

THE RELIGIOUS CLASSROOM: ANALYZING THE CROSS-APPLICATION OF  
INSTRUCTIONAL COMMUNICATION PEDAGOGY TO YOUTH MINISTRIES

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Instructional communication literature suggests that, to achieve optimal student learning outcomes, an instructor must completely engage in all aspects of experiential learning. It follows, then, that youth ministers should also employ experiential learning in their youth ministries to achieve their learning outcome goals among the youth they teach. This research project examined three research questions: 1.) What pedagogical strategies do youth ministers use during large group class sessions? 2.) In what ways do youth ministers employ instructional communication best practices within their pedagogical strategies? 3.) What strategies do former students remember their youth minister using the most? The analysis revealed four key conclusions. First, youth ministers privilege lecture-style delivery formats over other formats suggested as key in the instructional communication literature. Second, youth ministers who do implement discussion-based delivery formats predominately use teacher-student rather than student-student discussion, which is also an instructional communication best practice. Third, although youth ministers talk about instructional communication best practices regarding engagement and action, they rarely provide opportunities for students to do so during large group class session. Finally, former students report recalling that youth ministers privilege lecture delivery over student-to-student discussions or active application activities related to their daily lives. Based on these conclusions, several implications and suggestions for future research are proposed.

Dedicated to The One who guides my steps

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## CHAPTER ONE: PROBLEM AND RATIONALE

Christian church membership is growing in countries such as Africa (11.6% in 1970 to 21.8% in 2010 with an expected rise to 24.7% in 2020) and Asia (7.8% in 1970 to 15.2% in 2010 with an expected rise to 16.6% in 2020). Conversely, such membership is declining in North America (17.2% in 1970 to 12.0% in 2010 with an expected fall to 11.3% in 2020; Center for the Study of Global Christianity, 2013, p. 14). Perry G. Downs (2013), professor of Christian education at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, identifies four problems in Christian education that may be contributing to this decline in church growth:

- 1.) Speaking to immediate needs while neglecting the mysteries of God which results in weak faith (p. 29),
- 2.) Failure to “engage people’s hearts and minds as our Lord did and tend to insult them rather than influence them for God” (p. 42),
- 3.) Emphasizing “need-oriented” messages over “Bible-oriented” messages (p. 135), and
- 4.) Failing to focus on the central task of teaching for spiritual growth. (p. 198)

As these comments illustrate, his argument is less about message content and more about how that message is conveyed. A minister who strives to engage students and allows them to take charge of their own learning will construct a message dedicated to Scripture and spiritual growth (p. 38-39). Unfortunately, 17 to 19-year-olds often report leaving the church because they fail to see its relevance in their lives (Downs, 2013; Stetzer, 2014).

Thus, this project explores youth ministerial teaching as it may or may not align with instructional communication pedagogical best practices. Viewing youth ministers as teachers and the youth as students in this way may shed light onto why youth fail to see the relevance of the

church in their lives, as well as on pedagogical strategies youth ministers might employ more effectively as a means to counter this trend.

To clarify, instructional communication research confirms the value of implementing specific strategies to gain student attention, increase motivation to learn, improve content retention, and ultimately to positively influence affective, cognitive, and behavioral learning (e.g., Brookfield, 2015; Frisby, Kaufmann, & Beck, 2016; Frymier, 2005; Goodboy, Booth-Butterfield, Bolkan, & Griffin, 2015; Ledford, Saperstein, Cafferty, McClintick, & Bernstein, 2015; Montalbano & Ige, 2011; Schrodt, Witt, Turman, Myers, Barton, & Jernberg, 2009; Sprinkle, Hunt, Simonds, & Comadena, 2006; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014; Titsworth, Mazer, Goodboy, Bolkan, & Myers, 2015). This body of research stresses transforming the classroom from that of a traditional teacher-centered learning environment to a student-centered learning environment. In a teacher-centered model, students are typically passive receivers of information and instructors are the active agents disseminating knowledge (Knowlton, 2000, p. 7). On the other hand, a student-centered model focuses instead on student learning (Kahl & Venette, 2010, p. 179). Moreover, research reveals that student-to-student engagement is a critical component of effective teaching and learning in college classrooms (Carlson, Dwyer, Bingham, Cruz, & Prisbell, 2006; Johnson, 2009; Johnson & LaBelle, 2015). It follows that youth ministers who replace a teacher-centered model with a student-centered one may also achieve better learning outcomes among the youth they serve.

Research typically conceives of religious communication and instructional communication as separate disciplines. This disconnect may have contributed to the limited number of studies focused on instructional communication theories, concepts, and models

applied to religious communication and contexts. Even fewer studies have done such cross-application specifically within the context of youth ministry.

To begin to fill this gap, this research project frames youth ministries as classroom environments in which the youth minister is the teacher and the youth members are the students. In doing so, this study then considers instructional communication best practices employed in the context of the youth ministry classroom. The project is grounded in a belief that the pedagogical best practices identified in instructional communication research may also positively influence student learning in youth ministry contexts. If such cross-application is useful, adopting them in youth ministry settings may play a role in reversing the trend of young adults choosing not to attend church regularly or even to leave it altogether. This research project is the first of many studies required to gain a thorough understanding of these relationships. In other words, this study explores the degree to which youth ministers employ instructional communication best practices in their large group youth meetings.

In essence, then, the primary audience of this research is not only youth ministers themselves, but also seminary instructors who train youth ministers in their craft. This research is also useful for instructional communication scholars as it extends theoretical best practices for traditional classrooms into religious contexts. Finally, this study extends the IDEA model of effective instructional risk and crisis communication into religious contexts.

### **Definitions**

Words can have multiple connotative and denotative meanings. Thus, several key terms are operationally defined as follows:

- 1. Action:** IDEA Model component offering specific action steps the receiver is to enact (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2013).

2. **Instructional Communication Best Practices:** pedagogical strategies identified in the instructional communication literature as most effective for achieving desired student learning outcomes related to affect, cognition, and behavior.
3. **Christian Education:** the ministry of bringing the believer to maturity in Jesus Christ (Downs, 2013, p. 16).
4. **Church:** common noun; a building for public Christian worship and activities (different from the proper noun “the Church”).
5. **Distribution:** IDEA Model component focused on which communication channels are used to send the message (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2013).
6. **Explanation:** IDEA Model component which answers questions about what something means (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2013).
7. **Internalization:** IDEA Model component that attempts to motivate receivers to attend to and retain a message (Sellnow and Sellnow, 2013).
8. **Sermon:** a lecture on a Biblical passage or topic.
9. **Student-Centered Model:** a model of teaching where the classroom is driven by the students (Kahl & Venette, 2010).
10. **Teacher-Centered Model:** a model of teaching where the classroom is driven by the teacher (Knowlton, 2000).
11. **The Church:** proper noun; a group of people characterized by being believers in God; the religious body (different from the common noun “church”).

**12. Youth Group:** also referred to as youth ministry; age-specific group gathering to discussing God, the Bible, and life situations.

**13. Youth Ministers:** also called Youth Pastor; a person of certain theological education – either official or unofficial – in charge of leading the youth ministry at a church.

### **Organization**

This thesis is organized into five chapters. The first chapter describes the problem and rationale for the project. The second chapter reviews relevant literature pertaining to the topic. The third chapter discusses the methodologies utilized. The fourth chapter provides the results and the fifth chapter offers conclusions, implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Ministers usually spend years studying at seminary where leading theologians help shape their understanding of the Bible. Beyond learning content, however, these aspiring ministers also learn how to teach and preach. What is unclear, however, is the degree to which these “how to’s” are grounded in empirical research regarding instructional communication best practice pedagogies. This chapter provides groundwork by, first, describing research conducted on preaching and Christian education for cross-application implications. Second, to evaluate youth ministries through the lens of instructional communication research, best practices in instructional communication are explained. Finally, this chapter closes by proposing the research questions explored in this study.

### **Christian Education**

Christian education research has focused on senior pastors’ teaching effectiveness by examining types of sermons (Goodmason, 2006), preaching styles (Keller, 2012; Wilson, 2017), preaching methods (Earls, 2014; Malmström, 2015), communication training (Carrell, 2009; Emslie, 2016), habits or qualities (Perera, 2009; Rainer, 2014; Rinne, 2013) and teaching young children (Downs, 2013).

One of the underlying themes in Christian education is persuasion. In other words, the primary purpose of preaching is transformational. In other words, persuasion is the primary goal (Carroll, 2009; Emslie, 2016). Transformational preaching is entrenched in the desire for audience members to change their attitudes, behaviors, and/or beliefs. In fact, the primary purpose of Christian education is to model the teaching practices of Jesus and, thus, to change lives (Downs, 2013, p. 33). These preaching goals are, in fact, similar to the goals of teachers (Malmström, 2015).

To achieve such aspirations, both preachers and teachers employ the fundamentals of persuasive speaking as outlined in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Aristotle posits three key persuasive appeals: ethos (credibility or authority), logos (logic), and pathos (emotion). He asserts the better a speaker utilizes each of these appeals, the more persuasive he or she will be. Whether or not preachers realize it, they often apply these appeals in their sermons. Appeals to ethos focus on the perceived speaker character and credibility. Appeals to logos address logic and reasoning and appeals to pathos tap into positive and negative emotions. Some may argue that a preacher has inherent credibility, which comes with his or her training (traditional credibility). To be truly persuasive, though, pastors must use more radical legitimization through Biblical evidentiary support and intertext conceptualizations (Malmström, 2015). In doing so, they also appeal to logos. In the realm of emotion, the most common tactic is to utilize fear appeals (Joseph & Thompson, 2004). These appeals are characteristic of what some refer to as "fire and brimstone" pastors who threaten listeners with the idea of an eternity in Hell if they do not follow the pastor's advice. Pastors use strategic language to invoke emotional responses in their audience such as feelings of conviction through establishing meaning in their words (Gobbel & Ridenhour, 1981).

Using Jesus as an exemplar, Downs (2013) recognizes various teaching methods as legitimate (p. 38). He argues that effective Christian education must incorporate different methods, depending on what communication scholars call the rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1968). "There is no single best way to teach; neither is there a single "biblical" method of teaching. A wide variety of options exist, and the wise teacher will learn to teach in various ways" (Downs, 2013, p. 38). He recognizes the importance of learning outcomes and suggests a taxonomy proposed by Norman Steineker and M. Robert Bell (1979). Not unlike Bloom's (s.f. Anderson,



2013) taxonomy, this taxonomy is comprised of the following levels: 1.) Recall (I remember), 2.) Recall and Approval (I like), 3.) Recall and Speculation (I think), 4.) Recall and Application (I try), and 5.) Recall and Adoption (I adopt). According to Downs (2013), students must engage in both affective and cognitive learning in order to reach the level of adoption, which is the ultimate goal (p. 38). He also argues that “concepts can be communicated in winsome ways, and students can be led to consider possible applications in their daily lives. But formal education tends to be less effective than informal education in helping students reach the higher tiers of learning” (p. 39).

