

# Episode Five

## Engaging learners: your educational toolkit

### Fiona Hammond

So welcome to episode 5 of Faith Formation Essentials, a short course designed to help you do ministry with an educational focus. This is all about forming faith in a range of contexts, whether in schools, parishes or out in the community. With 6 episodes in total, we're getting there!

In Episode five, we're doing something a little different. This time we are going to be SUPER practical. There's a swag of the best thinking strategy tools you've even seen. We'll run through a good pattern for a learning experience and give you tools for each step of the way. You might not use each strategy every time, but we hope to expand your strategy tool kit to encourage faith formation in your people.

### Jonathan Sargeant

So let's lay the groundwork. You'll remember us talking about the Swiss educational theorist Piaget and the paradigm-changing things he outlined about how education can work best.

To paraphrase and summarise, Piaget characterised the classroom we now think of as old-fashioned in this way: It was a place where desks were arranged in rows, because the primary relationship of students in the class was with the teacher. There were, say, 25 one-to-one relationships, student to teacher. The idea was that students learn individually. Learning was a solo exercise. This was an environment in which the instructor (careful choice of words there!), the instructor gives and the students receive.

But Piaget paints a picture of a better way. This has come to mean a few different things. We see desks in groups, rather than rows. Grouping desks acknowledges that learning happens collaboratively. We learn together. We also learn from each other, not just from the teacher. So learning is all about interaction, interaction with each other but also with knowledge itself. That's about the new knowledge the learning experience features, but also the prior knowledge that this new stuff will be built upon and linked to.

And knowledge is not just facts, it is also about processes and thinking skills. Understanding these processes means students learn how to learn, so that they can continue this once they leave formal schooling. Lifelong learners like you!

Okay it's a bright utopian world! Visit schools and you'll see this taken very seriously. You might still see some rows of desks in some places for particular purposes, but mostly? Gone!



But in the world this set of ideas creates, how can learning happen best? What strategies are useful? Let's work through a learning experience design and gather some skills as we go.

### Fiona Hammond

So we start with the first phase. Let's call that phase, Introducing the Learning Focus. That sounds like a good way to start things off!

Our first skill in this part of the learning experience is

Skill 1: Identifying what the learner already knows.

According to Piaget, it's good to do this because new knowledge is built on and linked to existing knowledge. It also helps you as the faith former to get a handle on what your group already knows and where any remedial action might be warranted.

So there are a few ways you can do this identifying. Here's some of them.

One is the good old Mind Map. Have you ever done one of these before? Maybe you have. They can look a bit like this...

A mind map is a diagrammatic method of collecting information about a particular issue, idea or question. It's a bit like brainstorming in which the stuff you collect is depicted in this particular way, in order to organise it into a kind of hierarchy, to inspire more ideas and thinking.

Popularised by British thinker Tony Buzan, the mind map places the central concept in the centre, with radial lines, or "associations" to next level category headings, or "Main Ideas". These are then broken down further into sub ideas and so on.

Buzan likes you to use curvy lines and colours but there are really no fixed rules. Some of the skill comes in collecting the info and knowing what are category headings and what are next level to those. But if you identify the central idea, say, 'Learning about the Bible', you can specifically ask people to name the big areas, the main ideas that the central idea inspires. These might be Old Testament, New Testament, Development of the Canon, Parables, Ways of reading the Bible, Genres, Translation issues and more.

Then you can brainstorm supporting ideas for each main idea, drawing connecting lines. Going with New Testament, supporting ideas might be Gospels, Epistles, Authorship, Early Church, Culture of the day, NT identities etc. You can probably think of many more, but just for the example, that's all we need. As you think up



these supporting ideas, someone might mention something that you think is another Main idea and you can include it radiating from the central concept. Easy!

If there's a trick when you do these as a group, it might be the challenge of working out on the spot the difference between Main and Supporting ideas, but you can easily just erase and adjust as you go.

Okay, now have a go at one yourself. Find the page in your workbook and follow the process we've just outlined and see what you come up with. Pause the video to give you time to think.

