**Culturally Responsive Preacher Development
In the Online Learning Environment**

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Abstract

The transition to the online environment offers a critical moment for reflection on best pedagogical practices in homiletics, specifically in the area of our cultural responsiveness to diverse students. A broader range of students may access online seminary-level education, but they will fail to thrive if educators fail to adapt. This paper brings dimensions of cultural values into conversation with best practices in online pedagogy. It isolates four capacities of the successful preaching student, correlating those capacities with cultural values and practices, so students and educators may approach online and classroom learning with sensitivity and wisdom.

Change is in the air at seminaries across the land. A few schools have discerned a renewed vocation and commitment to the classroom, but many more have recently ended a prolonged season of hand-wringing about online learning, and have embraced it. Some of us who teach in that environment remain reluctant immigrants. Like the grandma who only got on the boat because the kids dragged her, we lament the losses more than we celebrate the gains. Some view the move cynically, as one made solely for the survival of our school. Others of us, myself included, have surprised ourselves and become outright converts. Like scrappy immigrants, we are on the lookout for its opportunities while working to minimize its downsides. Much like Israel in the post-exilic period, we see that sturdy brick temple of campus-based classroom fading and shrinking. Israel had a chance in that season to expand her vision of God beyond familiar categories. Though painful, it was a transformative time for the people of God. I believe we are at a similar moment in theological education, and for homiletical pedagogy in particular.

From Transition to Transformation

One particularly tantalizing opportunity is that of increased access and potential for thriving for those who have been marginalized by the traditional seminary environment.[1] But that will only happen if we let this technical shift compel us to a more substantive transformation of our pedagogy. Rather than merely uploading the standard set of assignments which we had previously published in printed syllabi, and repackaging and recording the same tired set of lectures we've always delivered in classrooms, could we pause and reflect on the

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[1] It is still too early to have solid data on whether online seminary education is in fact broadening the range of students we attract and successfully educate, but the initial consensus among deans and faculty is that this is happening. According to a recent Association of Theological Schools (ATS) survey, "Among the biggest benefits of online education, these were the top five responses: (1) 99% said it gives students more flexibility, (2) 81% said it reaches more students, (3) 66% said it helps students learn in their own contexts, (4) 46% said it helps reduce the cost for students, and (5) 45% said it enhances the school's global outreach." Tom Tanner, "Online Learning at ATS Schools: Part 2—Looking around at our present," *Association of Theological Schools, The Commission on Accrediting,* (March, 2017): 3.

diversity of learners we hope to engage, and our practices for doing so? This essay will argue that online learning environments can offer preaching students a more culturally relevant and sustaining experience than the geophysical classroom. Education professor Django Paris coined the term *culturally sustaining pedagogy,* which emphasizes not only the need for relevance and dexterous responsiveness to diverse cultural practices and values in the classroom, but also for a genuine commitment to the ongoing existence and value of those cultures. His vision is for, "…schooling to be a site for sustaining the cultural ways of being of communities of color."[2]

Throughout this essay I hope to ask how the shift to online learning might be part of our own transformation as co-learners who teach. As education professor Zaretta Hammond puts it, "…culturally responsive teaching isn't a set of engagement strategies you use on students…. Too often we focus on *doing something to* culturally and linguistically diverse students without changing ourselves…instead, culturally responsive teaching is about being a different type of teacher who is in relationship with students and the content in a different way."[3] This is what I hope for within myself as I transition to online teaching. I want the environments I host and cultivate to become spaces where marginalized voices are better heard, where a range of preaching styles and histories are honored, and where seminal formation happens for all of us.

Cultivating Thriving Learners

An overarching goal as we teach is that we are equipping our students to succeed as learners. So before we explore how culture impacts learning and relates to online learning, let me isolate four capacities of thriving homiletical learners. All sorts of skills are needed to *preach*, from the ability to reflect deeply on sacred texts to the capacity to connect with one's listeners. But here's my short list of what's needed to *learn* to preach:

1. *Conceptual Capacity:* Thriving students possess the ability to grasp new concepts and models. They can see patterns, relationships, discrepancies, and underlying structures within sermonic and scriptural content. They have sufficient mental pegs on which to hang new templates; they've built an adequate cognitive foundation for comprehension of theories and categories. They further need the imaginative agility to transfer and retrieve a model they've seen and understood, and apply it to a sermon they construct.