Christian educational manuals also stress the importance of preachers applying their messages to real-world scenarios; however, they rarely offer guidelines for going the step further to reach the adoption level (Earls, 2014; Keller, 2012; Perera, 2009; Rinne, 2013). Such application usually takes the form of examples, narratives, and metaphors. In one preacher guide, the author suggests that sermons should follow Jesus’ example of using “object lessons” or acted out examples (Earls, 2014). Such examples help the audience connect with the lesson in more substantial ways, which, in turn, increases sermon retention. Perera (2003) argues application should be integrated into sermon material because without it, listeners are likely to be left questioning its relevance to their daily lives. Ironically, it is this very pedagogical approach that Downs (2013) claims is less effective when teaching students. Moreover, ministers must acknowledge where students are situated in their faith journey to adequately involve students both affectively and cognitively.

James Fowler (1981) developed a model of faith depicting six stages a person goes through while developing his or her faith: 1.) Intuitive/Projective Faith (Infancy/Early Childhood), 2.) Mythic/Literal Faith (Childhood and Beyond), 3.) Synthetic/Conventional Faith

(Adolescence and Beyond), 4.) Individuate/Reflective Faith (Young Adulthood), 5.) Conjunctive Faith (Mid-Life and Beyond), and 6.) Universalizing Faith (Mid-Life and Beyond). Stage three is particularly critical for the purposes of this research project. Fowler (1981) argues that it is in stage three that students begin to synthesize beliefs from previous stages and then adopt the belief system advocated by the church. Stage three is characterized by a strict and clear separation of “us” versus “them.” Moreover, students depend on youth ministers to make value judgments for them and to tell them how to think about Scripture. Consequently, students engage in a logical fallacy known as *argumentum ad verecundiam* – appeal to authority – where they believe something is true because someone in an authoritative position says it is true. Overdependence youth ministers as authorities in this way can lead to students to become complacent about the messages they hear.

Christian education best practices advise pastors to reject such complacency and instead encourage critique (Rainer, 2014; Perera, 2003; Rinne, 2013). Receiving feedback in such contexts mirrors the self-reflective practices taught in oral communication classrooms. Throughout these guides, authors share their own experiences collaborating with fellow pastors or family members to engage in critical, constructive feedback regarding their sermons, much like peer evaluations (Rainer, 2014; Rinne, 2013). Pastors are also advised to record their sermons and watch them later to engage in critical self-evaluation (Rainer, 2014). Additionally, pastors must engage in ongoing audience analysis and adaptation to ensure their messages are perceived as relevant by their audiences (Perera, 2003). Audience analysis is a type of check on content and offers feedback into audience mindsets. As one author wrote, “Nothing will improve your preaching like thoughtful feedback ... you also need careful, constructive criticism ... The practice is helpful to all of us” (Rinne, 2013, para. 18-19). The level of self-reflection, critique,

and audience analysis youth ministers exercise dictates the levels of learning students are likely to attain.

Youth ministers who adopt more informal patterns of education engaging students in ways which help them may be more successful in achieving desired learning outcomes. Moreover, applications to the daily life experiences of students and providing opportunities for critical thinking are critical to achieving desired learning outcomes. There is no one right way to do so. In fact, research suggests youth ministers may employ one of eight different models. These include the friendship model, spiritual awareness model, servant-leadership model, liberation model, biblical-hermeneutic model, liturgical-initiation model, social justice model, and Christian discipleship model (Canales, 2006, p. 205). Four primary leadership styles drive similar aspects of the youth group as the ministry models: 1.) Servant leadership, 2.) moral leadership, 3.) spiritual leadership, and 4.) transformational leadership (p. 25). The chosen ministry model and leadership style affect the taxonomic level students can reach and the learning outcomes they are likely to achieve.

In addition to the eight models of youth ministry and four leadership styles, research also identifies four types of preachers: the Homiletician, the Sermonic Essayist, the Bible Teacher, and the Exhorter (Wilson, 2017). Each of these preaching styles revolves around a specific purpose that dictates other aspects of sermon delivery such as time, use of text, and heart/mind appeals. The Homiletician asks the audience to feel, the Sermonic Essayist asks the audience to think, the Bible Teacher asks the audience to understand, and the Exhorter asks the audience to act (Wilson, 2017). Three distinct types of sermons exist: topical sermons, text sermons, and expository sermons (Goodmason, 2006). These sermon types influence how a pastor uses the Bible. Topical sermons use various passages in the Bible to support a topic or argument, text

sermons use one passage as a stasis point for a topic or argument, and expository sermons use passages sequentially to allow the topic or argument to derive from the text (Goodmason, 2006). Despite these three sermon styles, recent scholars argue in support of Haddon Robison's claim that "expository preaching is essential in a postmodern context" (para. 5). Current conversations continue to propose similar arguments. Tim Keller (2012), a well-known Presbyterian pastor, suggests that another key aspect to sermon style is the pastor's ability to deliver his or her chosen style well with the right combination of "warmth and authority/force" (para. 6). Doing so establishes credibility and agency, as well as enhances perceptions that the pastor is relatable and accessible.

Although relatively little research exists about teaching pedagogy in religious settings, this review illustrates some of the work that may inform teaching practices in church settings. The next section focuses on instructional communication research best practices as a means to improve teaching practices in religious contexts.

### **Instructional Communication**

Pedagogical practices in college classroom contexts has changed over the years. Today, research emphasizes experiential learning as first proposed by Dewey (1938) as a fundamental best practice. A good deal of recent work focuses on how teachers might achieve this when teaching online and when using technology in the classroom. The traditional model of "teaching as they were taught" has been replaced with learner- and learning- centered pedagogical best practices. Youth ministries may require similar paradigm shifts in teaching styles to achieve the learning outcome goals they seek among their students.

Foundational to most pedagogical best practices is what Kolb (1984) describes in the form of a four-stage learning cycle. This model is a prime example of transitioning from teacher-

centered lessons learner- and learning- centered ones. It is from this four-stage cycle that scholars have proposed multiple methods to achieve effective student engagement. Research has evaluated a plethora of best practices, but for the purposes of this paper, the focus is specifically on using mixed modality teaching (Brookfield, 2015; Kolb, 1984; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014), promoting self-regulated learning (Bandura, 1993; Brookfield, 2015; Madden, Ellen, & Ajzen, 1992; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014), and fostering critical thinking (Brookfield, 2015).

Some instructional communication research advocates that teachers adopt a servant-leadership approach to achieve these outcomes (Campbell, Strawser, & Sellnow, 2017). In his seminal study, Robert Greenleaf (1970) defines servant leadership as predicated on the desire to serve others first. This goal of serving others is what then inspires that person to lead. Campbell et al. (2017) assert that the religious underpinnings of servant-leadership inspire teachers to engage pedagogies that complement instructional communication best practices. There exists for instructors—and particularly for youth ministers as instructors—a moral obligation to serve students in such a manner, leading to greater levels of self-efficacy and learning (Stewart, 2012). Adopting a servant-leadership mindset may arguably lead to a more student-centered classroom and engage in instructional communication best practices pedagogy of technology and self-regulated learning (Campbell, Strawser, & Sellnow, 2017). Indeed, Downs (2013) essentially argues for a similar focus by claiming “when the objective becomes changing students’ lives, the focus and activities of the teacher will be influenced...[Jesus] could take time to listen to students and interact with them because his agenda was their lives, not his content” (p. 33). Similarly, servant-leadership beseeches youth ministers to care more about the student’s life than any content he or she may want to convey.

To succeed in Christian education and instructional communication pedagogy, this study focuses on three instructional communication best practices: employing mixed modality teaching, encouraging self-regulated learning, and fostering critical thinkers.

Mixed modality teaching occurs when an instructor inserts multiple pedagogical approaches into his or her classroom (i.e. visual/oral, hands-on/passive). Instructors deliver content through a variety of mediums and do so sometimes face-to-face and other times online (a.k.a. blended, hybrid). Brookfield (2015) suggests “given that students clearly have different learning habits and preferences, varying the communication styles and modalities you use in a lecture has long been argued as an essential component of good practice” (p. 73). Integrating technology can enhance student engagement when used effectively (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014).

Mixed mode is not limited to technology-enhanced methods. Other strategies include introducing periods of silence, changing the position you lecture from, breaking lectures into 10-15-minute chunks, using clickers or other classroom response systems, and employing social media (Brookfield, 2015, pp. 77-78). These techniques diverge from the traditional model of classroom instruction and, in so doing, tend to spark student interest and engagement.

According to Svinicki and McKeachie (2014), learning outcome achievement may also be fostered by encouraging self-regulated learning. The authors explain that instructors can do so by setting goals, increasing self-awareness, applying previous knowledge to help understand new concepts, and teaching specific strategies. Complementary to these characteristics are motivational cues – both intrinsic and extrinsic – which can be stimulated via teaching pedagogy (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014). However, such teaching pedagogy must emphasize building self-

confidence, developing information literacy, and practicing learning decisions as channels to encourage students to control of and responsibility for their own learning (Brookfield, 2015).

Self-regulated learning fosters self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) defines self-efficacy as “the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes” (p. 193). This notion of personal agency influences peoples’ emotions, attitudes, and beliefs and takes place cognitively, motivationally, affectively, and selectively (Bandura, 1993). Once students become self-motivated to engage in the learning process, the next step is for them to challenge their preconceived biases and perceptions through critical thinking.

Critical thinking is primarily concerned with evaluating various lenses and frameworks through which we work and learn. Critical thinkers engage in an ongoing process of appraising the “correctness” of the assumptions they hold. Instructors should encourage students to become critical thinkers, not only because it is a basic skill used outside of the classroom, but because it expands the platforms on which students can work and interact with others. Students report that they develop critical thinking skills when they work in small groups to examine real-life case study examples (Brookfield, 2015, p. 156).

To teach students effectively to become critical thinkers, instructors must refrain from sharing their personal opinions during classroom discussions. Students tend to perceive teacher perceptions as correct and, thus, find it difficult to move past the assumption that the instructor is always right (Brookfield, 2015, p. 158). In essence, to foster critical thinking skills, teachers must place the burden on students to develop informed opinions and move past the preconceived and unchallenged assumptions they often have when they enter the classroom.

These three practices are some of the fundamental stasis points in instructional communication. Moreover, instructional communication pedagogies are not necessarily limited

to traditional classroom settings. For example, instructional communication occurs in risk and crisis situations, technology-enhanced environments, digital games, and forensics education (Sellnow, Limperos, Frisby, Spence, Sellnow, & Downs, 2015). This research project adds to the literature by examining it in a religious context.

