

# Episode Three

## How do People Learn?

Jonathan Sargeant

Welcome to episode 3 of Faith Formation Essentials!

I hope you're starting to get a feeling that the world of education is a huge and interesting one and that the Christian education world, the sphere of faith formation, is a fascinating place! Certainly we know that it's crucial to UNDERSTAND the people we're working with, and the way that people learn. In this episode we're going to give special attention to that set of ideas that helps us do just that: Understanding learners, as well as understanding OURSELVES as learners.

Do you have a preference for how you learn things? Not WHAT you learn but HOW you learn it? You probably have an inkling about that. We get back to it later...

Let's begin by getting in touch with our own memories about being in learning environments, maybe in the church but maybe elsewhere as well. Here's the questions for you...

What comes to mind when you think of great learning times in your past? Maybe the past is your childhood or teen years at school. Or maybe it's more recent, depending on your age of course! But can you think of a learning experience that inspired you or drew you into a subject effectively? Or where you felt really understood or really understood something?

So what comes to mind when you think of a great learning experience from your past. Jot something down in your workbook, firstly. Then there's step two. What was it about that experience that made it great? Jot that down too. There are some possible answers there on the page but feel free to go beyond them as appropriate. Ok, pause the video now to do some of that remembering and writing .

Okay how did you go? Did you manage to think of something? I can remember a few! My Modern History classroom from Yr 11 made the subject fascinating by always linking events in the past century to current things that were happening in the world. The teacher gave us the tools to understand the forces at work in the world we were living in, tools I still use every day. As well in that classroom we were treated as people there to learn, and we became those people, independently motivated and a bit like the adults we would someday be.

How about you? If you're working in a group, feel free to take a moment to share, especially about WHAT it was that made that learning environment or moment great. Add ideas from each other to make a list: Things that make a learning experience great!



Then, in your group, pray a prayer of thanks for these times in our lives. If you're working on your own, feel free to pray solo in the same way: a prayer of thanks for great learning. Pause the video to do these things.

Alright, nice one! It's good to be thankful for these times from our pasts! It also serves to remind us of some of the qualities that elevate learning above the ordinary. These are things WE can aspire to establishing! Maybe the example of that great learning in your past means you already create some of the same stuff in ministry contexts! Now that's what it is to be inspirational!

### Ann Edwards

So we're thinking about learning. You might remember our discussion about the 3-circle model last episode. That model helps us think about a structure for understanding the content of what we teach when we do faith formation.

In the general realm of teaching there's a way of doing similar for ALL knowledge. If you had to organise all of the things it's possible to know, how would you do it? You'll be happy that's a rhetorical question! In the educational world we talk about the domains of knowledge.

According to educational experts, if you want to organise knowledge, there are three domains. Firstly you can talk about the cognitive domain. The cognitive domain contains all knowledge that is to do with straight facts and figures, but also critical thinking, problem solving and the like. How many disciples were there? What titles did people use when referring to Jesus? How did early Christians respond to the resurrection? In the cognitive domain we also evaluate and analyse ideas and apply them to everyday life. So there are processes involved which help us to do those things. That is the cognitive domain.

### Max Lambourne

The Affective domain involves our feelings, emotions and attitudes. Values as well. Even what you might call dispositions. If the cognitive domain is fact-based, the Affective domain is feelings-based, you can say. So it's one thing to know the names of the disciples. In the affective domain we might wonder what it felt like to BE a disciple. WE might put ourselves into their shoes to wonder what it was like to follow Jesus around the Middle East. We might derive a list of values we see expressed in that wandering group or in the Early church as well. This is the world of the Affective domain.

Rounding off these three is the psycho-motor domain. It has the best name! This



domain is all about utilizing motor skills and coordinating them. It's about movement and spatial awareness. You might hear that and wonder about how this domain has any connection with the world of faith formation, but it is there. Even simple things like accepting the cup when we take communion, or learning to cross yourself, if that's a thing you're into. Even lifting our hands when we sing, as some of us do. A Communion Service involves much ritualized movement that engages all participants.

