

Pulpit Practices: Enhancing Adult Learning through Culturally Relevant Techniques

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to examine sermons of African American pastors to identify culturally relevant themes, which could subsequently serve as instructional techniques to enhance adult learning. Five narrative themes were identified with implications for adult education researchers, practitioners, and African American pastors who serve underrepresented populations.

Introduction

Regardless of the context, cultural relevancy, diversity, and/or multiculturalism discussions can be found. As our society becomes more diverse, it has become even more pertinent than ever for us, regardless of the sector (i.e., business, health, education, etc.), to not only be knowledgeable, but sensitive to those who are different from us. Such is the case in adult learner classrooms, where they are populated by more diverse learners. Although strides have been made, “minority” adult learners, such as African Americans, are still made to feel inferior in the classroom. Thus, educators must employ culturally relevant techniques, which can enhance the learning experience. For African Americans, African American pastors provide biblical information in a manner that is relevant and understandable. Hence, they certainly play “a major role in adult education” (Lawson, 1993, p. 343). Lawson goes on to say “More people consistently listen to the pastor than any other single teacher in the church” (p. 343). Sanders (2003) indicates, “Preaching is more than the simple verbal communication of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (para. 15). It lends itself to learning by the hearers. Despite the educational research goldmine that exists in the Black Church, “inadequate attention has been focused on the role of the church in the education of black people” (Byrd, 1986, p. 83). Hence, it is not surprising that the use of culturally relevant techniques has not been explored. While it is appropriate to associate religious education or spiritual development with religious institutions, the church can prove to be an invaluable source of learning for educational researchers. Although religious and Christian education can certainly stake their claim in the literature, little attention has been given to adult learning through the lens of sermons.

Cultural Relevancy

Adult educators have argued the importance of providing culturally relevant adult education (Colin, 1989; Guy, 1999, Sheared, 1994). As our society continues to become more diverse, it is more important than ever for adult educators to provide materials and instruction in the classroom that are culturally relevant for adult learners. Some traditional methods and techniques used fail to reflect the diversity of learners (Imel, 1995) and many times practitioners fail to exhibit a sensitivity towards other cultures and their rich heritage (Colin & Preciphs, 1991). Often the case with African American learners, they do not see their culture reflected in the literature or the examples in the classroom. While adult educators have sought to describe

the importance of culturally relevant adult education, the literature is lacking in providing examples of the types or techniques of cultural relevancy from different contexts that can be used with African American learners. Although many educators have expressed interest regarding cultural inclusivity, they sometimes lack the necessary tools (know how) to employ it. Adult educators suggest using a culturally relevant approach that is Africentric (Colin, 1989; Guy, 1996) for African American adult learners. Such an approach can be readily found in the Black Church.

Most discussions of culturally relevant adult education (CRAE) include the importance of using materials and examples that are relevant to the learner and incorporating aspects of the learner's culture into the educational process (Colin, 1989; Guy, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Martin, 1990; Sheared, 1994). In her discussion of CRAE, Colin introduces the concept of self-ethnic reflectors. "Reflectors" are described as curricula, philosophy, activities, events and personalities in the educational literature. In other words, learners must see a representation of themselves. As Guy (1999) succinctly points out, incorporating CRAE in the learning process enhances learners' self-image by allowing learners to see themselves in a positive light and empowers them to challenge the authority and power of the dominant culture. Failure to use such techniques can perpetuate negative attitudes and feelings among learners.

The Black Church

A review of the literature reveals a wide array of learning opportunities in the church for African Americans. It has provided programs for spiritual, and physical and mental well-being (Isaac, 2002; Taylor, Ellison, Chatters, et al., 2000; Yanek, Becker, Moy, et al., 2001). The church provides one of the greatest opportunities of learning for African Americans. However, despite its rich educational tradition, it is often overshadowed by formal learning institutions as sites for broadening our knowledge base of adult education.

Since its formal organization in the 1790s, the Black church has "served as the hub of life in African American communities (Howd, 1999). "Churches became clearinghouses for everything from education and family support to business and politics" (Howd, paragraph 10). Thus, it has been a place of refuge, a place of teaching and learning, a place to develop a sundry of skills, and most obviously, a place of worship. In addition to its religiosity and spirituality, the Black Church taught people of African descent how to contend with difficulties and adjust to life in a society which considered them as second-class citizens or, as in slavery, three fifths human. Bell (1996) contends "Embracing religion that was undergirded by . . . [music] helped slaves to be free in their own minds" (p.1) He further notes, "There must be a connection between . . . music and how we utilized it in earlier ordeals and its potential for now" (p.11).

Although the music of the Black Church has been a unique identifier and characteristic of the black worship experience; it is of great importance in the worship experience. Yet, it is African American preaching and, in particular, the sermon that is the most important element of the worship experience (LaRue, 2000; Lincoln & Mayima, 1993; Mitchell, 1990; Rowland, 1998). According to Maynard-Reid (2000), "the interaction between the 'preacher in the pulpit' and the 'preacher in the pew' is possibly the most folksy part of the African-American worship service" (p. 96). The sermon has drawn heavily on the oral traditions and literature of the African culture. Courlander (1976) defines black oral literature as:

An oral literature with a special personality, often containing implicit or explicit intellectual or emotional responses to the injustices and inequalities inherent in the historic relationship of blacks to the mainstream culture. . . . It ranges from

humorous nonsense to profound and moving reflections on the human experience. Much of the Negro oral literature is a product of life in the cities, and reflects the struggles—and sometimes the triumphs—of the individual in the midst of a world he never made. (p. 256-257)

The oral tradition has contributed to the unique elements of the African American sermon.

