epistemology: Honoring the Adult Learner as Subject," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 2000, no. 85 (2000): p. 7.



The application of Vella's principle of praxis to a learning-centered homiletic intends to allow this equality of response(ability) to happen.<sup>35</sup> Theologically, praxis moves one away from thinking about God as an object to be known in an information-like manner, directing preaching away from a teacher-centered pedagogy that attempts to transfer information. Praxis helps one move to a more collaborative relationship with God and others in which one engages God, the Bible, and one's theological tradition in individual and communal discernment. Implicit in this understanding is that knowledge and transformation are bound to social action and lived out in our practices. Truth is not impersonal and only information, but God who is in relationship within Godself and with humanity.<sup>36</sup> One constructs knowledge via reflection and action with God and others in the community. Learning is communal—dia-logos, "the word between us."<sup>37</sup>

Vella's process also contributes to a learning-centered homiletic by nurturing practical theological questions related to immediacy. Theologically, transformation occurs via engagement with God in a relationship and allows this relationship to inform one's reflection and action. Transformation is application. Vella's characteristics also posit that transformation is holistic; meaning it is both emotive and rational. Vella's progression can enable a process of practical theological reflection. It invites people to envision, assess, struggle with, and decide for their context how a relationship with God and others calls them to live. One searches less for answers about how to believe about God and more for meaning-making concerning how we understand God working and acting in our communities and lives and therefore, how we too are called to live.

### Connections to Schatzki's Practice-based Worldview

Bill Green argues that there are two "meta-traditions" within "practice knowledge traditions" these are "neo-Aristotelianism and post-Cartesianism." The neo-Aristotelianism tradition is represented by scholars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as Alasdair MacIntyre. The post-Cartesianism tradition is represented by scholars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most prominently, Theodore Schatzki.<sup>38</sup> Although the post-Cartesianism tradition is not exclusive of Aristotle or MacIntyre, this study focuses intentionally on Schatzki of the post-Cartesianism tradition because of the close connection between his practice theory and learning-centered pedagogy.<sup>39</sup> Schatzki's understanding of how social order exists and develops is critical for this study because it lends normative understanding for exploring how the transversal intersections of the practice of

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<sup>35</sup> Freire, commenting on praxis, asserts, "To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection." Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th-anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 88.

<sup>36</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, pp. 38–39.

<sup>37</sup> Jane Vella, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults*, Rev. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Bill Green, "Introduction: Understanding and Researching Professional Practice," in *Understanding and Researching Professional Practice*, ed. Bill Green (Rotterdam: Sense, 2009), pp. 4–5.

<sup>39</sup> See: Theodore R. Schatzki, "A Primer on Practices: Theory and Research," in *Practice-Based Education: Perspectives and Strategies*, ed. Joy Higgs et al. (Rotterdam: Sense, 2012), p 13; Davide Nicolini, *Practice Theory, Work, and Organization: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp 1–2, 23.

preaching, practical theology, and pedagogy, create and sustain social order among those who participate in these practices.

Vella's Dialogue Education connects to Theodore Schatzki's theory of practice in several ways. First, how Vella's Dialogue Education routinely, over time, arranges and implements its actions strategically demonstrates its pedagogical center. Vella's strategic arrangement for Dialogue Education places learning—formation and contextual meaning development—at the center of her process. As participants engage in Dialogue Education, they publicly demonstrate how their doings and sayings endeavor to reach their purpose. Meaning and formation occur through practice as the participants engage in the learning tasks.<sup>40</sup>

Vella's lived understanding of how learning occurs is through embodied actions guided by learning-centered practice. The importance of these actions is evident in the seven steps of design Who, What, Why, When, Where, What For, and How which require the teacher to involve all in the course to answer these questions. It also manifests in the principles and practices like the Learning Needs Resource Assessment which immediately invites the participants to inform the learning event. Vella's design process is about developing mutual accountability and movement of information via dialogue between all involved. Pedagogically, the practice of Dialogue Education here is about developing a process that asks participants to engage in new content actively. This content always connects to the *jointly* named purpose for the learning event. Epistemologically then, Vella, like Schatzki, advocates that learning and knowledge development are contextual and linked to social practice.<sup>41</sup>