2. *Reflective Capacity:* Thriving students are able to reflect fruitfully on their own sermons, analyzing their strengths and weaknesses, and then strategizing for improvement. Their self-perception must be sufficiently humble and sufficiently confident that they can watch their own videos profitably—neither devastatingly horrified nor unduly pleased and blind to flaws. They must also be able to receive feedback from peers, congregants, and professors, making deep-level change when it is needed and minor fixes when only those are needed—and the wisdom to know the difference.

3. *Investment Capacity:* Thriving learners are marked by a strong desire to invest in their own growth. The have the impulse and the discipline to stop sawing long enough to sharpen their saw, as Stephen Covey put it nearly three decades ago.[4] They are motivated to improve, and willing to apply effort to do so. Below, we will explore the

[2] Django Paris and H. Samy Alim, eds., *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2017): KBL 375.

[3] Zaretta Hammond, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* (Thousand Oaks: Corwin, 2015), 52.

[4] Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 287.

multiple cultural factors which impact the likelihood of a person called to ministry to make the bold move to invest in his or her own growth.

4. *Management Capacity:* Thriving learners are able to protect that investment and carry it through to its goal. They not only enroll in seminary or a given course, but they possess the organizational skills and discipline to protect the time they will need to succeed at their work. They also usually have the support of a surrounding ecosystem which values and guards their investment along with them.

Admittedly, none of these capacities is unique to preaching courses. All are necessary for learning anything, from preschool play dough clean-up procedures to advanced microbiology. They are simply the four I have isolated as I have reflected on why students have succeeded and failed in the preaching courses and workshops I have taught in a few countries, and in the US to students from many cultural backgrounds. I suspect many of us who teach could name students who came to seminary with deficiencies in one or more areas, as we reflect on the walls they hit that led to their failure. Each strength will take a unique shape in different students and will manifest differently in part dependent on this elusive term we call 'culture.' And online learning will play to each strength better than classroom learning in some ways, and worse in others.

With those categories in mind, let us consider the further goal of seeing homiletical learners from diverse backgrounds thrive. As we zero in on cultural factors which may foster or inhibit learning, I am mindful of the rallying cry against too quickly viewing aspects of a student's background as a *deficiency* or barrier to learning, a problem for kind and creative teachers to solve. In the 1990's and 2000's a vocal group of educators, including Gloria Ladson-Billings,[5] Zaretta Hammond, Geneva Gay, bell hooks, and Django Paris, urged a movement away from what they termed *deficit pedagogies*, which while perhaps initially well-meaning, perpetuated dominant culture assumptions and viewed underperforming students through a lens of challenges to overcome, to *asset pedagogies*. Their plea is for culturally relevant and responsive teaching methodologies. Gay has urged teaching that involves, "…using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them."[6]

I appreciate the exhortation to view all students as bringing assets from their cultural background. My only modification would be that I understand *every* culture's values and practices to inhibit learning in some ways. Rather than creating a sharp divide between a deficit approach and an asset approach, I would argue for an *appreciative critique* approach that allows us to speak honestly about how our own and others' cultural backgrounds facilitate some aspects of learning and make other aspects more challenging. From there we can discuss what adaptations will optimize learning for all. I will offer two case studies of how cultural diversity may be honored and sustained by the online shift. Then I will describe the work of anthropologists and others to isolate and articulate dimensions of cultural values, with an eye to their effect on learning. From there I will offer two more examples, one in which the online setting allowed a student to transcend cultural barriers to learning, and one where it may have caused a greater collision with a cultural reality.

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[5] Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," *American Educational Research Journal*, 32:3. (Autumn, 1995): 465-491.

[6] Geneva Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010), 31.

Case Study One: Preaching on Home Turf for Culturally Contextualized Thriving

As I watched Alvin's[7] video, I smiled in sheer delight. His sonorous voice and chanted refrains clearly pleased his African Methodist Episcopal crowd. They clapped, waved their hands, and even stood for a long moment at one point to witness with their bodies to the truth he proclaimed. He was at home, and it showed. In many white-dominated preaching classrooms, African American students have wrestled with anxiety as they have negotiated the degree to which they will bring a preached word to the class in the style and language of their culture, or will conform it to the often-unstated expectations of the dominant culture of the classroom. The listeners in many a North American seminary are simply not primed to offer the verbal and physical feedback that forms an essential part of the preaching moment in many African-American traditions. Consequently, their sermons have required a translation and accommodation step that has at times hindered authentic performance.