### Ann Edwards

So once upon a time the idea was that you could organise all knowledge, in other words all things a human being could know, into these three categories: thinking knowledge - the cognitive domain, heart knowledge - the affective domain and moving knowledge - the psychomotor domain.

Of course nothing remains static so these days you might also hear about the Social domain; this is knowledge about teamwork, and communication, leadership and how groups work. Some people talk about the Personal and Social Responsibility domain. That includes stuff to do with ethics and the expression of ethics: how we behave in the world in relation to others and the world itself, the environment.

Ultimately, it's really useful to be aware of these domains because it awakens us to the possibility that knowledge is not just about facts and figures, or the cognitive domain. Our values, behaviors, and the practice of living alongside other people in community... all of that is of course crucial to how faith works. So it makes sense to be aware of a model about knowledge that explicitly examines these facets of understanding.

If you're a trivia fan, you might be interested to know that this model and the next one we're going to have a look at are often linked to a gentleman named Benjamin Bloom. This is because he actually chaired a series of educational conferences where these ideas were developed back in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. So we're about to examine what people call Bloom's taxonomy. This is not his work alone, but he shepherded it into existence and also edited the first book which outlined these ideas.

### Allana Wales

So...if there are basically three kinds of knowledge, then there is also a hierarchy of ways of thinking in those areas. We're talking about a taxonomy, a word that really just means a scheme of classification. I used the word hierarchy because we think about this particular scheme as having lower-level thinking processes moving to higher-level thinking processes.



This will all make more sense when we talk about what they actually are! And an example will help too.

Let's say you're sharing a Bible story with a group for the first time: the Good Samaritan story from Luke 10. You want to work on the story, to help your group understand it and relate the central ideas to a contemporary setting. So what might we do? First off we share the story itself with the group. There are a million ways to do this, depending on age level, room configuration, time for the whole activity, but let's not complicate things; let's just focus on the thinking processes. So, we share the story, just read it out. Next? We ask the group, "What happened first?" Take answers, then we can ask "What happened next?" We're checking everyone is on the same page about what actually happens in the story itself. This is important because everything else that happens depends on this first.

In Bloom's taxonomy, the very lowest level thinking process is "Remember". Lowest level doesn't mean unimportant or easy. It just means it's your starting point; people remember what happened in the story. Next on the taxonomy is Understand, sometimes called Comprehend. That also comes into play here because people are organising the parts of the story into order. So, with young people we might even have a set of cards with moments in the story and have them put them into the correct order.

Now I'm not going into detail on every level on the taxonomy. You can see a version in your workbook.

Briefly, Application and Analysis are the next two and might involve your group working out the message and making connections with the question Jesus is asked before he tells the parable/story: "Who, then, is my neighbour?"

### Jonathan Sargeant

The final two levels are Evaluate and Design, sometimes called Create. In these levels, people demonstrate that they understand the story and its messages, and apply them to life. Evaluation might look like this: Rank this parable with others in terms of relevance for modern life, or impact on teenagers, or potential for blockbuster movie plot...you get the idea!

Another evaluation task might be to ... decide to what extent the parable of the Good Samaritan is effective in teaching about caring, or communal welfare, or challenging unjust structures of social thinking.



To explore Design thinking, you might have the group compose a letter from the “Expert in the Law” who asked the question. It might be a letter six months later where the “expert” explains how chatting with Jesus about this idea changed him. Such a letter shows that the composer knows the message and can understand how it might be life changing, and then project that life changing-ness into the future.

Teachers use this kind of taxonomy all the time. Knowing how human brains work enables us to create learning experiences that are as effective as they can be. Learning is easier when we build foundations, rather than start at the top and flit around.

Those of us in less professional educational settings can use this information too. Being aware of this taxonomy can mean simple things, like knowing the first thing to do after telling a story is to check for comprehension, for understanding: OR Asking learners to create modern day versions of Jesus stories but check they have the facts straight first!

