

Constructing Knowledge with Your Learners

by Judith Deckers

Creating learning opportunities in which learners think, question, and explore new understandings about their faith is critical. Most of your learners come to you with prior faith experiences and want to understand more clearly their relationship with God. Appreciating this will allow you to construct learning opportunities that draw on their prior knowledge and involve them actively in their search for meaning.

For example, a class of older students who are reading the story of the penitent woman are ready to be challenged beyond learning the basic facts of the story. They are advanced enough in their cognitive thinking to be able to explore the meaning of the word *forgiveness*. Invite them to work in groups to make symbolic drawings reflecting their understanding of this word. Ask them to describe their drawings to assist them in developing a religious language and build meaning.

In education today, we recognize that learning involves more than acquiring facts. We are called to value our learners as thinkers. Involving them in problem solving experiences that include discussion and even debate helps them construct knowledge.

As they think creatively about their new knowledge, they are practicing and refining it, applying it to new situations, and gradually coming to true understanding.

According to the psychologist Len Vygotsky, cognitive development is not so much a series of stages as a continuum of experiences. There are two levels to this development. The lower level, *independent performance*, is what your learner can know and do on his or her own. The higher level, *assisted performance*, represents what your learner can achieve with help.

Remember that what your learner does with assistance today may be

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done independently tomorrow. In the past, educators may have focused more on the independent level; today we plan experiences for our learners at the assisted level.

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These assisted experiences may involve interaction with you or with peers. By prompting, commenting, offering hints and clues, and asking or rephrasing questions, we are helping our learners grow in understanding concepts and building new skills.

These ideas of how our learners build knowledge evolved from the work of Jean Piaget. He described cognitive learning as a struggle between existing ways of thinking and new insights. As learners interact with the world around them, they assimilate new understandings into what they already know. When they encounter a new situation that does not fit their previous understanding, they either reshape their existing categories of

knowledge or create new ones. Cognitive development, then, involves balancing existing ways of thinking and new experiences. Understanding is not only a matter of increasing the amount of existing information, but of growing in the ways we think about what is known.

The theory of cognitive development provides the foundation for the way we work with our learners in catechetical situations as well. In catechesis we believe that knowledge of our Catholic tradition provides important insights for our faith journey. Educational theory shows us some practical strategies for helping our learners build religious knowledge. The interactive dimension of these strategies also allows opportunities for group sharing and community building. As learners gain insight from one another, they begin to see that true wisdom belongs to the whole community of faith.

For Reflection

- When has a teacher or catechist assisted you in coming to a new understanding? What strategy did they use to help you?
- What opportunities do you give your learners to think about and work with the new faith concepts you are presenting to them?