By contrast, the online course I teach requires students to find a local preaching context, ideally their own congregation, and preach for them.[8] They then gather a subset of those listeners for a feedback session. They upload a recording of the sermon, which ideally includes some panning of the audience, for their professor's and their online peers' evaluation. Despite initial skepticism of this process, I have been struck by the way Puerto Ricans sound more like Puerto Ricans, and African-Americans sound more like African-Americans, when they are able to preach in their own local contexts. Henri Nouwen has reflected on the need at times for the *ministry of absence*.[9] I wonder if in fact the absence of the (in this case, white) professor, in her sterile classroom filled with peers who may be perceived--even if inaccurately--to be critical of the preacher's style, might liberate and empower students to preach out of their authentic voices.

Aronson, Fried, and Good discuss the effects of the fear of stereotyping on academic performance in a study focused on African Americans. These students often carry the burden of potential stereotyping in ways which debilitate and even immobilize. "*Stereotype threat* appears to undermine academic achievement…in the short run, it can impair performance by inducing anxiety."[10] Even simply being asked to state one's race prior to taking a standardized test has been shown to adversely impact the performance of those from groups which have faced negative stereotyping. Though I initially fretted about the cold sterility of the videotaped sermon, online environments may actually decrease anxiety for those coming to the task from a range of homiletical-cultural heritages. We are letting our emerging preachers stay home, and home-court advantage lets athletes thrive. In one swift, simple, yet game-changing move, we have traded the rarified environment of the classroom for the embedded, local context. This is part of why I do not prefer the term *distance learning*. Kemp and others have used the term *situated learning* to refer not to the online delivery *per se*, but in an argument that all learning

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[7] All student names are changed.

[8] While I am highlighting the positives here, this is not without its challenges, e.g. for the student who has just moved to a new location, whose church does not endorse women preaching, whose church members do not speak English, or whose preaching culture does not count it a sermon unless it is an hour in length. I have helped students overcome all four of these barriers this year.

[9] Henri Nouwen, *The Living Reminder* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977), 44.

[10] Aronson, J., Fried, C., & Good, C., "Reducing the effects of Stereotype Threat on African American college students by shaping Theories of Intelligence," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 38 (2002): 114.

should take place in as natural, communal, and local a context as possible.[11] Alvin gained access to locally situated, contextualized learning.

Is that learning being done at a distance? Yes and no. The truth is, every seminary education involves increasing distance and proximity in some spheres and by some players. I have heard opponents of online learning use the word *disembodied* to describe it. We fret that we are losing the bodily proximity of students visibly present, their scents smell-able, and neatly seated in adjacent desks. However, in on-campus learning we ask our students to remove their bodies from the communities of faith which have in many cases been formational for them, and from the social ecology which has sustained them. They uproot and dislocate themselves in ways which may be highly disorienting. As educator Mark Nichols notes, "The classic model of theological education may promote a more isolated, ecclesiologically removed formational experience than its distance equivalent."[12] This is particularly true for those who do not find their cultural backgrounds sustained and affirmed in the new setting of the seminary campus.

Case Study Two: Breaking down Language Barriers

Thomas posted responses to lectures and readings with abandon every week last quarter. He enthusiastically offered thoughtful feedback on sermons to each of his peers. As I heard him preach and listened to his thick accent, my first thought was that I wished I could have offered him the chance to preach in Taiwanese. That's a little ways down the road in terms of translation software. (I do encourage English Language Learning students to post their sermons in both languages so I and their peers can watch a few minutes of them preaching in their first language, since delivery there is generally so much better.) But my other thought was, "He would have sat in the back in silence most of the time in my classroom." Having immigrated to the US at age 27, past the window of ease for language learning, he would have hesitated in class, and that lag time would have been quickly filled in class with more confident speakers. The discussion board format online levels the playing field for students like Thomas. More on Thomas later.