### Elizabeth Donald McConnell

Okay, mind maps are great! There are also other ways of determining what people already know about a topic, some a bit simpler.

K.W.H.L. charts work too. The letters stand for k - What do I KNOW?

W - What do I WANT to know?

H - HOW will I find out? and

L - What have I learnt?

The idea is that you explain what the new area of focus is, say, St Paul's Letters in the New Testament. You might have a little discussion then, or maybe not. The participants then fill in the chart, in terms of that central focus...

What do I know about Paul's letters?

What do I want to know about Paul's letters?

How will I find out more about Paul's Letters?

And what have I learned through this process of identifying these things? Maybe that I know more than I thought I did but there's important stuff still to understand. Or that I have more access to this kind of knowledge than I thought I did. That kind of thing.

You can see how that's a good way to start things off because it gives you a sort of mini-plan for where to go to next. And if your learners do this, knowing they're about to do 6 weeks on Paul's Letters, then they've just provided themselves with the best kind of motivation to get into to it!



## Paul Alcorn

Along the same lines is the Y chart. I say along the same lines, but there's a major kind of difference! The Y Chart is an effective way to increase engagement is the use of the senses in education. Obviously, utilising different senses engages different parts of the brain, especially those to do with memory. When we use our senses to think metaphorically, that's two layers of different cognitive and affective engagement!

So a Y Chart asks us to engage in these ways. State our central focus... how about Paul's Letters again? Then we muse, what do these letters look like? We might write down "a sheaf of papers", using a literal sense. Metaphorically, we might write that they look like gardening tools, that nurture the seeds of Jesus into a growing church. Or they look like a rule book, putting theological boundaries around the gospels.

What do Paul's Letters sound like? We might write that they sound like church bells, ringing out and amplifying Jesus' ideas and practice. Or they sound like, blah blah blah, a stern man's voice!!

And what do Paul's letters FEEL like? They feel like... a velvet blanket on a firm mattress, communicating God's love is soft to touch but with a really solid foundation of that mattress underneath.

You can see that in this way the Y chart gets at different information than either of the previous two methods. Here we're accessing the vibe, the feel, well, feelings, actually. Using metaphors in this way uses different parts of our brain. We're thinking though what we know about Paul's letters and translating them into images, feelings, sounds that say something of what we think. We might argue this is less precise but it's also coming at our pre-knowledge from a different angle that can be informative.

As an aside, doing that metaphorical thinking comes easier to some of us than others. But we can state for the record that any of us can LEARN to do this. Really, all it takes to get better at this stuff is to do it a few times, to give it a go every now and then. Even the most literal of people can get better at it.

## Jonathan Sargeant

Alright we're onto Skill number two. We're still in the 'Introducing the Learning Focus' phase of the educational process, but skill number two is this: "Stimulate interest when introducing a topic."



It makes sense that we want to do this and once again there are a zillion ways to get people interested. Since this is a VIDEO course, how about we do something very visual? I really like to use the Arts when I teach. You get to draw on great resources of religious art from centuries of artistic expression, learning along the way about our faith but also different understandings of our faith from years gone by.

Let's say, hmmm, we are going to work with the story of the Annunciation from Luke 1:26-38. This is where the angel appears to Mary and tells her she's going to have a son, to be called Jesus. This is all a bit of a surprise because Mary is not married at this stage and she "Knows not a man", although she is engaged to Joseph. Her cousin Elizabeth, even though she's getting on, will also have a bub. Anyway in the midst of this amazing stuff going on, the angel as they often do, starts the conversation with "Fear not" and the whole thing ends with Mary basically saying "that's what God wants to happen? I'm good with it!"

Imagine then showing a couple of paintings of the scene from two very different times.

First this version from 1644. Its The Annunciation by Philippe de Champaigne. Have a look and tell me this...what is the artist trying to say about these two main players in the story?

What are angels like? Calm, beautiful, royal blue, integrated with creation, with nature, carrying that flower, glowing with holiness, traditional in the depiction with wings, floating above the ground, so other worldly and not touching dirty old earth.

