

# Using Small-Group Hands-On Experiences

Small-group hands-on experiences help students bring meaning and understanding to complex theological concepts. Instead of simply *knowing* about a concept, students *experience* the concept as well. In order for students to live out a concept, they must understand it first. Research suggests students who engage in hands-on learning demonstrate increased retention of the material and are more likely to live out the theological concept. In addition, many students today are visual learners; they process information visually first and then make meaning from what they have seen and experienced. Effective instructional methodology requires engaging students in the learning process, facilitating student-with-student learning, and helping students to gain new insights by themselves. All three of these goals are realized through the utilization of small-group hands-on experiences.

## Engaging Students in the Learning Process

Engaging students in the learning process is more than simply providing an exercise that invites students to move or process information in a slightly different manner. Engaging students in the learning process means making them active participants in the process of discovering meaning rather than passive recipients of information. Small-group hands-on experiences enable students to work together in the uncovering of meaning. Additionally, small-group hands-on experiences can be crafted to engage the variety of learning styles of students. Students may learn best through visual, kinesthetic, verbal, or many other learning intelligences. Small-group hands-on experiences allow you, as the teacher, to create a variety of opportunities for your students to learn in the manner that works best for them.

## Facilitating Student-with-Student Learning

Through small-group hands-on experiences, students learn from not only their own experiences but also from the experiences of others in their small group. When crafting small-group hands-on experiences, it is important to incorporate discussion and sharing as a part of the exercise. This can be done by having members of a small group share what they learned in the experience, having members of the small group “teach” assigned material to the rest of the group, or having the small group prepare a presentation for the class.

## Gain New Insights by Themselves

One of greatest strengths in terms of student learning through small-group hands-on experiences is the students’ discovery of insight on their own. When crafting experiences for your students, do not tell them what they are to learn; instead provide guidelines for the experience that point students in the direction of the desired insight. When students discover meaning on their own, they are much more likely to remember it. It is important that at the conclusion of the experience, you review the insights the students gained and affirm correct insights. Additionally, students might have an incomplete understanding. This provides you with a teaching moment to direct them to a fuller understanding of the desired insights.



## Tips to Remember

The following tips are suggested to ensure successful utilization of small-group hands-on experiences:

- Secure student safety at all times.
- Write the purpose and objectives of the activity on the board either before or after the experience.
- Involve all participants in an active role.
- Connect student learning with the exercise and check to be sure all students understand the underlying concept and purpose of the experience.
- Hold students accountable for learning by quizzing / testing about the meaning and purpose of the experience at various points following the exercise.
- Understand that “failure is impossible” (Susan B. Anthony). Whatever happens as a result of the experience is an opportunity for learning.