Cultural Values and Pedagogy

Let's step away from the technological dimension for a moment and focus on the ways culture influences learning in general. We will first set out some of the dimensions of cultural values from the work of several prominent studies. We will then ask learning and teaching is impacted by culture and how online instruction could change that equation, mitigating some of the challenges and perhaps exacerbating others. The moment the word *culture* enters an academic conversation today, warning sirens commence to screech. Understandably so: we who live in the United States form a painfully divided nation. Discussions of differences between races and ethnic groups have too often been unfruitful and even harmful, to the point where it has become difficult to assert almost anything about cultural difference without raising concerns of racism, Western bias, or elitism. That is clearly not my intention here, though I recognize at the outset the risk of unintentionally mischaracterizing a group of people. Another source of confusion can be the understanding of *culture* to refer to the outward, readily visible creative

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[11] Kemp, S. J., "Situated Learning: Optimizing Experiential Learning through God-Given Learning Community," *Christian Education Journal* 7.1 (2010): 118–143. For a general introduction to Situated Learning Theory, see http://www.instructionaldesign.org/theories/situated-learning.html

[12] Mark Nichols, "The Formational Experiences of On-Campus and Theological Distance Education Students," *Journal of Adult Theological Education* (April 2016): 29.

expressions such as dance or theater which mark its elite and its popular culture, or to other symbols, heroes, and rituals which distinguish one culture from another—what some cultural anthropologists refer to as alternately the visible level of the iceberg and the outer layer of the onion.[13] While it is impossible to divorce practices from values, since practices reveal and reinforce values, this essay will dive into the deeper layer of that icy onion, to the level of *shared values.*

I am also aware that the conceptual framework which has informed my thinking about culture has been widely critiqued even as it has been widely adopted. In particular, cultural anthropologist Geert Hofstede's categories have been called deterministic and essentialist, and his methodology questioned. The initial data he had access to in the 1960's was from surveys of thousands of IBM employees in fifty countries,[14] which meant few women and no unemployed persons were queried, and that the sample set was skewed toward engineers over artists. Perhaps even more problematic was his view, at least early in his research and writing, that a nation had a monolithic culture, which ignores multiculturalism, immigration trends, and other changes over time within nations. Brendan McSweeney warns, "In the wider literature on culture such is the elusiveness of the concept of culture that there is no consensus about which 'units' or 'dimensions' should be used for describing culture."[15] These problems are real, and they do not go away entirely in his more nuanced recent work, which has incorporated the insights from studies (including his own later surveys) which use better sampling methodology.

However, I continue to find his thinking insightful, and to find the paradigm of cultural values dimensions to be a useful tool. Our goal as educators is to use every tool at our disposal to grow in our cultural competence and agility, such that we can help all our students to become empowered learners. Here, I will draw from three models of difference between cultures, the *Hofstede Dimensional Model (HDM),*[16] the *Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) Research Project,*[17] and the categories detailed in *Ministering Cross-Culturally,*[18] by anthropologist Sherwood Lingenfelter and Marvin Mayers.

Hofstede initially isolated four cultural values dimensions:

1. **Power Distance**: The level of social acceptance, and the expectation of, unequal distribution of power, and assumptions regarding subordinates' relationship to authority
2. **Collectivism vs. Individualism**: Relationship between Individuals and Groups (divided into *Institutional Collectivism* and *In-Group Collectivism* in GLOBE)
3. **Conceptions of Masculinity and Femininity** (Gender Egalitarianism in GLOBE): the social implications of having been born a boy or a girl in a culture; the extent to which gender roles are distinct or overlapping.
4. **Uncertainty Avoidance**: The extent to which a collective deals with or avoids ambiguity by adherence to norms, rules, and rituals.[19]

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[13] Geert Hofstede, G. J. Hofstede, and M. Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2010), 8.

[14] For critique of aspects of his methodology and conclusions, see Brendan McSweeney, "Hofstede's model of national cultural differences and their consequences: A triumph of faith – a failure of analysis," *Human Relations* 55:1 (2002): 89-118.

[15] McSweeney, 106.

[16] Best outlined in *Cultures and Organizations,* ibid.