Thinking of youth ministries as metaphorical classrooms makes it easier to conceptualize how to incorporate such practices into a religious environment. Doing so may uniquely diverge from traditional youth ministry preaching, thus sparking student interest to engage more fully with the material.

### **Theoretical Framework**

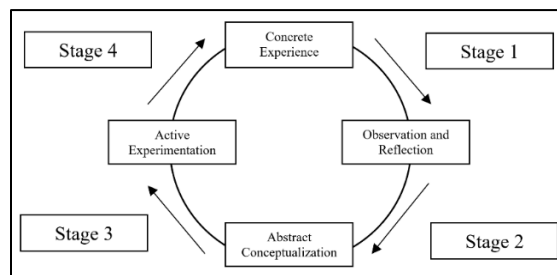
The IDEA model for effective instructional communication in risk and crisis settings extends Kolb's (1984) cycle of learning as an easy-to-understand and simple-to-use model for designing instructional risk and crisis communication messages. Both the IDEA model and Kolb's cycle of learning theory are rooted in John Dewey's (1938) experiential learning theory. The following paragraphs summarize the historical evolution of experiential learning and the learning cycle to ultimately create the IDEA model and describe its basic tenets.

John Dewey (1938) first conceived of experiential learning as comprised on an ongoing interaction among thinking, doing, and reflecting. He argued that traditional education privileged thinking over doing and reflecting. Consequently, he argued, students may be achieving cognitive learning outcomes but at the expense of affective and/or behavioral learning outcomes. Moreover, students tended to forget what they learned quickly. Hence, he created the Chicago School where teaching and learning was grounded in experiential learning as an answer to this flaw in teaching practices. Unfortunately, the model he provided in the Chicago School for effective pedagogy did not migrate into educational systems and practices for decades.



More recently, Kolb (1984) extended Dewey’s ideas in ways that made the outcomes of experiential pedagogical practices measurable. He did so by illustrating learning in the form of a four-stage cycle. These stages are: concrete experience, observation/reflection, abstract ideologies, and application (p. 30). Students must be able to engage in new experiences (concrete experience), reflect on those experiences (observation/reflection), draw their own abstract concepts or theories (abstract conceptualization), and interact with their concepts in various problem-solving situations (active experimentation) to become the most effective learners possible (Figure 1). Kolb’s notions have been used to ground numerous studies since its inception more than three decades ago. His experiential learning theory has been applied as a framework in multiple contexts including higher education (Healey & Jenkins, 2000; Kolb & Kolb, 2005), laboratory education (Abdulwahed & Nagy, 2009; Konak, Clark, & Nasereddin, 2014), nursing education (Gibbs & Priest, 2010; Hartley, 2010), service learning (Chan, 2012; Petkus, 2000), and public speaking (Stokes-Eley, 2007).

To aid students in this endeavor, teachers should aim to complete this cycle in each of their lessons. Unfortunately, in most college classrooms, and in most youth ministries, teachers (or youth ministers) focus primarily on stage two—and do so at the expense of the other three stages (Kahl and Venette, 2010, p. 180).



*Figure 1.* Kolb’s four stage cycle of learning

The IDEA Model (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2013; 2014; 2019) is an instructional communication framework grounded in Dewey’s (1938) experiential learning philosophy and

Kolb's (1984) learning cycle theory. Sellnow, Lane, Sellnow, & Littlefield (2017) suggested this model as a "simple and easy-to-employ canon for spokespersons and media reporters to follow when offering instructional risk and crisis messages to affected individuals and groups" (p. 555). In other words, unlike Kolb's model, which can be dense to understand and employ by practitioners that do not conduct instructional communication research and practice as a central part of their profession. A good deal of research confirms that the IDEA model is a practical tool for non-academics to use as they design instructional messages that achieve affective, cognitive, and behavioral learning in risk and crisis contexts (e.g., Frisby, et al., 2013; Littlefield, et al., 2014; Sellnow, et al., 2014; Sellnow et al., 2015a; Sellnow et al., 2012; Sellnow, Johansson, Sellnow, & Lane, 2018). Hence, it seems plausible to extend the IDEA model as a practical tool for youth ministers to use when designing effective instructional lessons in religious contexts.

Based on multiple message-testing experiments, the IDEA model simplifies Kolb's four-dimension plus four-stage cycle into four main components: 1.) Internalization, 2.) Distribution, 3.) Explanation, and 4.) Action. Internalization concerns motivating and engaging the audience, which is emphasized through proximity, timeliness, and personal impact. Distribution involves the different channels and modes used to convey a message. Explanation offers message content in ways that is intelligibly translated to a given audience. Sellnow & Sellnow (2013) argue "the explanation component must be (a) brief, (b) understandable by the target audience, and (c) offered along with the components of internalization and action" (para. 8). Action provides specific directives about what to do or, in some cases, what not to do (Figure 2).

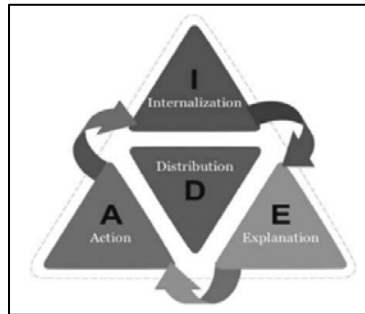
A good deal of research has applied the IDEA model to risk and crisis situations. For instance, Sellnow, Johansson, Sellnow, & Lane (2018) discovered that, when all IDEA model elements were addressed in an instructional crisis message, audience members were motivated to

attend to the message, understood what was happening, and indicated their intentions to engage in the prescribed actions for self-protection. Similarly, Sellnow, Lane, Sellnow, & Littlefield (2017) concluded it was not necessary to tailor messages to different audiences when all elements of the IDEA Model were present in it. In risk and crisis situations, then, instructional messages employing the IDEA model are more effective in achieving desired learning outcomes than those that do not include all components of it (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2013).

Furthermore, studies have examined instructional messages in more specific contexts. IDEA model-influenced instructional messages studied during the PEDv outbreak, for instance, demonstrate the need for these messages to come before an acute crisis event and to have a clear explanation about the nature of the crisis. (Sellnow, Parker, Sellnow, Littlefield, Helsel, Getchell, Smith, & Merrill, 2017; Sellnow, Sellnow, Helsel, Martin, & Parker, 2018). Messages aiming to inform audiences should be attuned to the preferences (i.e. learning style preference) of the intended audience (Sellnow, Sellnow, Lane, & Littlefield, 2011). Unfortunately, through an analysis of the Ebola epidemic, Sellnow-Richmond and Sellnow (2018) determined instructional risk and crisis messages place more emphasis on the explanation element of the IDEA model over the internalization or action elements. Sellnow and Sellnow (in press) ultimately argue for the IDEA model as an effective tool for emergency managers acting as spokespeople, as well as for educators teaching a new generation of professionals how to communicate during a risk or crisis situation.

This literature primarily examines the IDEA Model as an effective tool used for designing messages and communication responses during times of crisis. The model has not yet been used to evaluate instructional communication effectiveness in religious settings. The IDEA Model may also be a valuable tool for training youth ministers to design lessons that round the

cycle of learning in ways that achieve desired affective, cognitive and behavioral learning outcomes. Consequently, this study extends research by employing the IDEA model in the religious context of youth ministry.



*Figure 2.* The IDEA model (Sellnow, Lane, Sellnow, & Littlefield, 2017)

### **Research Questions**

A good deal of instructional communication research points to the fact that—when teachers are not schooled in empirically tested pedagogical best practices—they tend to teach as they were taught (Brookfield, 2015; Kahl & Venette, 2010; Knowlton, 2000; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014). Moreover, such teaching tends to fail in terms of achieving desired learning outcomes among students (Kahl & Venette, 2010). It follows that youth ministers may be learning their craft in similar ways, teaching as they were taught even when research points consistently to its ineffectiveness. Thus, this research project attempts to contribute to the field of research by cross-applying instructional communication theories, concepts, and models to teaching and learning pedagogies used in Christian education generally and youth ministries specifically. Thus, youth ministers are considered teachers and the youth they work with are the students. Therefore, there is a potential relationship between instructional communication best practices for classroom environments and youth member knowledge retention and self-efficacy in youth ministries. Foundational research must be laid to understand the current pedagogy employed by youth ministers and whether such strategies align with instructional communication

literature. Additionally, knowing what former students recall as the pedagogical strategies used in their respective youth ministry can confirm what youth ministers themselves argue as their pedagogical practices. Perhaps this and similar studies will ultimately improve teaching and learning in ways that begin to turn the tide of young people leaving the Church because it seems irrelevant to them. To do so the following research questions are posed:

*RQ1: What pedagogical strategies do youth ministers use during large group class sessions?*

*RQ2: In what ways do youth ministers employ instructional communication best practices within their pedagogical strategies?*

*RQ3: What strategies do former students remember their youth minister using the most?*

### **Summary**

This chapter reviewed literature pertinent to the research questions posed in this study. The next three chapters discuss the methods and results, as well as some conclusions, implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

This research project employed a triangulation methodology (Denzin, 1978) to analyze the pedagogical strategies used by youth ministers. Triangulation is a methodological approach wherein data is collected using diverse methods in order to comprehend thoroughly what is happening in a given context (Denzin, 1978). The four different types of triangulation are: methods triangulation (use of both qualitative and quantitative methods), investigator triangulation (use of more than one researcher), theoretical triangulation (use of more than one theory), and data analysis triangulation (use of more than one method to analyze data). A triangulated methodology is useful because it can improve “reliability and formal generalizability” (Tracy, 2013, p. 40). It may also enhance credibility, provide a more complete consideration of the overarching problem, increase confidence in data, and obtain stronger research findings singular methodologies would have missed (Renz, Carrington, & Badger, 2018, p. 827; Tracy, 2013, p. 236). In terms of the present study, triangulation deepens understanding surrounding instructional communication in religious contexts and allows for more generalizability than would be possible without it.

The following paragraphs outline the methods employed in detail. First, the participants and procedures are described. Then, each instrument used in the data collection is detailed. Finally, the data analysis process is explained.

### **Participants**

Nine (9) youth ministers from the central Mississippi, gulf coast Mississippi, and Orlando Florida areas participated in interviews for this study. In total, eight males (88.9%) and one female (11.1%) participated in the study, six (66.7%) of which were Caucasian/white, two (22.2%) were Hispanic/Latinx, and one (11.1%) was African American/Black. They ranged in

age from 29-47 with a maximum of 20 years in youth ministry. Five (55.6%) youth ministers reported working at a Baptist/Southern Baptist church while the remaining four (44.4%) reported working at a non-denominational church.

