

Active Learning and Faith Formation

Experience is the best teacher. Once you learn to ride a bike, you never forget—not because you read about it, but because you did it. It is difficult to forget something learned through experience.

People tend to learn least through “passive” methods like reading textbooks or listening to lectures. Active methods, involving direct, meaningful, and personal experiences, are most effective.

This chart compares the characteristics of active learning with those of traditional passive learning. The distinctions have been somewhat exaggerated for clarity.

Passive Learning Characteristics

- Learners start by receiving the content of what is to be learned.
- Teachers and catechists are the givers of information; students are receptacles for information.
- The learning process is deductive. It starts with general principles and moves to particular application.
- The learning environment is orderly, quiet, controlled. Adolescent energy is resisted and restricted.
- Students infrequently move or interact.
- Discussion is used to ensure that the students have memorized the content.

Active Learning Characteristics

- Students start by sharing an experience.
- Students are actively involved in discovering what is to be learned from the experience; teachers are guides and resources, facilitating the process.
- The learning process is inductive. It starts with a particular experience and moves to a general principle.
- The learning environment is occasionally noisy and chaotic but still controlled. Adolescent energy is channeled and engaged in discovery.
- Students frequently move and interact.
- Discussion is used to explore the meaning of a particular experience and to apply new knowledge to life situations.

Active learning captures the attention and involves the learner. Through games, role-plays, simulations, hands-on activities, and inductive discovery, the learner is engaged not just on a cognitive level but on a number of levels. Active methods are well suited to faith formation sessions with young adolescents. Here are some strategies for effective facilitation:

- Study the characteristics of active learning.
- Practice leading active faith formation activities.
- Allow adequate time, as active methods can require extra preparation steps.
- Avoid the temptation to skip activities that may appear superfluous at first.

Through active learning, “religion” moves beyond mere memorization. Teachers become facilitators of learning, students become explorers of meaning, and faith is brought to life!

An Example of Active Learning

Being Part of the Body of Christ

- 1.** Arrange the participants in groups of six, and give each young person two or three playing cards.
- 2.** Instruct the groups to build a two-story card house, each group member adding one card at a time. If a group’s house collapses, the group members take their cards back and the group starts over.
- 3.** Ask the participants to identify connections they see between building the house and living as the Body of Christ. Incorporate the following ideas if the participants do not identify them:
 - Each person has different cards, but all are equally important to the common goal.
 - The choices individuals make have an impact on the whole group.
 - When things go wrong, it helps to work together and try again.
 - Different talents are needed at different stages: creativity, patience, encouragement, and so on.
- 4.** Read aloud 1 Corinthians 12:12–13.
- 5.** Offer concluding comments that build on the participants’ experience and ideas and that recap the main idea of the passage that the Body of Christ is made up of many members who are united by the Spirit.