What is Mary like? Her face is calm, though her hand position shows a bit of unease. She also wears the royal blue. She has the beginnings of the hint of a halo, not fully bloomed yet. She's smart! How do we know? Because she can read! This Mary is not a peasant girl, because she can afford not just one book but others in the cupboard as well. There's some washing to hang out but Mary is more interested in improving her mind.

For a story that provokes anxiety, at least in the beginning, the actual painting is one of calm. We are seeing the end of the story, where Mary displays her acceptance of God's will, even though it will have consequences for her. There's peace!

Now how about this picture, entitled The Annunciation (1898) by African-American artist Henry Ossawa Tanner?



What is different? It's a totally different style, a realist style rather than the mannered renaissance depiction. We still have two figures...wait, do we? Certainly the angel here is depicted very differently, the white hot golden light almost difficult to focus on. That is a depiction where I would welcome the words "Fear Not!"

Mary here looks, would you say ordinary? Just an ordinary person like you or me. The unspoken message is that God might call on any of us. She wrings her hands and looks a little pensive, though she doesn't shrink back as in some other depictions. It leaves us to ask the question: What stage of the story are we being shown? Also of note: Tanner shows us the toes of a bare foot. This is a big deal for Mary who is always shown previously in historic depictions, wearing shoes. Bare feet means we are seeing the humanity of Mary, not the other-worldly holiness. But it's really a picture of humanity, isn't it? The drapes are more for composition and not really first century, but we are seeing a teen girl in the midst of something extraordinary and her reaction is very composed.

So when do you think this painting was created? Looks pretty modern? Late 20<sup>th</sup> century maybe? Mid 20<sup>th</sup>? It was actually painted in 1898! That's surprising to me! The artist, Henry Ossawa Tanner is probably the first recognised major Black American artist. I love this painting!

So with just two pictures, we could draw some of these observations out of the group we're working with, with the right questions: What do you see? What is the artist trying to tell us about the angel? About Mary? What are some of the differences between the two paintings? Easy! We are careful that our art appreciation class is not distracting from the actual point: to get interested in the story itself. But it's a way to do so with a great visual strategy. You can do that with clips from films too, of course. I love to do that.

### Elizabeth Donald McConnell

Now we are in the main body of the learning experience, and we can talk about some methods for collaborative learning. Now we hope that the activities we've done in the intro of our lesson are so stimulating that learners are eager to engage, discuss and share. But what if we ask a question and get...silence? That's where skill 3 comes into its own: helping learners share their thoughts.

How can we help learners to share when questions are asked? Such silence can be for a variety of reasons. Only one of those reasons is that learners don't know the answer. There are many others.



One might be that students are a little unsure of their answer and not up to talking about it in the plenary space, in front of everyone. Some people need a little longer to think. Some might need a little stimulus to kickstart their 'answering reflex'.

Now there is certainly a skill in sequencing questions. When we create a sequence, we should make sure that the first one or two are questions that ANYONE can answer. In a learning experience about the two stories of Creation that sit in the beginning of Genesis in the Old Testament, we might start a sequence by asking "What's your favourite place to enjoy outside?" We might even ask "What's ONE of your favourite places?" because some can get in a pickle working out the hierarchy of places to work out the MOST favourite. But such questions start us off well because all of us potentially have an answer, even if we are indoorsy types!

But soon in our learning time, after we've read the two stories there in Genesis 1 and 2 to 3, we might want to get learners sharing about, say, questions THEY have about the two stories. Now we could just straight out ask the group for questions and wait for responses. That might work, or you might endure a loooong pause waiting to see who will be brave enough to go first. When we do this, it's often the same people who DO go first. But what if there was another way?

### Fiona Hammond

Think/Pair/Share is the strategy to use here. It's a simple one and once you use it a couple of times, learners will know how to do it themselves. Here's how it works... We'll go back to our "Issues about the 2 creation stories" question. So I ask the question: "What are some of the questions that hearing these Creation stories inspire for you? To answer we'll use this process.

I'm going to give you 90 seconds to THINK about an answer to the question. After 90 seconds of thinking time, turn to the person sitting next to you. The we'll have 3 minutes to share with your new partner and to hear them too. Once that time is up, return to the whole group. Then hear from some pairs about their questions. If there's time, you could hear from everyone, but the beauty of this technique is that everyone has already had a chance to be heard, in their pair!

