



 NCCL
Accompaniment
in Faith

PRACTICES + SKILLS FOR CATECHISTS & EDUCATORS

Video Guide

Engaging the Learner
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Engaging the Learner

Ideas from the Video Presentation

1. Engaging the Learner

Sometimes, we mistakenly think that our job is to make faith formation FUN. Now, I have nothing against FUN, but that's not our primary goal. We are not there to entertain learners. We are there to ENGAGE them. Learners are to be actively involved in the learning process instead of being passive listeners. And, chances are, if a learner is deeply engaged, the learning will be fun.

2. Facilitating Encounters with Christ

This shift in understanding begins with looking at our own role as catechists and educators. We are not teachers of a subject but rather, we are facilitators of encounters with Christ. To facilitate means "to make easy." A facilitator employs certain skills and techniques to enable a group of learners to learn together smoothly. Most importantly, to facilitate means to place yourself in the service of others, just as Jesus taught us to serve. Let's look at some of the ways that you, as a catechist, can facilitate faith formation and engage learners

3. Paying Attention to What Learners Will Be Doing

For starters, as you do your planning and preparation, pay attention, not only to what you will be doing, but what your learners will be doing, how you will facilitate that, and how you will measure or assess their comprehension of new ideas.

4. Exhibiting Cognitive Skills

One way to help you determine how you will assess comprehension is to pay attention to key words in the learning outcomes. You may be asking learners to exhibit one of six cognitive skills in a hierarchy known as Bloom's Taxonomy:

- *Remember* (example of assessment: "list the seven sacraments")
- *Understand* (example of assessment: "explain the meaning of the symbol of water in baptism")
- *Apply* (example assessment: "draw a picture of an experience of reconciliation you your life")
- *Analyze* (example of assessment: "categorize the seven sacraments into Sacraments of Initiation, Sacraments of Healing, and Sacraments at the Service of Communion.")
- *Evaluate* (example of assessment: "evaluate a sample homily for a confirmation Mass in relation to its use of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the symbols of the bishop, or the symbols of the rite of confirmation.")
- *Create* (example of assessment: "prepare a prayer aid for the celebration of one of the seven sacraments.")

Experts tell us that learners retain a much higher percentage of what they do. Get your learners doing.

5. Walking in the Door

Do your best to engage learners from the moment they walk in the door. Have a small task ready for them to complete as soon as they sit down. At the beginning of a session, consider doing a "check in" which enables you to "take the pulse" of your group and get learners in touch with their state of mind and spirit. One popular examples is called Rose, Bud, Thorn which invites learners to share either a positive experience (Rose), a grievance or struggle (Thorn), and one thing they are looking forward to (Bud). This gets everybody talking and helps them to be present in the moment.

6. Reinforcing Learning

Learning needs to be reinforced. A good way to do that and to get your learners thinking and speaking instead of you doing all the talking is to ask them to recall important concepts covered in your last session. Don't hesitate to give a "spot quiz" at the start of a session to assess their ability to recall important concepts or keywords.

7. Discovering New Ways of Thinking, Speaking, and Acting

Design sessions so that your learners are responsible for discovering new ways of thinking, speaking, and acting on their own. For example, if the focus of your session is on the importance of listening to "voices" that guide us to the "truth," you might invite learners to identify "voices" that may not be trustworthy and that we should avoid listening to. You can then ask them to identify "voices" that can and should be trusted. After they have done all this work, you can simply summarize and fill in examples they have missed and affirm them for using their brains to do the right thing.

8. Asking the Right Questions

A great way to engage learners is by asking questions. Strive to use questions that are "open-ended" or, simply put, those that cannot be answered with a yes or a no. For example, instead of asking, "Do you remember your first communion?" ask, "What are some of the things you remember about your first communion?" Granted, you may still get one-word answers, but if you have more than yes or no, you can at least begin making a list on the board for further discussion.

9. Keeping Things On-Track

As a facilitator, keep an eye out for the following four types of learners in your group who can steer things off track:

- *The Dominator*: this learner just talks way too much and doesn't allow space for others. Even though theirs is the first hand up, be patient and wait for others that you can call on so that more voices are heard.
- *The Shy One*: this learner is the opposite of the Dominator – the shy person who rarely volunteers a thought. Gently invite these learners to share their thoughts.
- *The Tangent Maker*: this learner has a habit of steering the conversation in a direction that is not particularly helpful. Learn how to politely interrupt and say that we need to get our focus back.
- *The Antagonist*: this is the learner with an agenda or an axe to grind. You may need to have a one-on-one with him or her to clear the air.

10. Making Reading Active

Don't allow reading from a textbook to become a passive activity. Use techniques to engage learners in this task. One way is to get a foam ball and toss it to the learner who will read. Then, invite that learner to toss it to the next one who will read. Learners who will never volunteer to read aloud will raise their hand if they know the ball is going to be tossed their way. A more solemn or prayerful approach to this is to hand a small battery-operated tea light candle to the learner who is to read and invite them to pass it to the next reader. The light represents the light of Christ that was given to us at baptism.