In addition, 155 former youth ministry students participated by completing an online survey recalling their experiences. There were 42 males (27.1%) and 112 females (72.3%) with one participant reporting as other (0.7%). Of the participants, 125 (78.1%) were Caucasian/White, 16 (10.0%) were Hispanic/Latinx, eight (5.0%) were African American/Black, seven (4.4%) were Asian, three (1.9%) were mixed race, and one (0.6%) was Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. Some respondents reported themselves as more than one race/ethnicity and, in these cases, were coded in more than one demographic category. In total, 111 (71.6%) participants reported themselves to be 18-24 years old and 44 (28.4%) as 25-30 years old. One participant did not report age. There were 117 (75.5%) participants who reported going to a youth ministry at the same church they attended while 37 (23.9%) said they did not attend the same church as their youth group and one (0.7%) participant preferred not to answer. Similarly, 126 (81.3%) of participants reported their parents went to the church where they attended youth group while 28 (18.1%) said their parents did not attend the same church as their youth group and one (0.7%) participant preferred not to answer.

## **Procedure**

### **Institutional Review Board**

The structured interview questions, survey questions, consent documents, and recruitment methods were sent to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Central Florida for approval. All suggested changes were made and approved before any recruitment of participants or data collection took place.

## **Structured Interviews**

Youth ministers were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling methods via Internet searches and email. Local youth ministers from the Mississippi Gulf Coast and Orlando, Florida areas were recruited and then asked to suggest other youth ministers that the researcher might contact.

Interviews with youth ministers took place at the participants' location of choice and lasted anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour and fifteen minutes. Each youth minister was told about all ethical considerations and consent information, including the minimal risk of psychological discomfort associated with the interview questions. Each minister was given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Each participant was assured no identifying information would be tied to them or the churches they served. To ensure such anonymity, the chosen pseudonyms were used and any mention of specific church names were blocked out in the resulting transcript documents. All interviews were audiotaped for transcription purposes. The interviews produced 217 double-spaced pages of transcript data. All electronic documents (i.e. transcriptions of the interviews) were saved in password protected files in accordance with ethical considerations of participant privacy and confidentiality.

## **Survey Questionnaire**

Survey participants also were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. Facebook was used as the primary recruitment tool. A link to the survey was distributed via Facebook posts with an invitation to participate. The same message was posted in various Facebook groups. Apps such as GroupMe and Allo were used to reach out to groups with the same message and link included. Some participants also then shared or re-posted the messages asking friends to also take the survey. Finally, a UCF professor distributed a link to the survey to



students in her large introduction to communication classes. The professor made participation mandatory but also provided an alternative assignment for students not able to, willing to, or eligible to take the survey. A total of 240 surveys were collected; however, only 168 were deemed usable for this research project.

## **Instruments**

### **Interview Protocol**

Each interview was comprised of several core questions (see Appendix A). The researcher prodded with additional follow-up questions when warranted. Participants were first asked to (a) provide background information on themselves including their path toward becoming a youth minister and where the classes they attended while in seminary. Participants were then asked (b) questions about the pedagogy they use to teach their youth groups, including (c) material they were given in seminary, (d) their motivation to search for new ways to delivery sermons, and (e) what method of sermon delivery they believe is most effective. An electronic questionnaire was sent to each youth minister asking for demographic information after completing their respective interviews.

### **Survey Questionnaire**

To measure former youth ministry student perceptions regarding their youth minister's teaching strategies, the Principals of Adult Learning Scale was modified to fit the context of youth ministry. The questionnaire consisted of both open- and closed-ended questions based on the communication scale regarding their perceptions of the strategies youth ministers employed during a youth group session. These questions were followed by open- and closed-ended demographic questions (see Appendix B).

**Principals of Adult Learning Scale (PALS).** Conti (1979) created a self-report measure to gauge how teacher-centered vs. student-centered an instructor is on a spectrum. The measure tests seven different factors: 1.) Learner-centered activities, 2.) personalizing instruction, 3.) relating to Experience, 4.) assessing student needs, 5.) climate building, 6.) participation in the learning process, and 7.) flexibility for personal development. Scores between 0-145 indicate more of a teacher-centered style of instruction whereas a score between 146-220 indicates more of a student-centered style of instruction. The Principals of Adults Learning Scale (PALS) measures these seven factors using a 44-item, 6-point Likert-type summated rating scale. A test-retest method performed by Conti revealed an alpha of 0.92 (Conti, 1979) and later field testing revealed concurrent validity and congruence (Conti, 1978, 1979).

For this study, only four of the seven factors specified by the PALS were analyzed. The other three factors (Assessing Student Needs, Climate Building, and Flexibility for Personal Development) were not included because they were not relevant to answer the research questions and to mitigate the potential for unreliable responses due to survey fatigue. Of the factors used, Factor one is labeled as Learner-Centered Activities. This factor asks questions such as, “I encourage students to adopt middle class values.” On the survey, the language was modified to ask, “He/She encouraged students to adopt Christian values.” Factor two is labeled as Personalizing Instruction. This factor asks questions such as, “I use lecturing as the best method for presenting my subject material to adult students.” On the survey, the language was modified to ask, “He/She used monologue preaching to present his/her material.” Factor three is labeled as Relating to Experience. This factor asks questions such as, “I plan learning episodes to take into account my students' prior experiences.” On the survey, the language was modified to ask, “His/Her lessons took into account students' prior experiences.” Factor four is labeled as

Participating in the Learning Process. This factor asks questions such as, “I allow students to participate in developing the criteria for evaluating their performance in class.” On the survey, the language was modified to ask, “He/She allowed students to participate in developing the material of weekly lessons.” A fifth factor was also created which was labeled as Technology Use. This factor asks such questions as, “He/She allowed students to participate in the lesson through technology.”

Reliability tests were run on each of the five factors. Learner-Centered Activities (N = 5;  $\alpha = 0.20$ ) and Personalizing Instruction (N = 4;  $\alpha = 0.47$ ) did not obtain high reliability scores and, therefore, were not included in the data analysis. However, Relating to Experience (N = 6;  $\alpha = 0.83$ ), Participating in the Learning Process (N = 4;  $\alpha = 0.69$ ), and Technology Use (N = 6;  $\alpha = 0.82$ ) all had acceptable reliability scores. Technology Use was added as a factor as it helped answer the research questions. Results from it were included in the data analysis due to its high reliability score.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Interview Analysis**

Interview data was examined using a thematic analysis to discover emergent themes. More specifically, an etic approach based on established “conceptual categories provided by our disciplinary knowledge and theory” was used to analyze the interview data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 95). For this study, first-level coding focused on the four stages of Kolb’s (1984) learning cycle model and second level coding centered on the elements of Sellnow and Sellnow’s (2013; 2014, 2019) IDEA model. First-level coding produced three (3) themes related to learning cycle pedagogical best practices of lecture and discussion and no (0) themes related to the learning cycle best practices of application or synthesis. Second-level coding revealed

themes representing each element of the IDEA model (internalization, distribution, explanation, action). Interview responses were examined for the presence (or lack thereof) of each learning cycle stage or IDEA model element. Finally, responses were coded based on redundancy/frequency and intensity as described by Bogdan and Biklen (2007).

### **Survey Analysis**

This survey yielded a total of 240 responses. After the data was cleaned, 156 responses were deemed to be usable. Next, each factor was turned into a variable, which was followed by a descriptive statistical analysis through SPSS software to determine the frequency measure of each variable.

### **Summary**

This chapter explained the methodological approach used in this study. Method triangulation was used through both qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys to garner data about pedagogical practices used in youth groups. Chapter Four describes the results of the analysis.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS**

This chapter provides the results of interview data collected from nine youth ministers and survey data collected from former youth ministry students. These results are reported as they address each research question. The three research questions are: 1.) What pedagogical strategies do youth ministers use during large group sessions? 2.) In what ways do youth ministers employ instructional communication best practices within their pedagogical strategies? 3.) What strategies do former students remember their youth minister using the most?

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question asked: What pedagogical strategies do youth ministers use during large group sessions? To answer this question, qualitative interviews with the youth ministers were coded.

In total, 284 qualitative comments from the youth ministers were coded as they addressed pedagogical best practices described in Kolb's (1984) learning cycle model. Coding revealed 129 (19.7%) comments concerned lecture-based preaching strategies while 114 (17.4%) comments concerned teacher-student discussion-based preaching strategies. Only 41 (6.3%) comments were related to student-student discussion-based preaching strategies (see Table 1). Some comments were double coded if they addressed more than one area.

To visualize what lecture-style preaching looks like, one preacher reflected on his experience in a youth ministry:

So, we had rows of chairs. Always lined up and then, him with his stand and his papers if he had it. Or if he just memorized it off the cuff. Um, and that was, that was always it. It was really never like, um, maybe we were in a circle this week

or we're just in small groups only. It was always, that's his setting. Us in rows, him talking to us.

Another minister described their own preaching similarly by stating:

So, literally...in terms of structure, [it's] really not all [that] different from what we do on a Wednesday night....So, in terms of structure, this is a pretty traditional church. [The] Wednesday night message...by nature, it's monologue.

At the same time, however, some youth ministers asserted they employed more teacher-student discussion preaching. One minister reported using facilitated small groups. For example, "They would go into their small groups and I would have three to five questions....And I would try to walk with them through using those questions."

Although lecture and teacher-student discussions were the primary format types, a few youth ministers mentioned using more student-student discussions as a pedagogical strategy.

One youth minister asserted:

They're the ones who teach it, they're the ones who organize it. I'm just the host. I just get to, you know, hang out....What I'm trying to do with these students is work myself out of a job. Where I'm not the one preaching, I'm not the one teaching, I'm not the one leading. They are.

For the most part, youth ministers reported using a traditional classroom, monologue-lecture style format or a small group teacher-student discussed format. Such strategies are more minister-centered. Conversely, only a few youth ministers actively employed student-student discussion formats wherein students lead the lesson, not the youth minister. Such a strategy is more student-centered.