"Let's go over it one more time. 90 seconds to think - 3 minutes in pairs to chat, then share with the main group, if you feel happy to do that. Okay? Go for it!"

Think/Pair/Share is a great way to get discussion going. You've given clear instructions and done it twice.



You've checked for understanding about the process. You've given clear time limits, so learners know they need to begin straight away and can't get distracted.

You give thinking time to allow for focussed thought.

You use pairs, because it's likely at least one of the two will have an answer, and that might inspire the second person if they take longer to get their thoughts together. It also gives both a chance to try out their ideas in a less threatening space, and maybe hone them a little. It provides a chance for learners to learn from each other.

And then, back in the plenary group, you can collect the answers, as many as you have time for. There are variations of this strategy, such as having pairs record their answers on notes of paper that can be collected, but it's pretty sure-fire! It works with a variety of ages and is a softer way to start a discussion than the stark straight question to the group and wait through the potential awkward pause.

Want to try it out? If you are working on this course in a group, pause the video now and use Think/Pair/Share to discuss this question: What's one of your favourite places to be quiet and still, and why?

90 seconds to think, then break into pairs and chat for say 3 minutes, then come back to the whole group and share ideas. I'll put those steps on the screen.

How did you go? I like that strategy! So easy to use and it really breaks down some of the common barriers to thinking and sharing in groups!

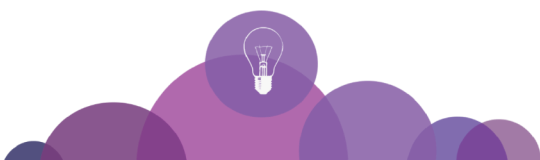
### Paul Alcorn

Next up is Skill 4: Helping learners identify their values.

When we talk about values here, we're referring to a hierarchy of our preferences for ideas in a particular area. The word "Values" is emotive. Values can refer to principles or standards of behaviour or even one's judgement of what is important in life. For instance, we could talk about Fairness, that people should be treated fairly, and that might include the idea of consistency too. Identifying values is often an important activity for people of faith. Scripture gives us some clues, but of course, people see Scripture in different ways.

Clarifying values is key and here's a tool for doing just that, whether we're talking foundational ideas about life or other issues maybe not so crucial.

For instance, you ask the question: "What are some qualities or skills of good teachers?"





You could use Think/Pair/Share to get people to come up with their ideas. However you do it, you collect answers from people, preferably in a visible location like a dry erase board. Stack the answers in a vertical list.

Now you pair up the list, two by two. Next you engage in a conversation with your class over which in the pair is more important as a quality of a good teacher. You can simply ask the group which they prefer and get a few points either way. Then vote in the group for each alternative. Whichever is preferred, you put in the appropriate space on the template. Then... move onto the next pair. Chat then vote, write it in and move on. It works like a kind of tennis tournament.

Once you run out of pairs, you can move onto the next level, next up to the right. You might not need as much talk this time around, as some of the key points in favour of particular entries on the list have already been mentioned. But the new pairing might provoke some ideas.

So you can see how you gradually fill this in, and that the process of discussing preferences gives you a way of talking about each entry, its pros and cons and so on.

In the end you come up with the final entry: The top most preferred quality or skill.

At that point you might note the occasional issue with this style of process. This is the same issue you can get in a sporting tournament : what if the top two teams meet in the first round and a great team is knocked out? The same kind of thing could happen with our qualities of a great teacher.

So you can look back at the path the top preference has taken through the process, and the other preferences it has knocked off. Let's say the top quality has been voted as 'consistency'.

You might ask, "Are there any qualities that got knocked out by 'consistency' earlier, that you think should have been in our top 4 or 2? Qualities that would have been valued higher if they appeared in a different position on our initial list of ten?"

This might just be a discussion with no voting, just to check your final result.

Ultimately the point is not necessarily what comes out on top, but on the quality of the discussion along the way. You can use it for any question where the answers are numerous and are also opinions, rather than fact-based responses.