Second, Vella's emphasis on learners as subjects of their learning also relates to Schatzki, who claims that "the status of human beings as 'subjects' (and 'agents') is bound to practices."<sup>42</sup> Vella argues that learning occurs as individuals contextualize new content and make it their own.<sup>43</sup> One's humanity depends on the ability to make one's own decisions in life and wrestle with new ideas, skills, and attitudes.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, Vella intentionally designs the pedagogical practice of Dialogue Education to exhibit, facilitate, and nurture the humanity of the participants. In effect, we become what we practice. Schatzki notes that this idea rejects an epistemology that holds that "mind is the central phenomenon in human life: the source of meaning, the receptacle of knowledge and truth, the wellspring of activity, and the co- or sole constitutor of reality. According to practice theory, mind is at least to a significant extent 'constituted' within practices."<sup>45</sup> Vella's pedagogy invites learners to participate in an embodied

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<sup>40</sup> Leach and Moon state, "Our fourth assertion is that the development of knowledge is inseparable from the process of participating in a culture of practice..." Leach and Moon, *The Power of Pedagogy*, p. 6. In his research de Kock argues that "learning has multiple aspects and is embedded in practices." de Kock, "What About Learning in Practical Theological Studies," p. 6.

<sup>41</sup> Theodore R. Schatzki, "Practice Mind-ed Orders," in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Theodore R. Schatzki, K. Knorr-Cetina, and Eike von Savigny (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 56.

<sup>42</sup> Theodore R. Schatzki, K. Knorr-Cetina, and Eike von Savigny, eds., *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 20.

<sup>43</sup> Vella, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*, p. 16.

<sup>44</sup> Vella, "A Spirited Epistemology," p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, and Savigny, *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, pp. 20–21.

manner that recognizes that learning and meaning-making are rational, emotional, contextual, individual, and communal. As Schatzki observes, knowledge is a “complex process involving the entire person.”<sup>46</sup>

Third, like Schatzki, Vella understands the importance of physical activity, the materials one uses to fulfill these acts, and the space in which the practice occurs.<sup>47</sup> The seven design steps focus on where learning will occur, the location design, and the implicit meanings that artifacts, materials, and classroom space and arrangement hold. Because physical actions make up practices, Vella focuses her process on intentional learning tasks for the learners, designed to meet achievement-based objectives, or what Schatzki calls the teleoaffective elements that organize a practice.<sup>48</sup> The pedagogical center of the learning tasks, the doings and sayings that fulfill their purpose, affect the task’s outcome and the learning that will occur individually and corporately. Therefore, learning is a shared response(ability) between all those engaging in the practice. The strategy rooted in the doings and sayings of the action that make up a practice affects the learning that occurs, and Vella’s learning-centered pedagogy recognizes this.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, as Vella suggests through the principles and practices of Dialogue Education, Schatzki attests that practices give order and place to people and things and give or restrict permission, power, learning, and self-perception.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, Vella focuses on developing safety, sound relationships, respect for the learner as the decision-maker, sequence, reinforcement, immediacy, clear roles, teamwork, accountability, engagement, and praxis in her pedagogical process. Such pedagogy drives the design and implementation of teaching, shaping the social space and determining how learning occurs within the space.<sup>51</sup>

## Moving Toward Preaching Practice Centered on Learning

Although not intended for the design and implementation of preaching, Vella’s Dialogue Education principles and process can contribute to developing a learning-centered homiletic. The congruence between Schatzki’s practice theory and Vella’s learning-centered process allows one to apply Vella’s process to homiletics to develop a homiletic theory that corresponds

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<sup>46</sup> Theodore R. Schatzki, “Practices and Learning,” in *Practice Theory Perspectives on Pedagogy and Education: Praxis, Diversity and Contestation*, ed. Peter Grootenboer, Christine Edwards-Groves, and Sarojni Choy (Singapore: Springer, 2018), pp. 23–26.

<sup>47</sup> Schatzki, “Practice Mind-ed Orders,” p. 56.

<sup>48</sup> Schatzki, “A Primer on Practices,” p. 15.