Table 1

*Pedagogical Strategies Used During Large Group Sessions*

	N = 284	%
<b>Lecture</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>45.4%</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My teaching time is more of a preaching style than a discussion [style – preaching, lecture, teaching, sermon, etc.]</li> </ul>	58	45.3%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We would do the large group of worship, but then there would be one speaker that would kind of give fifteen-minute, ten-minute deal. [description]</li> </ul>	44	34.4%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literally...in terms of structure, it really [was] not all that different from what we do on a Wednesday night [structure; comparing previous youth ministry with current youth ministry]</li> </ul>	12	9.4%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The engagement level in a large group is just making sure everyone is paying attention and occasionally, like and throwing out questions [engagement]</li> </ul>	8	6.3%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wednesday is more monologue [monologuing]</li> </ul>	7	5.5%
<b>Teacher-Student Discussion</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>40.1%</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• And then when you're asking questions, um, if they're good questions and if it's a good, um, topic, I think they're engaged...engaged as well. [questions as engagement; teacher-lead questions]</li> </ul>	46	41.1%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was like someone threw a Bible study together and said alright guys, let's sit around and talk about it. [teacher-lead discussion about text; small groups]</li> </ul>	37	32.7%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion does take place. [discussion within the lecture]</li> </ul>	18	16.1%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There's always more discussion when it's, when...when it's about, when the students get to participate. [Teacher-lead engagement]</li> </ul>	13	11.6%
<b>Student-Student Discussion</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>14.5%</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where I'm not the one preaching, I'm not the one teaching, I'm not the one leading. They are. [Student-lead lecture]</li> </ul>	14	34.1%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...It's not a ministry for the students, it's a ministry of the students. [Student-lead ministry/activities; student leadership]</li> </ul>	14	34.1%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The focus was having high school students lead small groups for middle school students. [Student-lead discussion]</li> </ul>	13	31.7%

## Research Question 2

The second research question asked: In what ways do youth ministers employ instructional communication best practices within their pedagogical strategies? To answer this question, second-level coding was conducted on the qualitative interviews with the youth ministers.

As a pragmatic extension of Kolb's (1984) learning cycle theory, the IDEA Model (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2013) was applied to the two main pedagogical strategies identified in research question 1: Lecture and Teacher-Student or Student-Student Discussion. A total of 637 comments were coded according to the IDEA Model: (a) Internalization, (b) Distribution, (c) Explanation, and (d) Action. An "Other" category also arose from the data in the form of two subcategories: Relationship Building and Pre-Session Activities. Some items were double coded if they included elements from more than one IDEA model category.

### Lecture

Even though there were 284 comments coded for lecture-based and discussion-based formats, all 656 comments were coded for the IDEA model with some comments being double coded into multiple categories. Of the 637 (67.1%) total comments coded, 312 (49.1%) comments were Internalization, 109 (17.2%) comments were Distribution, 159 (25.0%) comments were Explanation, and 76 (12.0%) comments were Application (see Table 2).

**Internalization.** Internalization signifies the act of motivating or engaging the audience in your message. In the context of this format of preaching, youth ministers often stated their use of games, storytelling, or questions to catch students' attention. One youth minister responded, "we usually have like a funny video or a game. Something to kinda break the ice." The same



youth minister further elaborated on their technique for engaging students throughout the message:

Table 2

*LEAD Model in Lecture-Based Formats.*

	N = 637	%
<b>Internalization</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>46.2%</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...If you're gonna use illustrations, have it connect them with God's Word to understand it better. [Illustrations as engagement – stories, objects, props, etc.]</li> </ul>	55	17.6%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There's always more discussion when it's, when...when it's about, when the students get to participate. [Discussion and student participation as engagement – connecting with students]</li> </ul>	49	15.7%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I will stop and ask questions...[Asking questions as engagement]</li> </ul>	46	14.7%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Um, but there were other times that we, you know, we did movement. [Games as motivation – movement]</li> </ul>	42	13.5%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I think appealing to the majority of the senses [Mixed modality as engagement – touch, smell, sight, hearing, taste]</li> </ul>	23	7.4%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• And so, eccentric speaker will always keep attention longer than a monotone speaker will. [Speaking or communication style – vocal delivery, presentation, etc.]</li> </ul>	23	7.4%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• And invitational things that brought people in. [Invitation or introduction as motivation – includes worship, food, climate]</li> </ul>	18	5.8%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If I'm, if-if there's one thing that's going to engage students, it's the Good News. It's the Gospel. It's Jesus. [The text as engagement – includes topic selection]</li> </ul>	14	4.4%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When you're showing a video on the screen that's contemporary that captures their attention. [Technology use as engagement]</li> </ul>	13	4.2%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everyone would respond well if-if the preacher, the youth pastor would tell a joke, people would laugh. [Humor as engagement]</li> </ul>	7	2.2%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can still do the interaction walk around, touch a guy on his leg or shoulder and, um, make a point. [Interaction as engagement – touch, eye contact, etc.]</li> </ul>	4	1.3%

<b>Distribution</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>16.9%</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I will use physical illustrations if I have something there in my hands to show them. [Face-to-face; physical objects, delivery, in-person, speaker, visuals, etc.]</li> </ul>	67	61.5%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>And I will use video illustrations. [Technology]</li> </ul>	32	29.4%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>They can see it or they have their own copy of God's Word. [Text]</li> </ul>	9	8.3%
<b>Explanation</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>25.6%</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>And we'll have a passage. Usually, I'm, I'm and expositional passage kinda guy. You know, I'll go verse-by-verse. [Type/Method]</li> </ul>	68	42.8%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>And so, the Gospel's gotta be in there somewhere. [Text in the message; Referring back to the Bible; All about Scripture]</li> </ul>	49	30.8%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For me it's about them gettin' it. For me, I didn't get it. [Understanding]</li> </ul>	31	19.5%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Part of the problem with student ministers, or communicators of the Gospel in general, is that they try to do one message that really can be about four. [Amount of time]</li> </ul>	15	9.4%
<b>Application</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>11.3%</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You're talking about things that are relevant to their lives. [Relevant application]</li> </ul>	41	53.9%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>...how they apply this and I wasn't listenin'. [Process or understanding how to do it; Response]</li> </ul>	14	18.4%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>And, then we, occasionally, it's like the vision casting portion of it. [Visualization]</li> </ul>	11	14.5%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We want you first and foremost your relationship with God and then how do you equate that to the real world and be successful [Prioritization or preparation]</li> </ul>	6	7.9%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>...and the practice [Action]</li> </ul>	4	5.3%

It's like okay here it is, get ready....You'll usually here me say, alright guys if there's one thing that you could remember, if there's only one point you could remember today, it's this....And so, there's times when I'll say, alright guys, hey write this down. And so, I've learned to do that over the last couple years. Hey, write this down.

One youth minister revealed a unique approach taken by his youth minister to engage students:

It was just the way in which he presented the material that gave me an opportunity for my brain to continue to work where it was more processing for me rather than just hearing somebody telling me what they thought was right for my life. For instance, when he was dressed like a fireman, it really engaged my brain to think, okay he's not just talking about firemen, he's talking about how each of us stand in the gap for somebody.

Questions also played a big role in the Internalization aspect of the IDEA Model in this case. A youth minister who discussed the different ways to engage a small group versus a large group suggested, “the engagement level in a large group is just making sure everyone is paying attention and occasionally throwing out questions.”

**Distribution.** Distribution encompasses the different channels which may be used to convey a message. Some of the youth ministers mentioned, “all of mine have like visual things with it,” “having [God’s Word] on the screen so they can follow along as you are reading it,” and “we show a little video that intros into the more serious time of the night.” Other youth ministers, however, still advocated for face-to-face dissemination as the primary channel. For instance, a youth minister asserted, “I will always think the most effective communication style will be in-person. I mean, Jesus did it for three years and we’re still talking about it.” On reflecting on tactics used by previous youth ministers, one minister reminisced about:

The other guy would give handouts. But they were more youth oriented. But I do remember some lessons from [him] and [the handouts] were more, more story driven or topical, like I can remember his stuff. Or sometimes he would break it up and he would do some visuals. A few object lesson kind of things. So, those were more visual.

**Explanation.** Explanation, in this context, centers around going back to the Bible and talking about what Scripture really means. Most of the youth ministers emphasized the need to have all lessons rooted in Scripture.

A youth minister adamantly argued, “it's about Scripture. It's what this whole thing was about.” He continued:

Anything that happens whether it's youth ministry, missions, church planting, local ministry, outreach, whatever, it has to be starting with the Word of God. It has to be regulated by the Word of God. It has to be formed by the Word of God. It has to be motivated by the Word of God. And it has to be with the understanding of the Word of God.

Other youth ministers unsurprisingly echoed this same sentiment with statement such as:

Like Jesus and what he's done there on the cross, through his resurrection, like that's gotta be, even if it's an Old Testament story, if it's a Psalms, if it's a word of wisdom like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, it's gotta have Jesus somehow. So, the Gospel's gotta be in there somewhere.

In reflections about former youth ministry experiences or their own preaching, the ministers shared stories such as, “like I said, for me it's about them gettin' it. For me, I didn't get it,” “You cannot [be] the preachers who lay down their Bibles saying, we don't need this today,” and “Don't get so caught up, don't get flashy without your content.”

**Action.** Action indicates relating the information back to the every-day life of the audience. For example, in this case, application would be asking youth students to perform a certain act based off a Biblical value (i.e. Pray every day.) One minister asserted application starts in the preparation stages:

They all struggle with the same insecurities, they all struggle with the same fears. And because they all struggle with those things, they all struggle with the same idols. And so, when I'm putting together a message, I'm being really careful to listen to students. I'm being really careful to pay attention to students. I'm really trying to put myself in their frame of mind, because the truth is, their struggles aren't that different from mine.

He later went on to say, "I gotta start asking, what does this mean to a teenager? How do you as a follower of Christ actually become what it is that Scripture's calling us to be, um when, when you're fifteen."

One youth minister shared an experience of dressing up like a football player to help the student apply the lesson to their lived experiences:

And, of course, that tied into their walk with God as well. That their lives, that from [what] God wants to do for them and how He wants to use them, if they're not willing to put in the preparation, if they're not willing to do the things that they can do to be ready for what God has for 'em, then He's not expecting them to just jump right out there in the game.

The potential consequences for leaving application out of a message were exposed when another youth minister mentioned, "When they're not engaged, I find [it's] typically when it's just something that doesn't hit their life, or they haven't experienced yet."

## **Discussion**

Of the 175 (18.5%) comments coded, 30 (17.1%) comments were Internalization, 41 (23.4%) comments were Distribution, 60 (34.3%) comments were Explanation, and 59 (33.7%) comments were Application (see Table 3).

**Internationalization.** Internalization in lecture formats is similar for discussion formats, too. One youth minister who was a strong advocate for small groups over large groups asserted:

I think the best way to engage students will always be small groups. In a large group it's a little different because the best you can do is look a person in the eye. But in small groups, it's really where there's a person and they feel loved and connected because it's a small. You're able to do that.

The minister went on to say, "there's easy engagement because you can look each student in the eye and have solid conversations." Another minister mirrored such statements by pointing out, "then [you can] have those meaningful conversations in a smaller group. Where you feel safer to share."

The youth ministers also made comments about strategies they use to engage students in discussion formats. One minister posited:

And so, I wanna bring stories, I wanna bring a hook, something to bring them in. And, uh, I want them to participate.... And then I'm gonna bring in interesting elements to make sure that I hope bring the students down the path I want them to go.