Max Lambourne

Okay let’s take a different tack. We’ve thought about teachers. We’ve thought about knowledge. We’ve thought about thinking processes. To put that together, teachers help us encounter knowledge and wrestle with it using thinking processes.

But what about us as the learner? Do we all learn in the same way? Or do we have preferences for how we learn, ways of learning that help us in the teaching learning process? Hah, you won’t be surprised to hear that yes we do, we do have preferences!

Let’s start with a little scenario. Imagine yourself in a learning situation. Let’s say you’re in a classroom and a teacher or lecturer is using a PowerPoint presentation as well as talking on and on about something important that you need to know, ah, repotting rose bushes. What would YOU do to learn that? Some of us would watch the screen and take careful notes, maybe drawing diagrams. Some of us would listen intently to the lecturer and focus on what we can hear. Some of us would find all of this unhelpful and would look forward to a bit of practical work where we get to do some actual physical work with rose bushes and soil.

That all sounds a bit broad, but I wonder if you get a sense of which of those categories you’d fall into?

In the broadest sense, human beings have been found to have three basic preferences for how to learn. We call this V A K, an acronym for Visual, Auditory and Kinesthetic.



### Allana Wales

So, some people prefer to learn visually. They retain and absorb ideas best when there are images, charts, diagrams or pictures. Visual learners love PowerPoint, especially if there are more images than just slabs of text but visual text is okay too. Visual learners like to take notes because it makes the spoken word into text you can see. So if they were sitting in an exam about repotting rose bushes, visual learners might visualise their notes in their mind.

Auditory learners like to be able to hear the teacher. They learn best in this auditory mode from the spoken words of the presenter. It's useful to have the chance to repeat ideas back to the teacher, or explain something they've just learnt or even answer questions and discuss. So the auditory learner sits in that exam and hears in their mind what they need to know to do well. Note that auditory learners might also take lots of notes to record what they are hearing.

The third group are the Kinesthetic learners. Have you heard that word before? These are the people who learn best by moving, doing, touching. They remember more about what was done in a learning experience, not what was said or seen. Practical hands-on experiences are the go here.

### Max Lambourne

Hmm, getting more of a sense where you sit? Note a few things. These are preferences. We can all learn in each mode. I'm a visual learner to a high degree, but I can still listen to a person teaching and learn. It's the same for each of us; we can learn in any way, but our mind has a preference for one or sometimes a balance between two of these.

It's totally worth having a handle on our own preference. People tend to favour their own preference when they have to teach something. Sub-consciously, we tend to imagine everyone is like us and would easily learn the way we do.

The trick for us is to remember that in any group, there will be a mix of people with each preference. If we want to be effective, we can make sure that each preference is catered for. Say you're teaching about the Good Samaritan as we were talking about before. You might tell the story using artwork, a collection of images (visual), you might discuss the central ideas (auditory) and you might conclude by acting out a modern version of the story (kinesthetic) or building a diorama using Lego figures.



### Ann Edwards

Now also note this: if you ask people about memorable learning experiences, many people describe the time they did something that sounds kinesthetic: the science teacher took them into the playground with skateboards to teach the laws of motion, or the priest took the class into the sanctuary to examine the chalice and cloths used in the Eucharist. Many assume this means they must be kinesthetic, because these experiences are at the top of their mind when recalling learning. The truth is we all love and remember these practical moments. The reason we do? Perhaps because often these experiences are rare and stand out from the normal pattern of things!

You see all kinds of percentages for what the distribution of these learning preferences are. Some suggest that the percentage of visual learners is growing, possibly due to the saturation of our modern lives with images. Some say we change over time, because early schooling is mostly kinesthetic, middle schooling is more visual and later schooling is auditory. But is the mode of schooling created according to dominant preferences or does it create the preference? That's a big question too big for our little course!

### Allana Wales

Right now though, let's do a questionnaire to help you determine what your learning preference might be. Maybe you have an idea already. In your workbook there's a simple set of questions designed to point you in the direction of understanding yourself as having a preference in one of these categories. Pause the video and find the page number you can see on the screen. Have a go at those questions.