<sup>49</sup> Schatzki states, “The shape taken by any such path typically reflects opportunities to learn that are afforded at particular space-time locations in bundles: at or in particular workstations, stoves, classrooms, training fields, meeting rooms, and the like. Which learning opportunities are afforded at these locations depends on the practices that are carried on at them, for example, leather good production practices (apprenticeship), cooking practices, teaching practices, training practices, review practices, and the like. It also depends on the material arrangements involved—the laid out production facilities, kitchens, classrooms, training fields, etc.—as well as what, at any moment, happens to be going on at these locations. In principle, an opportunity to learn can be afforded anywhere depending on the bundles there and what is going on at a given moment.” Schatzki, “Practices and Learning,” p. 30.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

to a practice-based worldview. Vella, like Schatzki, is advocating that learning and knowledge development are contextual and depend on social practice. Both Schatzki and Vella propound that one becomes what one practices. The intentionality of Vella's pedagogical theory and practice demonstrates and fosters the humanity of the participants. Both recognize that learning is a shared response(ability) between all those engaging in the practice. The strategy is rooted in the doings and sayings of the action that make up a practice that affects the learning that occurs.

Pedagogically, Vella understands students as decision-makers during the learning event. The teacher's role, therefore, shifts from the quantity of content communicated by the teacher to the quality of content engagement by the students enabled by the learning tasks. Homiletically, the sermon moves from focusing on what the preacher says to the congregation's work as they participate in a process of reflection and action.

Additionally, context plays a decisive role in meaning development. The student's response(ability) is to connect content to their experience, appraise, deliberate, employ, assess, and make meaning. Homiletically, the sermon becomes a joint exploration related to how and why one understands God, where, how, and in what way God is working in their communities and lives, and what such understandings mean practically for living out faith. This type of exploration implies that Vella's design process is about mutual accountability and movement of information, ideas, and dialogue between all involved. The process is communal. A learning-centered homiletic must consider pedagogical strategies that involve both individual and communal interaction.

Epistemologically, Dialogue Education maintains that knowledge is not something that is disconnected from and outside of human action but connects intrinsically to contextual action. Furthermore, it is implicit that knowledge development is relational. Homiletically, this holistic epistemology requires a communal theological method centered pedagogically in the active participation of all those involved.

Theologically, Vella's understanding that the Holy Spirit is actively engaged in the formation of people is at the core of her claim that learners are subjects of their learning.<sup>52</sup> From this idea, one can make a theological claim that Vella believes that humans can respond to God and others and be decision-makers of their learning. Being is relational.<sup>53</sup> Because epistemologically, in Vella's process, knowing is participatory, her process can aid in the theological task of practicing one's response(ability) to God and others.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, homiletically, Vella's process defines the preacher's role as one responsible for helping the congregation engage in

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<sup>52</sup> Vella, "A Spirited Epistemology," p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> Christian Educator Rhonda McEwen states, "Each woman and man is imbued with inherent dignity, singular worth, divine purpose, and infinite value—regardless of ethnic origin, nationality, gender, religion, political persuasion, or socioeconomic background. As his created beings, human beings have the capacity to know and be known by God (Ps 139). And because we are known by God, we too are capable of knowing. (Rhonda M McEwen, "Learning Design in a Global Classroom," *International Journal of Christianity & Education* 23, no. 2 (2019): p. 172.

<sup>54</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, pp. 38–39.

theological conversation that honors each participant's humanity while constructing knowledge via reflection and action with God and others in the community. The contextual nature of Vella's process moves the sermon toward becoming and nurturing a cycle of practical theological reflection.

These pedagogical, epistemological, and theological characteristics of Vella's process cause interesting theological questions. How does one develop a communal theological method centered pedagogically in the active participation of all the participants involved? What are the theological characteristics of such a holistic approach to knowledge development? Who is God when viewed through such an epistemological lens, and how does God relate or engage with humanity? How do humans become who they are and what role does God play in this development? What role does a homiletic play in the formation of one's humanity? Furthermore, finally, what role does the community of faith play in this formation? These are the questions to which we turn when developing a theology for a learning-centered homiletic.

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