Another minister revealed, "There's a lot more fun stuff. There's a lot more games... We kind of walk them into these small groups with discussion questions ....It's not somebody sitting down...telling you what it says." Props and object lessons are also used to introduce the topic and engage students in the discussion as demonstrated by a minister who stated:

I use....object lessons at times if they're appropriate. We were talking about scheduling and I used an object lesson with stones and a bucket and sand and filling up your time, you know, with stuff, if you don't prioritize first.

Table 3

*LEAD Model in Discussion-Based Formats.*

	N = 190	%
<b>Internalization</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>15.8%</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• And so, I wanna bring stories, I wanna bring a hook, something to bring them in. [Illustrations as engagement – stories, object lesson, props, etc.]</li> </ul>	8	26.7%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• But in small groups, it's really where, there's a person and they feel loved and connected... [Connection and small groups as engagement]</li> </ul>	7	23.3%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There's a lot more fun stuff. There's a lot more games. [Games as engagement]</li> </ul>	5	16.7%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• And I want them to participate. [Participation as engagement – including students reading Scripture]</li> </ul>	4	13.3%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...because we were [a] small group, he would [say] hey I have a question about this word [Questions as engagement]</li> </ul>	3	10.0%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• And I gotta do it in such a way as to catch their attention, to keep their attention, to encourage them, to engage them [Presentation as engagement]</li> </ul>	2	6.7%
<b>Distribution</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>21.6%</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...they can still be come and be influenced by the goodness of God through the people of God [Face-to-face interactions; In-person influence; Small groups; Questions]</li> </ul>	20	48.8%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...had the handouts...[Physical objects; Visuals]</li> </ul>	11	26.8%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I've used videos before [ Technology]</li> </ul>	5	12.2%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hey guys, here's God's word. Now pay attention. And just let's talk about it. [The text]</li> </ul>	4	9.8%
<b>Explanation</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>31.6%</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We're presenting them with questions on a topic and they spend some time in those tables talking. [Explanation through questions and discussion; Student participation]</li> </ul>	34	56.7%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• And he would have some points, a Scripture passage, and then, all these other points would point back to It. [Going back to Scripture; Returning to a Christian theme]</li> </ul>	23	38.3%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...some preaching that was spiritual motivation...and then there were other classes I would take that were much more instructional teaching [Type or description]</li> </ul>	3	5.0%

<b>Application</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>31.0%</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We're instilling them and teaching them how to relate, how to love, what the Word of God calls us all to do. [The Bible telling us how we should live]</li> </ul>	25	42.4%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...there's a time of accountability. [Accountability as application]</li> </ul>	9	15.3%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We try to break them into small groups...where they can be equipped to live out their faith....[Small groups as application/preparation]</li> </ul>	7	11.9%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...then I talk to them in a very practical sense about the world that they live in. [Relevance and life scenarios as application]</li> </ul>	7	11.9%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...a lot of involvement is primarily working with youth doing outreach discipleship. [Discipleship or mentoring as application]</li> </ul>	6	10.2%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• So, we try to put them in a places where they're the ones leading, they're the ones doing, they're the ones maturing. [Student leadership and student participation as application]</li> </ul>	5	8.5%

**Distribution.** Face-to-face interactions are a more common channel with small groups as revealed by statements like, “and then we break off into small groups where their leaders listen to their hearts and their voices” “they’re not delivering a lesson. They’re walking through life with students,” and “maybe if they’re not converted, they can still come and be influenced by the goodness of God through the people of God.” These sentiments were strengthened by one ministers further explanation:

So, in our small group program, they are paired with some of our adult leaders who are investing in our students. They are paired with some of those adult leaders and they go through a lesson in small groups where they discuss the material together rather than someone just lecturing them.

One minister who teaches both a large group and a small group comparatively stated:

High school, I could sit here for forty-five minutes and do a discussion with them where we’re walking through and I’m helping them discover on their own instead



of just telling them the point and helping them find the point....Which is a lot of asking good questions back to them. You know, as they ask a question and I respond with other questions to help them process it.

Face-to-face interactions are not just between adults and students. Sometimes small groups are facilitated by older students to younger students. For example, in such a format, “the focus was having high school students lead small groups for middle school students.”

Yet, the youth ministers also voiced developing visuals as their distribution channel of choice. A youth minister who was comparing his previous youth ministry experiences with mentioned, “[one guy] would do some visuals. A few object lesson kind of things. So, those were more visual.”

**Explanation.** Explanation, as articulated in the interviews, seems more prevalent in discussion-based formats than in lecture-based formats. A youth minister reflecting on previous experience described it as, “a small group of people but [the youth minister] would teach clearly from Scripture....And he would have some points, a Scripture passage, and then all these other points would point back to it.” A separate minister confirmed a similar previous experience by explaining, “the youth pastor would do a typical Bible study where we would read the content, read the Scriptures, and then discuss it.”

The ministers stressed returning to Scripture or Christian values during these small group discussions or conversations as was articulated by one minister who claimed, “a lot of our conversations always come back to a Christian theme.” Another minister detailed his process:

I just start off with reading Exodus 20 which is the Ten Commandments. And all I did was ask them...to just observe. What do you see? Talk to me about what you see. And don't tell me, thou shalt not murder. That's already there on the page.

Tell me what you see in the things that are talked about, the differences of one commandment to another. And we started, I just wrote up on the board things that they would observe.

The same minister further elaborated:

I'm just asking questions....I'm not answering those, I'm not picking those things out....So, the discussion goes on and goes on and goes on....We just read it....They're picking that all out and you see them looking in Scripture and picking that out.

Another youth minister commented on the balance between using Scripture via lecture-based formats and discussion-based formats by mentioning, "Most of what I do is discussion based. I have moments where...I'm going to drop some knowledge on Scripture....That's what I want you to see. A lot of it, though, is discussion."

**Action.** Action in discussion-based formats is about making the Bible practical to students as was revealed by comments like, "There's great benefit to it. Not just spiritually, but physically as well. So, we talk about that and then I talk to them in a very practical sense about the world that they live in." One youth minister called small group time their "equipping time" where:

We try to break them into small groups...where they can be equipped to live out their faith so they can begin to see how they should be different because of the power of the Gospel. And then, how should I be interacting with the world around me because...with the Gospel transforming me, there's a call for me to then go do something with that.

Another minister asserted the regulatory power of Scripture by arguing:

We're instilling them and teaching them how to relate, how to love, what the Word of God calls us all to do....That's where we start is the Word of God for the efficiency of Scripture. It's infallibility. The Word of God regulates our relationships. The Word of God tells us how to deal with the problems in our relationships. The Word of God tells us how we ought to relate to one another.

A minister who recognized student growth in other areas of their life acknowledged a relationship between doing and maturing by stating, "we try to put [the students] in places where they're the ones leading. They're the ones doing. They're the ones maturing....This is the time they either get it or they walk away from it."

### **Other**

Of the 137 (14.5%) comments coded, 87 (63.5%) comments were Relationship Building and 59 (43.1%) comments were Pre-Session Activities (see Table 4).

**Relationship Building.** Relationship Building is conceptualized as comments made about actions taken by the youth minister himself or herself to build relationships with his or her students (teacher-student). Relationship building strategies were critical to the youth ministers, revealed by comments such as, "but the best part of my days is when I get to invest in students," "[the] most effective teaching comes from my relational connection with the group I'm teaching....The relational aspect of things is too important for me. Like I have to have that," and "you can build relationships with them. And you need to."

These strategies were memorable aspects of the youth ministers' previous experiences as well. One youth minister reminisced, "I loved my youth pastor and his wife. I mean, I was at their house all the time. Their way to bring children or students to God was super relational." Another minister reflected, "he figured that out because he talked to us. He was intentional with

us.” Such a familial climate in the youth ministry was advocated by a youth minister who acknowledged, “[we’re] establishing relationships with them and then helping them to build Godly relationships with one another....In a familial sense....We have very paternal relationships with them. Even when they’re not our kids.” One youth minister revealed their strategy for building relationship with students:

Our goal is to always to keep the fellowshippin' together....For me, I say with them it's very transparent. I want them to know my testimony. I want them to feel comfortable as well to open up if they have somethin' that they may be strugglin' with.

Another minister also explained their strategy:

I'll come in there and get to greet, especially the new folks, and then everyone else in there I'll make sure to give a high five. Hey, how ya doin'? Hey, I saw on Instagram you had a friends-giving this week, how'd that go? Or hey I haven't seen ya lately. Are you in jail or, you know, whatever? Try to pretend like I'm keepin' up with 'em.

Similarly, some youth ministers described their desire to mentor some students on a more intimate and personal level. A youth minister recalled a lack of such mentoring in their own life by lamenting, “I wish I woulda had somebody pour into me on purpose. Somebody who said, hey, are you interested in knowing more about God’s Word? Yes? Then, let’s meet together. Let’s do one-on-one discipleship.” Another minister visualized what mentoring, or discipleship, looked like and the purpose for it:

I typically am spending a lot of my time meeting with congregants or students, depending on who I’m discipling. I have a handful of students that I’m pouring

into. So, I'm spending time and engaging with and trying to help prepare them for leadership. Or help them in their leadership.

In building these relationships, one youth minister asserted, "I find we're gonna be able to achieve things by the Spirit of God in our Christ established friendships and relationships that other people won't."

**Pre-Instruction Activities.** Pre-Instructional Activities are ones students engage in that are meant to build connections between students (student-student). For example, one youth minister described what such pre-session activities consisted of:

We start out and we just open the doors....We allow the kids to buy snacks and drinks and stuff....We've got a section of our worship area that is all round tables and chairs. And so, they just sit and eat and mingle and chat....And then we also have several games that are out for those who just wanna come and hang out and just kinda chill for a little bit.

These pre-session games help set the climate of the group as one youth minister asserted, "I definitely feel that it helps if you have a gaming console. If you have things that kids can just go and grab and do." Another minister expounded on this description by explaining:

They're hanging around like a pool table or a video game system or couches. There's a few that'll go on the other side of this fake faux wall....They'll go on the other side of that and sit in our worship area. So, there'll be a few students sittin' around there talking.

However, sometimes these pre-session activities are not independent games students play on their own or with a select few other students. One youth minister talked about using student lead games to involve all students and set the appropriate group climate:

We have a student leadership team that does all of our games. So, that's their responsibility. Every week they just come up with some fun activity in their group. They find somethin' they wanna do to get the kids engaged and have fun. Some kind of ice-breaker that is fun for them to do. So, they come up with that.

A minister, discussing such student-to-student engagement, remarked simply, “we have games and we have goofiness and we have fun. We do a lot of stuff.”