The African American Sermon

“The performed African-American sermon is a narrative system which incorporates rationalized sets of conventions and principles designed to support the articulation of existence, belief, and cosmologic considerations in the experiencing lives of African-American people” (Davis, 1985, p. 67). Therefore, at times, African Americans can see themselves in the sermon.

Mitchell (1990) states there are four commonalties to the African American sermon. They are textual, expository, narrative, and metaphor. Massey (1980) describes the textual sermon as “a design determined mainly by the divisions or sequences of thought in a single text or short passage from Scripture” (p. 117). It builds on the mental imagery of the text. The second form is expository and is essentially an extended passage of scripture (Massey). Therefore, it is based on one central theme found within the scriptures. The narrative/storytelling sermon compares to a work of art (Mitchell). As such, with the narrative sermon there is no negotiation with the biblical accuracy of the sermon. However, the narrative sermon is constructed and developed with a certain element of flair that makes great use of the African American preacher’s artistry. The metaphor sermon builds upon one central figure or metaphor. For example, Mitchell states the sermon may be built on the metaphor of fishing or automotive cooling systems. This type of sermon is not unique to the African American preacher but according to Mitchell it is “the Black characteristics of the delivery and reception” (p. 119).

Another type of sermon is the Afrocentric sermon. Afrocentricity, according to Waters (1993) is “a multidisciplinary program with both scholarly and popular approaches designed to rescue African history and heritage from academic and ideological forced exile It is based upon a worldview that values Africa and persons of African descent and holds them central” (p. 3). Thus, an “Afrocentric” sermon is not racist but is an attempt to educate African American churchgoers with the historical and cultural presence of African Americans in the Bible and demonstrates “the beauty of Blackness in the Bible” (p. 18).

The African American sermon has been a unique instructional tool used by African American clergy to teach of the historical role of Africans in the Bible and the Bible’s relationship to the contemporary issues facing African Americans such as racism, poverty, health, and economic disparities. In the Black Church the sermon is a unique blend of religious education, showmanship, drama, singing, and most importantly, praising God. African Americans have been able to rely on the African American preacher’s sermons to speak to their lived experiences. The preaching tradition of the Black Church has always been a primary source of information and inspiration for African Americans (Thomas & Mitchell, 1994).

Methodology

A review of the literature reveals numerous books on preaching and sermons. There are books that specifically provide sermons from an African American perspective. There are sermons from women, different denominations, and time periods. These books, undoubtedly, would be useful to the novice preacher. Despite the volume of books surrounding sermons and preaching, the researchers selected LaRue’s (2000) *The Heart of Black Preaching*, because he

provides sermons from African American preachers specifically from the 19th and 20th centuries, uses male and female pastors, and pastors of different denominations. Sermons were analyzed using theme/content analysis. According to Merriam and Simpson (1995) content analysis establishes “the frequency of certain ideas, attitudes, or words within a particular body of material” (p. 81). Theme analysis is the “process of recovering the theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 78).

Findings

Five narrative themes were identified —Narratives of Personalities, Narratives of Social Experiences, Narratives of Psycho-cultural Experiences, Narratives and the use Metaphors and the Narrative of Affirmations. A common practice among the preachers was to mention names of living and celebrated people of African descent. For example, Alexander Crummell’s 19th century sermon included six people of African descent. Many of the social encounters shared among African Americans were included in the sermons by employing narratives on the social experiences. Social themes such as racism, discrimination, police brutality, sexism, high unemployment rates, lack of access to health care, and other inequities that are heaped upon African Americans are illustrated in the sermons but through these social experiences, the sermons always point to hope.

Employing narratives of the psycho-cultural experiences in the learning process can be quite useful for enhancing learning of African American learners. For example, one sermon mentions how African Americans had been described as slow and retarded, dimwitted and dull-witted, and how they were made to believe to accept low expectations. Narratives using *metaphors* were used to bring life or imagery to certain text and give emphasis to the meaning of sermons. While African American preachers are careful to bring to the forefront the negative narratives of social and psycho-cultural experiences of African Americans, they are also skillful in affirming African Americans. Hence, while African American preachers are careful to bring to the forefront the negative experiences of African Americans, they are also skillful in affirming them. In a sermon entitled, “What Makes You so Strong?,” The preacher reminds listeners of how they have been successful in spite of the injustices they have been dealt. Along those same lines, Cannon, a 20th century preacher, also calls upon the congregation to find the special talents that God has given to each of them.

Conclusion

With the continuous diversity of our population, educators can no longer afford to use monolithic instructional techniques in the classroom. Different strategies must be used to reach all learners. Adult educators have experienced some success in promoting cultural relevance in the field adult of education. Another means for doing so is through the African American sermon. It is replete with illustrative examples of cultural relevancy. However, the Black Church, like most informal institutions of learning, is often overlooked as a site for adult education research. As a context for research it can aid adult educators in enhancing their knowledge relative to African American adult learners. Also, it can provide strategies to assist learners from marginalized cultural backgrounds to take control of their lives and improve their social condition. Many adult educators are unaware of the use of the African American sermon as an educational tool. Yet when fiction and non-fiction literary writing are used to inform or

stimulate discussion around topics embedded in a culturally relevant text, adult educators may discover a valuable tool for teaching and learning. It is evident that the preachers and sermons in the Black Church can affect learners' emotions and this may be a way to facilitate learning, attitudinal change, and personal development for those who work for inclusion and struggle with diversity.

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