Just go with your first gut reaction, rather than overthinking it. Once you've completed the responses, follow the instructions on the page to add up the scores in each category and voila! Then start the video again and we'll process that material.

Okay how did you go? After our discussion you can probably guess which category is which on the page. How is your score in each? Does one stand out? Did it turn out the way you might have suspected? This is not a scientific survey so if it seems contradictory to what you think your preference is, that just might be the case. Maybe your score is close in 2 of the 3? That's fine too. Maybe you're a balanced person!



Just a final note on this VAK stuff. Think about the average eucharist. There's a lot of teaching going on there. We are 'enculturated' in subtle ways as we join in the service. But the main overt way teaching occurs is through the sermon. When you think about it, most sermons are 10 minutes or so of straight talking. This model suggests to us that sermons are great for auditory learners, but might not match the preference of others! What do you think?

### Jonathan Sargeant

I mentioned before that the VAK model of learning preferences is the broadest one, developed first in the 1920s.

Another way to think about this area is the idea of multiple intelligences, an idea developed by Howard Gardner and published first in 1983. His theory is that intelligence is not just one kind of general ability but that there are multiple intelligences, multiple ways to be intelligent. So for a long time, schools measured our intelligence by our ability with words and numbers. People might have been great at sports or with musical performance but ability with words and numbers were privileged. Gardner says that there are multiple intelligences. He initially proposed seven of these, and yes, of course there have been some additions since the 80s.

There's the musical intelligence, being good at performing or recognising music. There's visual spatial, where people have good spatial judgment. The linguistic intelligence is about words and languages, telling stories and memorising poems and so on. The logical mathematical intelligence is to do with numbers of course but also critical thinking and reasoning. The bodily Kinesthetic is the sports area, good at timing, movement, dancing, even acting. The intrapersonal intelligence is about the ability to be self-reflective, understand oneself and one's reactions. The Interpersonal intelligence is about sensitivity to others and the ability to work in groups.

Now there's overlap in some of these areas. Musicians might have musical intelligence but playing an instrument involves bodily kinesthetic intelligence and playing in a band or orchestra requires the interpersonal.

Since the list of seven was published others have been suggested. The naturalistic intelligence is about relating to the natural world, one's natural surroundings. This might be demonstrated by Farmers, ecologists, geologists and once upon a time, hunter/gatherers. Gardner actually added this one to his list in 1995.





Others have proposed a religious or spiritual category, though Gardner preferred the idea of Existential intelligence. Having said that, there are actually stringent criteria for these intelligences and Existential intelligence doesn't meet all of them, to do with coherent neural systems and specific methods for determining levels.

Anyway, the big takeaway for us as formers of faith might be that people are pretty amazing! Maybe it's also that people are of value no matter what kind of intelligence they show. It might also mean that those fidgety people we work with might be Bodily Kinesthetic people who need to move and can't sit still for long periods! And once again we can tend to favour our own areas of intelligence, so we should be on the lookout for that. Being aware of our capacity for accidentally excluding people seems to me to be an important skill for faith formers. We want there to be as few barriers as possible to people learning effectively!

Fiona Hammond

Okay that's been quite the journey!

In this episode we've thought a little bit about great learning experiences from our past, as a way of getting in touch with what makes learning great in the first place. We've thought about knowledge and how it can be categorised. We dabbled with Bloom's taxonomy, a hierarchical model of thinking skills. We thought through our preferences as learners and finished up with some stuff about Gardner's multiple intelligences ideas. Look how smart we must be now!

Seriously though there was a lot in that! Sitting back and reflecting on all of that content is meaningful, considering the implications for where you are and the people you work with now and into the future.

Next time, we'll answer an interesting question: How do people develop in the various ways we've been thinking about, socially, emotionally, morally etc? And do they also develop in stages or styles in terms of faith? Can we look at the growth of faith in that way? I wouldn't be asking that question if the answer was no! What faith looks like as it grows! Next time here in Faith Formation Essentials!