Table 4  
*“Other” Categories within the IDEA Model*

	N = 146	%
<b>Relationship Building</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>59.6%</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...my desire is that through my relationship with the church and the family I have in the church is that I can point them to Christ...[Paternal relations; loving correction, hanging out, friends, etc.]</li> <li>• And he figured that out because he talked to us. He was intentional with us. [Being intentional]</li> <li>• ...we have, so some of the older high school guys that have been mentoring and meeting and loving... [Mentoring; Discipleship]</li> <li>• When the Scripture doesn't regulate our relationships then we kinda determine that ourselves. [Scripture regulated relationships]</li> <li>• We talk to them at the same rate everybody else should be talked to. [Equality; Giving them a voice]</li> <li>• I'll come in there and get to greet, especially the new folks and then everyone else in there, I'll make sure to give a high five. [Greeting]</li> <li>• ...I say with them it's very transparent. I want them to know my testimony. I want them to feel comfortable as well to open up if they have somethin' that they may be strugglin' with. [Transparency]</li> <li>• ...through conversations through life. The bar, the shooting range, we just hang out at the beach. [Experiential]</li> </ul>	26	29.9%
	19	13.9%
	16	11.7%
	7	5.1%
	7	5.1%
	6	4.4%
	3	2.2%
	3	2.2%

<b>Pre-Instructional Activities</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>40.4%</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• And then some other students will lead worship and then, they'll hand it off to me. [Worship]</li> </ul>	27	45.8%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You'd see people hangin' out talkin'. And some people are playin' games, some people are playin' pool, some people are just chattin' about whatever. [Games, mingling, hanging out, groups, etc.]</li> </ul>	25	42.4%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...we have a student leadership team... [Student leadership]</li> </ul>	4	6.8%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...we start out and we just open the doors and, uh, we have food and stuff we allow the kids to buy, snacks and drinks and stuff as well that they can purchase. [Climate]</li> </ul>	3	5.1%

### Research Question 3

The third research question asked: What strategies do former students remember their youth minister using the most? To answer this question, survey data from adults who went through a youth ministry experience were examined quantitatively through descriptive statistics.

After the reliability scores were calculated, a descriptive statistic frequency test was run. Participants reported Relating to Experience ( $M = 3.73$ ;  $SD = 0.73$ ) as the variable they remembered being used the most. Participants revealed Participating in the Learning Process ( $M = 3.21$ ;  $SD = 0.80$ ) as the variable they remembered being used the second most often. And participants expressed Technology Use ( $M = 3.00$ ;  $SD = 1.00$ ) as the variable they remembered being used the third most often.

Table 5

*Summary of Descriptive Frequency Statistics for each PALS Variable (N = 168)*

Variable	Standardized Coefficients		
	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std Dev</i>
Learner-Centered Activities	168	3.40	0.48
Personalizing Instruction	168	3.03	0.67
Relating to Experience	168	3.73	0.73
Participating in the Learning Process	168	3.21	0.80
Technology Use	168	3.00	1.00

### Summary

This chapter reported the results from a qualitative thematic analysis of interview transcript data and a descriptive quantitative analysis of survey data. The next chapter provides conclusions, implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research based on this project.



## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION**

This chapter provides conclusions and implications drawn from the study, as well as suggestions for future research regarding instructional communication as employed by youth ministers. Ultimately, results from this and similar research could change the perceptions of irrelevance that seems to be causing young people to leave the Church.

### **Conclusions**

Four important conclusions are drawn from this analysis. Two focus on teacher-centered pedagogies, one on rounding the learning cycle, and the fourth on strategies. First, the youth ministers interviewed in this study reported heavy reliance on lecture style delivery. This aligns with a tradition teacher-centered model that instructional communication research has revealed to be ineffective in college classrooms (Kahl & Venette, 2010; Knowlton, 2000). Youth ministers who do not get formal training in pedagogical best practices appear to resort to teaching as they were taught, which research reveals is not conducive to the most effective student learning (affective, behavioral, cognitive; Brookfield, 2015; Kahl & Venette, 2010; Knowlton, 2000; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014).

Second, even when youth ministers engage in discussion, it is primarily teacher-to-student rather than student-to-student. Research suggests student-to-student engagement and discussion is far better for classroom climate and achieving student learning outcomes than teacher-student discussion (Carlson et al., 2006; Johnson, 2009; Johnson & LaBelle, 2015; Kahl & Venette, 2010). Some youth ministers may find it difficult to relinquish control, thus inhibits them from encouraging peer-peer discussion which have been shown to augment student learning outcomes in large-lecture environments (Ledford et al., 2015).

Third, youth ministers are not rounding the learning cycle by employing strategies related to all elements of the IDEA model. These youth ministers focus their strategies in Kolb's (1984) stage two of the learning cycle and rarely address stages one, three, or four. Confirming this gap is the fact that they focus far more on the explanation element of the IDEA model than on internalization or action (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2013). That is, youth ministers do not tend to construct messages designed to motivate students to attend to them, distribute them using a variety of channels, or prescribe and practice specific actions steps based on the Biblical messages explored in a given lesson. As such, their lessons may be failing to produce the learning outcomes desired by youth ministers (Sellnow et al., 2017).

Fourth, former students recalled that youth ministers from across denominations used the Relating to Experience strategy the most. They did so by attempting to engage students through stories as applied to a student's everyday lived experiences. However, by doing so using a teacher-centered or lecture-based approach rather than student-centered approach, their sincere attempts appeared to fail in terms of motivating students to realize the relevance of or to actually employ them in their daily lives beyond the church classroom walls (e.g., Conti, 1979; Kahn & Venette, 2010; Knowlton, 2000). This conclusion supports the youth ministers' self-reports which demonstrates the validity of the themes determined from the youth ministers' responses.

### **Implications**

This research suggests several steps to improve large group youth ministry sessions. Before providing them, however, it must be noted that the impetuous does not solely lie with youth ministers. A certain level of responsibility also lies on seminary schools and ministry educational platforms as the stasis point for implementing pedagogical best practices.

Downs (2013) advocates that preachers strive for the last tier in Steineker and Bell's (1979) taxonomy: Recall and Adoption. He asserts further that it is not enough for youth ministers to merely apply their message to everyday scenarios that students face. Rather, preachers must take it one step further by creating habits wherein students begin to adopt these attitudes and behaviors. His arguments are not dissimilar to research behind the IDEA Model. It is not enough just to explain the message to them. Some sort of action step is required.

This study unveils some of those weak areas in youth ministry teaching. Thus, there are steps youth ministers should take to improve their teaching and augment student learning. First, youth ministers must get students to open the Bible more as part of the Explanation stage of the IDEA Model. Youth ministers fall short if they only refer to Scripture once or twice in a session. Rather, they should encourage students to continuously be engaged with and by analyzing Scripture throughout the lesson. Although it may seem hard to require students to bring a copy of God's Word with them to church, allowing them to have electronic Bibles, offering copies of the Bible before the lesson, and offering incentives or rewards (i.e. candy) may help mitigate this challenge.

Second, youth ministers need to explore different modalities of disseminating their message as part of the Distribution stage of the IDEA Model. There seems to be an emphasis on face-to-face channels of communication and a few visuals like a PowerPoint slide or short video. However, youth ministers should recognize the full breath of distribution channel they may utilize. For example, engaging students in more interactive mediums such as handouts or technology-based games/platforms. However, using other students in the youth group as a message channel would also be advantageous. Allowing students to talk face-to-face with one

another, not just having a student lead a lecture, creates a better climate and engages more students in the lesson.

Third, youth ministers must go beyond words in the Action stage of the IDEA Model. It seems youth ministers do talk about application, especially how the Bible relates to students' every-day lived experiences. Unfortunately, words are not sufficient at this stage. We know students learn when they are doing, so more action-oriented application is necessary. For instance, if a lesson is focused on evangelism with students' peers, youth ministers should not only talk to students about how to share the Gospel. They should also allow students time to practice such conversations among themselves in the youth group. Similarly, if youth ministers are lecturing about spiritual disciplines like forgiveness, it is not enough to simply tell students to forgive others. Youth ministers should not only discuss how to forgive others but should also have their students practice doing so by, for example, having them write a letter to someone they need to forgive. Doing so in a low-stakes, safe environment makes those practices more habitual and prepares students for higher-stakes, less safe occurrences.

Employing these strategies may not only engage students more in the lesson, but they may potentially help students take control of their own learning and help them see more relevance in Scripture. When students start critically involving themselves in the lesson, they may overcome Fowler's (1981) lament of student's falling into *argumentum ad verecundiam* (appealing to authority) fallacy.

To ensure youth ministers are aware of and focus on empirically tested pedagogical best practices, this process should begin in seminary. There are existing courses for teaching ministers how to preach to congregations, but as the interviews in this study revealed, preaching to adults and teaching students is very different. Therefore, courses should be offered on how

best to teach students during a youth group session. These courses should introduce best practices and encourage youth ministers to shy away from “teaching as they were taught” (referring to their own past youth ministry experience). Additionally, instructional communication scholars should partner with seminaries and theology schools to host interactive, formal workshops about instructional communication best practices for youth ministers who are already in the field and no longer in seminary. If youth ministers are given the chance to learn and practice these pedagogical strategies, they may be more willing and more likely to use them during their youth ministry classes.

### **Limitations and Suggestions Future Research**

Although rich data was collected from the in-depth interviews and surveys, there are limitations under which this study operated. Primarily, one limitation was the youth ministers who were interviewed. All nine people were from the Southeast region of the United States and represented only two different Protestant denominations rendering high generalizability difficult. It is possible my research could have yielded different themes or results if more youth ministers from more heterogeneous backgrounds were interviewed. Thus, future research should strive to not only interview more youth ministers, but ensure they are interviewing youth ministers from different regions of the United States and from different denominations or religious affiliations. Additionally, although data saturation had been met, the interviewers were guided by my open-ended questions. Different results or themes may have been concluded with more targeted questions or more in-depth discussion about certain aspects of the youth ministers’ pedagogy.

A second limitation concerns the nature of the methodology itself. The interviews and surveys are only based on self-reports, which can unintentionally differ from reality. This form of self-reporting also calls on youth ministers and survey participants to remember details they

may be far removed from time-wise. Thus, it may be hard to accurately recall events or situations years after they happened. Therefore, future research should expand on this research by conducting experimental and ethnographic studies or employing another research methodology.