## Jonathan Sargeant

Another way to enable people to identify their values is by using a human continuum.

This can be done on a page but it's more fun to get people moving as they are able in your room or space. You can have a few value statements ready. Suggest the first one, say, "Small groups are essential if you want your church to grow". Indicate that one side of the room is 'agree', the other side 'disagree'. Have people move to the side of the room that coincides with their answer. Then ask for people, if they feel comfortable, to suggest a reason for why they went to that particular side of the room. Since this is a continuum, people may go to the centre of the room, if they see pros and cons to your statement.

Let's say I want to use this strategy as the stimulus, the opening activity in a session to grab attention and get us started. I have a particular topic for a session, but I might work towards it as the last statement, or the last few. But I might start with something much more trivial and fun, just to get people talking and moving: "Tim Tams are the best biscuit to have with a cup of tea." Totally irrelevant to our eventual topic, but just designed to loosen people up, surprise them and give them a statement on which everyone can have an opinion: we all have a preferred biscuit if we think about it!

Ok, so I've said the two sides of your space are 'agree' and 'disagree', but there are other possibilities. You can have TWO value-packed statements and ask "which is the worse?" -

Keeping library books overdue is okay when you have a deadline or Riding the tram/bus/ferry/train without paying

I use these strategies all the time. With some teens we started with 'Who is worse', then mentioned a couple of celebrities, then particular cereals, then introduced the moral choices of library books and train-riding, then more serious alternatives shop-lifting and tax evasion. The session itself was a lesson about resources for making moral choices, so you can see why we headed in this direction.

Two things I will mention: make sure your alternatives are opinion-based, not where there is one right answer.

And secondly, occasionally you'll end up with a large group on one side and a small on the other. For me, I like to then go and stand with the smaller group and congratulate them on their willingness to "Go against the flow". We always restate that these alternatives are opinions, no-one is right or wrong, people are allowed



to think differently, as long as they HAVE thought, not just trotted along with their friends! Ok, they were strategies for identifying values, or preferences.

### Elizabeth Donald McConnell

Moving on... We're still in the category of Methods for Collaborative learning. Let's call this skill 5: providing activities that enable collaborative learning. Here are two similar methods for exactly that, collaborative learning, in other words learning with and from our groups.

Let's say you want to get your group to work on mission at your church. You come up with a few questions that you want people to consider. You write these on some butcher's paper...

What are some things our church is doing to make contact with our community, now and in the past?

What gets in the way of our church making partnerships with our community these days? What are some new things we could be doing to make contact with our community?

In a Round Robin activity, you place these sheets, each with one question, around the room. Then people rotate around the sheets in groups, considering each question, discussing in their group and recording their thoughts. As the facilitator you rove among the groups, moving people on to the next sheet every few minutes. It's also a kind of Round Robin if you just let people wander on their own to each sheet. As you arrive at each new one you read the previous responses and tick those you agree with, adding extra ideas.

This is dependent on people being able to move. It might mean some preparation, moving tables and so on. In instances where movement isn't possible, because of infirmity or a cramped space you can do the Hot Potato. People still work in groups, but the sheets with questions move around the room, rotating from group to group.

The key in both iterations is to let people read others' responses. So, when the people or sheet return to first position, let that group catch up with what others have said. Now you've got a heap of fodder for discussion, or just material for a report, ideas for the future, analysis of the past and present and so on. Great!



## Jonathan Sargeant

The time for Skill 6 is now: Communicating ideas and information clearly. This skill is a little different from the others in that it's not a tool but principles for communicating when using visual aids, let's say, PowerPoint.

PowerPoint, or other versions of presentation software, are ubiquitous in the teaching learning space. That means they're everywhere. It makes sense because the research tells us that people are largely visual these days. And as we've said, using visuals accesses the brain and learning in different ways that are often memorable, no matter what our main learning preferences might be.

Now some people complain about PowerPoint. You've heard of 'death by PowerPoint'? They mean it's overused. I actually think 'death by PowerPoint' is a 'thing'. But it's only a thing that applies when PowerPoint is used BADLY.