[17] Jagdeep S. Chhokar, F.C. Brodbeck, and R. House, editors, *Culture and Leadership Across the World: The GLOBE Book of In-Depth Studies of 25 Societies* (New York: Psychology Press, 2008)

[18] Sherwood Lingenfelter and M. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986)

[19] *Culture and Leadership,* 42.

His team has since incorporated research from the *World Values Survey* and the *Chinese Values Survey* and added the categories of:

5. **Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation** ((LTO), which roughly correlates to *Future Orientation* in the GLOBE study),
6. **Indulgence vs. Restraint** (which overlaps somewhat with the *Survival vs. Self-Expression* spectrum in the World Values Survey[20]).

The GLOBE study, in part because if focuses on organizational cultures and measures what is valued in their leaders, adds these three categories:

7. **Assertiveness** (the extent to which an organizational culture rewards confrontation, directness, and aggression)
8. **Humane Orientation** (the extent to which organizations rewards fairness and kindness)
9. **Performance Orientation** (the extent to which organizations reward individuals for personal improvement and excellence).

Lingenfelter and Mayer's categories overlap with some of the above, but bring a different set of insights. They contrast cultures which are oriented toward different priorities, such as:

10. **Time vs. Event** (Related to LTO, this distinguishes a concern for punctuality and careful allocation of time vs. stress on completing an event and savoring the present moment)
11. **Task vs. Person** (Related to Individualism vs. Collectivism, a focus on achievement of goals vs. on satisfaction in relationships)
12. **Dichotomistic vs. Holistic Thinking** (Systematic, discrete thinking vs. open-ended, big-picture thinking)
13. **Status Ascribed vs. Status Achieved** (Related to Hofstede and GLOBE's Power Distance, this compares whether status is held and gained via fixed social rank or through one's achievements.)
14. **Crisis vs. Non-crisis** (Planning and anticipation vs. spontaneous responses to crises)
15. **Concealment of Vulnerability vs. Willingness to expose Vulnerability** (Face-saving and avoidance of risks that might expose weakness vs. relative lack of worry about shame; this appears as an aspect within Individualism vs. Collectivism in the other studies.)[21]

Using the Tools

I propose that we need not buy into all of Hofstede's assumptions nor endorse all his methodology to pick up his tools, and the others listed above. Let's let them serve where they may, a hammer here, an anvil there. We can all agree that many pedagogical encounters between students and faculty are navigating power distance issues. Every preaching feedback session is negotiating a student's predilection to reveal or conceal vulnerability. Some of that comes from temperament and how that went for them around the dinner table as a kid. But some is undeniably tied to their culture. A student's willingness to try a new model for the next sermon may relate to his learned-from-culture tolerance for uncertainty. Her likelihood to even

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[20] http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp?CMSID=Findings

[21] Lingenfelter and Mayer's research methodology was less rigorous in a sense: it was not gained through extensive surveys but simply thoughtful reflection as anthropologists and missionaries. I find their categories insightful and relevant to the pedagogy of preaching, so I have included them here.

begin seminary at all is impacted by her (denominational, familial, or ethnic) culture's level of rewarding of individual striving for improvement and excellence.

Taking up the tools of *Individual vs. Collective* and *Status Ascribed/Power Distance* as they work themselves out in learning processes, let's consider other factors which may have been in play for Thomas, for whom I argued in Case Study Two that online learning mediated language issues. Is it only language that has led to the silence of students like him in class? Thomas' Confucian heritage, with its value on respect for authority, was likely in conflict with the value on challenging assumptions which predominates in many Western classrooms. A common reason to raise one's hand, in a US setting, is to challenge. Faculty generally reward this as a sign of carefully engaged critical thinking. This is a natural outgrowth of a highly individualistic culture, in which learning itself is conceived as an agonistic endeavor. As Kate Chanock puts it, "Students who are reluctant to participate in challenging received wisdom— who value reticence and the appearance of consensus—are less likely to engage the interest and respect of lecturers in this system. Their good manners, owing to a concern for face—their own and their interlocutors—are mistaken for a lack of critical thinking or originality."[22] I certainly do not wish to portray all Asian students as well-mannered members of collectives. But Chanock raises a powerful challenge to Western educators to turn from assumptions about agonistic discourse as the way knowledge is constructed. While I have relished the stimulation of that discourse in my own classrooms, more of what happens in online forums is an appreciative reflection and personal application of readings and of my lectures. This is in part by my design, through a shift in the way I construct the questions and prompts. Though the tenor of the discourse is, with a few exceptions, more cooperative and collaborative than sharply critical, students seem more engaged than ever.