Third, there were many limitations associated with the survey. One of the main limitations was access to the desired sample population. It proved extremely difficult to access the minors in the interviewed pastors' youth ministries. Even though permission was granted from the IRB to obtain electronic signatures from parents or guardians, the return rate was negligible. It seems as if there may have been too many barriers to screen through in order to reach the targeted sample population. Unfortunately, this access dilemma resulted in no data collected from the direct students' perspectives. Rather, the survey data came from adults who had been in a youth ministry and who were not necessarily directly related to the ministers interviewed. Thus, paired sample tests could not be run between the two groups (youth ministers and former youth ministry participants). Furthermore, the survey participants from the updated survey were from various Protestant denominations or religious affiliations. Intergroup comparisons were not conducted on this demographic factor, but it could be an important intermingling variable. Being able to discern between denominations or religious affiliations may have exposed other relationships not tested in the study. Similarly, demographics in general were not taken into account in the statistics run. Future research, then, is warranted to obtain such data and conduct more revealing statistical tests. Doing so may uncover discrepancies between what youth ministers think they are doing and what their live audience perceives while also accounting for demographic information.

Finally, the reliability levels of the scale used to obtain data from former students did not yield acceptable reliability ratings in two of the categories. These were also the categories

former students claimed not remembering youth ministers using. These results need to be confirmed in additional studies using measures that yield higher reliability scores.

Future scholars should also cross-apply other instructional communication components to youth ministry contexts. For example, the ways in which a youth minister facilitates climate can be evaluated through the lens of instructional communication classroom climate literature. Even though this study tested perceived use of pedagogical strategies as viewed from previous youth ministry students, future studies may wish to gather data on attitudes and opinions associated with their youth ministry experience. Such data would allow communication scholars to formulate best practices for youth ministry instructional messages as well as understand the effectiveness related to various aspects of the youth ministry experience.

### **Conclusion**

Whether in a youth ministry or in a classroom setting, students learn best when content is explored in ways that highlight its relevance to their daily lives, is delivered intelligibly using multiple channels and modes, and includes specific action steps that are practiced and applied to daily life scenarios. Instructional communication best practices may, in fact, inform youth ministry pedagogical practices in positive ways. If youth ministers are to reach their students in meaningful and lifelong ways, this study suggests they should capitalize on what instructional communication research tells us about pedagogical best practice strategies. Failing to do so may contribute to the problem of shrinking church membership and participation across North America. Although more research is most certainly warranted, employing these and other pedagogical best practices may contribute to slowing down or even reversing the trend of declining membership based on perceptions of irrelevance.

## **APPENDIX A: YOUTH MINISTER INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**



## Introduction

- A. Hi, I'm Lakelyn Taylor. I'll be the one conducting the interview. May I receive your permission to record? (Receive permission or take detailed notes if the participant wishes not to be recorded.) Thank you for making time to participate in this interview today. As was mentioned to you, you'll be answering some questions about your preaching practices.
- B. Before we begin, I would like to let you know that this study has been approved by the IRB at the University of Central Florida and all of the information you provide during this interview will be anonymized. In other words, your name will not be used anywhere in the thesis. Instead, I will use a pseudonym to protect your anonymity. There is a minimal potential risk of slight psychological discomfort and, if you feel uncomfortable answering any of the questions you can decline to respond. In light of what I have just told you, I do need you to sign this consent form saying you agree to participate in the study. You should also know that you are free to quit the interview at any time and request your responses be pulled from the research. (Receive consent)
- C. Do you have any questions before we start?

## Body

1. First, I'd like to ask you to tell me a little about yourself.
2. Now, can you describe what your path toward becoming a youth minister was like?
3. What types of things do you do on a day-to-day basis as part of your position?
4. In the activities you do with youth, would you describe yourself as "preaching," "teaching," "working with," or something else?

- i. Please, explain why.

**Transition: These next questions are all about your experiences preaching to youth.**

5. Talk to me about the way youth ministry preaching/teaching was modeled for you.
  - i. What did it look like?
  - ii. What behaviors were incorporated to engage you as a student?
  - iii. Who modeled it for you?
  - iv. What did you think of that type of preaching/teaching?
  - v. How engaged were students under this type of preaching/teaching model?
6. So, now describe your own, current style of preaching/teaching/working with/ \_\_\_\_\_ to your youth group.
  - i. What is the typical process you engage in to prepare for a session with the youth?
  - ii. Please, describe what I am likely to witness if I were to observe you preaching/teaching/working with/ \_\_\_\_\_ on any given week?
    1. What behaviors do you use to engage your students?
    2. Why do you use these specific behaviors?
    3. How engaged do you think your students are during a given devotional? Why?
  - iii. What are some of the challenges you face when preaching/teaching/working with/ \_\_\_\_\_ to the youth in your church?
    1. What do you do to address these challenges?

7. In what ways is your current method of preaching/teaching/working with/\_\_\_\_\_ to youth similar to the way it was modeled for you?
8. In what ways is your method different?
9. In your opinion, what behaviors are the most effective to incorporate into a devotional/lesson?
  - i. Why?
  - ii. What does that model look like in practice?
10. What other factors, if anything, have influenced that way you preach/teach/work with/\_\_\_\_\_ to your youth group?
11. Is there anything else would you like to add?

#### Conclusion

**Transition: Thank you for participating in this interview!**

12. Would you be willing to do a follow up interview if I discover additional questions?

### Demographics Survey

Q1 Age

---

Q2 Sex

- Male
- Female
- Other
- Prefer Not to Answer

Q3 Ethnicity

- African American/Black
- Asian
- Caucasian/White
- Hispanic/Latinx
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- Other
- Prefer not to Answer

Q4 Denomination

- Baptist
- Methodist
- Presbyterian
- Catholic
- Other
- Prefer not to Answer

Q5 How many years have you been a youth ministry leader?

---

## **APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONS**

Q1 Did you participate in a youth ministry when you were in middle/high school?

Yes

No

Q2 What denomination was the youth group you attended?

Instructions: *Think back to when you were in a youth ministry as you answer these questions. The following set of items ask about strategies you may or may not have witnessed your youth minister using in his or her preaching during a large group meeting. For each item, please, click the number that most closely reflects how often you remember each strategy being used. For instance, if you don't remember technology being used then you would click on the 1 (Never); if you remember technology always being used then you would click on the 5 (Always).*

Q3 Please, click the number that most closely reflects how often you remember each strategy being used.

	Never	Almost Never	Occasionally	Almost Always	Always
He/She allowed students to participate in developing the material of weekly lessons.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She used disciplinary action when needed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She encouraged students to adopt Christian values.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She used monologue preaching to present his/her material.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She arranged the room so that it was easy for students to interact.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q4 Please, click the number that most closely reflects how often you employ each strategy.

	Never	Almost Never	Occasionally	Almost Always	Always
He/She got a student to motivate himself/herself by talking to him/her in the presence of other students.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
His/Her lessons took into account students' prior experiences.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She allowed students to participate in making decisions about the topics that will be preached.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She used one basic preaching method.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She used different techniques depending on the students being taught.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q5 Please, click the number that most closely reflects how often you employ each strategy.

	Never	Almost Never	Occasionally	Almost Always	Always
He/She planned activities that will encourage each students' growth from dependence on others to independence.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She encouraged students to ask questions about the lesson.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She had students identify their own problems that need to be solved.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She used materials that were originally designed for students in secondary school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She organized lessons according to the problems that students encounter in everyday life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q6 Please, click the number that most closely reflects how often you employ each strategy.

	Never	Almost Never	Occasionally	Almost Always	Always
He/She encouraged competition among students.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She used different materials with different students.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She helped students relate new learning to their prior experiences.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She preached about problems of everyday living.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She put Bible verses on PowerPoint slides.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q7 Please, click the number that most closely reflects how often you employ each strategy.

	Never	Almost Never	Occasionally	Almost Always	Always
He/She used visuals on a presentation platform to complement his/her preaching.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She incorporated videos into his/her preaching.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She allowed students to use an electronic Bible.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She encouraged students to look up information on their technology devices to add to the lesson.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She allowed students to participate in the lesson through technology.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Q8 Age

▼ 18 ... 100

Q9 Gender

- Female
- Male
- Other
- Prefer not to answer.

Q10 Ethnicity

- African American/Black
- Asian
- Caucasian/White
- Hispanic/Latinx
- Mixed Race
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- Other
- Prefer not to answer.

Q11 How many months and/or years did you participate in your youth group?

- Months \_\_\_\_\_
- Years \_\_\_\_\_

Q12 How long in months and/or years has it been since you last attended your youth group?

Months \_\_\_\_\_

Years \_\_\_\_\_

Q13 Were you raised in the church where you attended this youth group?

Yes

No

Prefer not to answer.

Q14 Did your parent(s) or guardian attend the church where you attended this youth group?

Yes

No

Prefer not to answer.

Q15 Are you taking this survey for Dr. Hanlon's class?

Yes

No

Q16 Please write your name down so we can send a list of student participants to Dr. Hanlon at the completion of this survey.

First Name \_\_\_\_\_

Last Name \_\_\_\_\_

For SurveyCircle users ([www.surveycircle.com](http://www.surveycircle.com)), The Survey Code is: ZJCZ-J4FS-SAJV-6S3J

**APPENDIX C: IRB OUTCOME LETTER**



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
 Office of Research & Commercialization  
 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
 Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
 Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

**Approval of Human Research**

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1  
FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Deanna Sellnow and Co-PIs: Lakelyn Taylor**

Date: **December 19, 2018**

Dear Researcher:

On 12/19/2018 the IRB approved the following modifications to human participant research until 06/06/2019 inclusive:

Type of Review: IRB Addendum and Modification Request Form  
Expedited Review

Modification Type: Additional study population added, updated protocol, consent, and instrument.

Project Title: The Religious Classroom: Analyzing the Cross-Application of Instructional Communication Pedagogy to Youth Ministries

Investigator: Deanna Sellnow

IRB Number: SBE-18-14080

Funding Agency:

Grant Title:

Research ID: N/A

The scientific merit of the research was considered during the IRB review. The Continuing Review Application must be submitted 30 days prior to the expiration date for studies that were previously expedited, and 60 days prior to the expiration date for research that was previously reviewed at a convened meeting. Do not make changes to the study (i.e., protocol, methodology, consent form, personnel, site, etc.) before obtaining IRB approval. A Modification Form **cannot** be used to extend the approval period of a study. All forms may be completed and submitted online at <https://iris.research.ucf.edu>.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 06/06/2019, approval of this research expires on that date. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

Use of the approved, stamped consent document(s) is required. The new form supersedes all previous versions, which are now invalid for further use. Only approved investigators (or other approved key study personnel) may solicit consent for research participation. Participants or their representatives must receive a copy of the consent form(s).

All data, including signed consent forms if applicable, must be retained and secured per protocol for a minimum of five years (six if HIPAA applies) past the completion of this research. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained and secured per protocol. Additional requirements may be imposed by your funding agency, your department, or other entities. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the [Investigator Manual](#).

This letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Gillian Morien on 12/19/2018 11:10:53 AM EST

Designated Reviewer

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