So here are some good principles for using visuals in learning.

One: use visual cues. What I mean here is that the time for slides overloaded with text is long gone.

This is difficult to read, daunting, it just puts people off. And the worst? Long slabs of text that are just read out. It's difficult for people to look at the text and hear it at the same time. No!

Instead, use visual cues for the content you want to talk about. For instance, you could display and read out a quote about gossip. Or you could present an image of an individual visibly distressed while a group talks in the background. Read out your quote about the harm caused by gossip while the image is on the screen, its kind of like a story book, and we all know how to process those!

Even when reading from scripture, you can have the whole reading on the slide, and then read along, or you could share the parable of the Sower while The Sower by Van Gogh is on the screen.

Using visual cues like this can help us get in touch with the emotion of a story or issue. Text on the screen about the worth of intergenerational learning and read it out? Or read your information while people take in an image of adult and baby hands intertwined.

Or display a cool image of a single hand emerging from a vast wheat field, when you are talking about people who feel a little lost in their everyday lives. As well as using images, a good tip for PP is to use black slides when you want people to concentrate on you and what you're sharing.



This could be in a sermon, a class lesson, a workshop, where-ever. Doing this wakes people up a little and stops them being entranced and 'zoned out' by the screen.

I mentioned too much text on the screen before. Sometimes you need SOME but it's always worth thinking if it can be whittled down. People don't need to see every word to understand an idea or issue.

Its possible to show text about "Small groups are an effective tool to drive faith growth and engage parishioners in meaningful structured peer learning. However, the same information is contained in this short statement: "Small groups grow faith!" Display the short statement, and read out the longer one.

While we're thinking about whittling text, we can apply the same principle to dot points, especially long lists of them. Remember this is not about dumbing anything down. We're still sharing the same level of complexity about whatever content or process we're using. But less text makes it more memorable and retainable, which is the key thing.

### Fiona Hammond

Finally we get to the last phase of our learning experience, Reflection on Learning. The final skill is helping learners reflect on what they have learnt. In other words we need to check on what has been learnt. Have we achieved the objective of the learning activity?

There are lots of ways to do this. At its simplest you can just ask a group, "So we're rounding up... what have we learnt today?" and take the answers. Hopefully people can come up with something!

A nice little tool that does this and some more as well is what we call "321 RIQ".

Like any of the tools we've used today, once you do them once or twice with people they learn how to do them and it all takes minimal explanation but first time, here's what it is.

In closing your learning experience, you ask for...

3 things you remember most about the session.

2 insights worth sharing; and

1 question you still have...

You can give people time to come up with these on their own, or even get them into pairs or threes to do so. Then share with the group.



The questions can give you pointers for where the group needs more help or where the next learning experiences might head. You can even answer them at that point if that's possible, or ask the group if they have answers, a nice strategy whilst you think of your own answer. Of course there's always the option to say, "That's such a good question, I'm going to do a bit of research and get back to you on that one!"

Anyway 321 RIQ, a nice little memorable tool to check on learning. You could even use it after a sermon!

### Jonathan Sargeant

Alright, we've travelled quite a trail in this session together. We've worked through a learning experience highlighting tools that help with learning along the way. Some of these tools are specific to particular phases of the 'lesson'. Some are multipurpose and can be useful in various moments within learning. And there are heaps more to gather and learn to use as well!

The key is variety, not to overuse any one particular strategy. Chocolate thick shakes are terrific but if you have one EVERY TIME you learn together, it wears you out.

Hmmm, or does it????

So there's just one session to go in this Faith Formation Essentials short course. We've come so far!

In the last session, we'll deal with two things. One of these is a very practical question: how do you choose good faith formation material? The one that's most colourful? The cheapest one? Or are there better ways to choose... and secondly, we'll think about the ethical dimensions of faith formation. Did you know there is an ethical dimension? In other words, how can we treat people with respect as their faith grows and make sure we're not coercing anyone, young person or older, as we go. The good thing is that there are a few strategies for respectful teaching that actually make any faith formation MUCH more effective. So it's win-win!

See you next time for that.