Case Study Three: Transcending Culture

As I was conducting a video coaching call with Edner, a student in Central America, his Pentecostal senior pastor walked by and asked what he was doing. The pastor waved at me, made a joke, and moved on. Edner declined to translate his joke but confided wistfully, "He doesn't think I should be attending seminary. It's lessening my reliance on the Holy Spirit. He also doesn't believe I should need more than a day's notice to prepare a sermon." That is in my view unfortunate, but the exciting piece for me here is that Edner is taking the class at all. Whether denominationally or nationally or both, he comes from a Short-Term Orientation culture where graduate-level work is viewed as a luxury. It is a culture which would score low on GLOBE's Performance Orientation scale. It is also highly collectivist, and those societies sometimes look upon individual ambition with outright suspicion, as an act of betrayal. It is viewed as a sign of arrogance and a threat to the stability of the community. In terms of my four capacities of thriving learners above, Edner possesses enormous internal drive to improve, but he does not have cultural support for that. Ironically, allowing him to pursue that work while physically remaining in his local context is actually letting him transcend (but not sever from) that context, engage in a dialogue with it, and overcome some of its learning liabilities.[23]

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[22] Kate Chanock, "The Right to Reticence," *Teaching in Higher Education* 15:5 (2010): 544.

[23] Again, this is not to say that highly collectivist, low Performance-oriented, and low LTO values are not assets in some educational endeavors. But Edner, in conversation about the barriers he faced to seminary education, indicated that a cultural opposition to higher education, and even specifically to planning and preparing sermons, was a barrier he had needed to overcome in gaining support for his seminary work.

Here as elsewhere I use the term *culture* loosely, such that we may speak of a student's denomination as a high power distance culture, her extended family as functioning like a highly uncertainty avoidant culture, and the ethnic group with which she most identifies as one which tends to conceal vulnerability rather than reveal it. We could and should do a similar analysis of ourselves, which might yield with points of mismatch and of congruity in our pedagogical approach to a given student. Sometimes those values collide.

Case Study Four: Crashing into Culture
 In my online courses, I offer an optional video call with each student following the first sermon. (It is optional in part because my seminary has urged us to make the course entirely asynchronous, so I cannot require any time-synchronous component. They may opt to write out a traditional 'self-evaluation,' but most opt for the call.) We have a half-hour session to reflect together on their sermon. The time concludes with more direct coaching and suggestions from me. I enjoy these calls and find that students are generally quite grateful for them. But I recently ended a pleasant (for me) call with a student from a culture known for high concealment of vulnerability. Thinking she had hung up, Amaya let out a very loud, "Whew!" after saying goodbye. I chuckled, but it reminded me that I am inviting students into a deeply vulnerable space. I am from a culture which values revealing vulnerability, but many are not. The *Reflective Capacity* will take a different shape for learners whose cultural preference is to conceal vulnerability, and my delivery of feedback will need to adjust for that. In addition, power distance dynamics are at play more than I am always aware of, coming as I do from hyper-egalitarian Southern California. I am still the professor to a student, and that distance is not entirely flattened by parallel screens.[24] Also, the early term classroom banter during breaks which might have made this encounter less awkward had not taken place. We have focused on student learning capacities as they are impacted by culture. Let's close by considering how we might use the tools of cultural values dimensions to transform our own pedagogy.

Navigating Professorial Power Distance in the Online Environment
 As I prepared to teach online, some of the readings for our required faculty training struck me as minimizing the influence of the professor in the learning process in a way that negated the investment I'd made to gain a body of knowledge and skills to offer my students. "I am still the expert here, after all," I clamored internally. This concern has faded, for me and for others. Theology professor Gayle Gerber Koontz reflects on the way that the online environment has transformed her own pedagogy, decreasing the power distance between learner and teacher. She writes,
> "Lecturing for most of a class session can be appropriate for some purposes, but it is also a way to maintain control of the common space. A lecture can be planned ahead of time and delivered; it does not require the kind of vulnerability that interactive teaching requires—asking probing questions "on your feet," engaging student responses as discussion flows to deepen their perceptual and critical awareness, encouraging students to address each other's thoughts and experiences. (It) requires that a teacher trust his or her intellectual and personal

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[24] Nor am I arguing that it should be. Many high power distance cultures have excellent educational outcomes, and I need a level of authority and credibility to be able to lead and influence my students.

ability to lead fruitful and perhaps emotionally laden discussions. And it requires trust that the group does indeed have the potential to teach and learn together."[25] Teachers need to communicate their credibility—they have real skills, insights, and subject matter expertise that makes them worth listening to. But they also need to be visibly learning as well, and to be, just as visibly, advocates and allies of their students' growth processes.

Navigating Professorial Uncertainty Avoidance in the Online Environment

Koontz's reflections speak to uncertainty avoidance tendencies in faculty as well. One uncertainty I had at first was sending my lecture segments out into cyber space with no control over when or where they would listen. At first the thought of them popping in their ear buds while they were on the treadmill at the gym or listening while commuting was distasteful to me. I want them seated at a desk, earnestly taking notes! I'll admit it, part of me likes my captive, deskbound audience and the illusion of control that dynamic affords me. Yet I have often walked away from a 50-minute lecture session with crystal-clear certainty regarding what *I* transmitted, but very little clarity as to what was actually grasped or appreciated by its recipients. I meant to leave time for questions, but alas, yet again I packed it with content, and now they are packing their laptops and on to the next lecture download down the hall.

In contrast, when I assign three lecture segments, each of which ends with a series of questions for reflection on personal and congregational practices, and then I spend an hour interacting with students about their responses, returning the next day to a fresh set of peer reply posts, I know they are listening. If they're getting fit at the gym at the same time, I'm increasingly okay with that. They might be on Facebook in the classroom, anyway. But this way, I get to watch interaction drive the learning process. My role at that point is to affirm and sharpen the questions they are asking, to provide resources, and offer perspective— in short, to keep the conversation going. As New Testament professor Mary Hinkle Shore wrote, "By designing and contributing to social threaded discussions, teachers keep students coming back to the course web site and promote the feeling among class participants that each student is participating in a community of inquiry, rather than completing the requirements of an independent study."[26]

Navigating Vulnerability in the Online Environment

I shared above about an awkward moment where vulnerability in reviewing a sermon seemed difficult online, though receiving feedback in class may not have been any easier for this student. But in general what has surprised me more is the extent to which students will open up with their peers and with me online in ways I've rarely seen in classrooms. We may not have place, but we have time. Lots of it. Students (and faculty) are quickly disabused of any idea that online learning will save them time. It is time spent differently. Some students simply do the required tasks, but others exhibit a generosity of spirit in their online presence which sets the tone for the whole group. In the first week, I invite students to share a prayer request if they are comfortable doing so. Many shared quite painful challenges. They must then reply to three peers within two days; I of course reply to all. Recently one student, Jorge, replied to everyone, with compassionate, thoughtful responses to each prayer request. Jorge changed the feel of the

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[25] Gayle Gerber Koontz, "Cross-Cultural Learning as a Paradigm for Encountering Educational Technology," *Theological Education* 42:2 (2007), 5.

[26] Mary Hinkle Shore, "Establishing Social Presence in Online Courses: Why and How," *Theological Education* 42:2 (2007), 97.

course for all of us. Next term I will require everyone to reply briefly to everyone else for that initial post. I'm learning that, though the Jorge's of online learning are a gift, I do a lot to set the pace for interaction. If I ignore them, they will go away. If I am generous with my time and care, and diligent with timely feedback, they will rise to that level.

Borrowing from my initial four capacities of successful learners, let me call us, as learners who also teach, to cultivate the agility, in the strange new land in which we find ourselves, to grasp new models of teaching, and the humility to reflect on what is core to our teaching and what could profitably be changed. Let's seize this moment to invest in our growth as educators, and let's be part of cultivating seminary cultures which become supportive ecosystems that foster thriving for all our online teachers and learners. As we pack our bags for exile, let's stock up well on each of these capacities.