11. Engaging Learners using Paired Interviews

A good way to break up the monotony of read-discuss-read-discuss and to truly engage learners with the content of the catechetical resource you're using is to try some of the following approaches. Paired interviews is a strategy which is very effective for interpersonal learners, who are eager to interact with others.

1. Arrange learners in pairs, and assign half of the text to one and the other half of the text to the other.
2. Provide an interview sheet with questions such as: What is the main idea of your section? What is a key word from your section? What does it mean? What is the most inspiring sentence from your section? What is one idea from your section that all Catholics should know or do?
3. Before learners read their assigned sections, have them look over the interview questions so that they know what to look for as they read.
4. Have them read their assigned sections silently, highlighting the information needed for the interviews.
5. Then have learners take turns interviewing one another about what they read, using the interview sheet.
6. Invite the pairs to share with the large group, each learner reporting on what his or her partner read as you highlight and emphasize important information.

12. Engaging Learners using Listen to the Sound of My Voice

Listen to the Sound of My Voice is a strategy that engages learners with the spoken word and encourages active listening.

1. Read over the text ahead of time and highlight key words and ideas.
2. Tell learners that you will read the text aloud and that they should listen to the sound of your voice to identify and highlight key words and ideas.
3. As you read aloud, use your voice (volume, tone, expression) to emphasize the key words and ideas as they highlight them in their text. You can make this more fun by exaggerating a key word or phrase, or by using a funny voice to get their attention at significant parts.
4. When you are done reading, ask participants to identify and share the key words and ideas that they've highlighted.
5. Go back and cover any key words or ideas that they may have missed.

An alternative to just changing the sound of your voice when coming across a key word is to use sound effects to grab participants' attention. Consider using a "clown" horn or "cycle" horn (or some other type of noisemaker) in order to inject some fun and energy into your exploration of a text.

13A - Engaging Learners using Graphic Organizers

Graphic Organizers is a strategy that engages visual learners and those whose strength is logic and math.

A graphic organizer is a worksheet that is given to learners to help them visualize, identify, organize, and make sense of information they are reading silently from a text. It can help learners to identify relationships between important concepts in a text. It is basically a visual map of what they are reading, which is why graphic organizers are also known as "concept maps."

The graphic organizer should be simple: a sheet of paper with a few boxes or shapes in which learners record specific information as they read. I recommend four boxes to track the following: the Big idea(s), Key words, Most interesting idea, questions I still have.

Assign a text to be read silently, and provide each learner with a graphic organizer. Go over the information participants are to organize, and then provide them with a set amount of time to complete the reading/organizing.

Use the graphic organizer as a basis for your follow-up discussion and as a way of assessing learners' comprehension of the material.

14. Engaging Learners using Key Word Clue Cards

Key Word Clue Cards is a strategy that encourages active reading and listening.

1. Look over the text ahead of time, identify key words, and write the key words on small index cards—one word per card.
2. You then randomly distribute the cards to your learners and explain that, as the text is being read aloud during the session, as soon as they hear one of their clue words mentioned, they are to yell, “Time Out!”
3. The learner then tapes the clue card on a word wall for all to see as you or a volunteer explains the importance or definition of the word.
4. If a learner fails to call “Time Out!” when his or her clue word has been read, that learner must stand for the remainder of the reading (or whatever amount of time seems reasonable without being cruel or unusual punishment!).
5. When the reading is completed, you can go back over the cards taped on the word wall and invite learners to recall their understanding of each word.

This strategy encourages learners to pay closer attention to the text that is being read and enables them to be actively involved, even when they are not the one reading aloud. This strategy also requires us catechists to look over the text carefully ahead of time to identify key points, something we should always do but at times may not do as thoroughly as we ought! The result is a more fully prepared catechist and a more thoroughly engaged participant.

15. Recalling and Sharing

At the end of your session, invite every learner to recall and share at least one significant insight, key word, or concept from the session. Not only is this a good way to invite your learners to speak up, but it also serves as a good opportunity for you to assess what kind of comprehension has taken place.

When approaching a faith formation session, be sure to focus not only on what you are going to do but primarily on what your learners are going to do. Don’t entertain them. Engage them!

Engaging the Learner - Checklist

Our goal isn't to entertain learners — it's to engage them as active participants and to facilitate their encounter with Christ. Use this checklist when planning a session to ensure learners are doing, thinking, and discovering, not just listening.

1. Engaging the Learner (Not Just Entertaining)

- ☐ Am I planning for what LEARNERS will be doing, not just what I will be doing?
- ☐ Have I planned how I will facilitate their active involvement, not just deliver content?
- ☐ Have I identified how I will measure or assess their comprehension?

2. Exhibiting Cognitive Skills (Bloom's Taxonomy)

Check which cognitive skill(s) this session's learning outcomes target:

- ☐ Remember (e.g., “list the seven sacraments”)
- ☐ Understand (e.g., “explain the meaning of water in Baptism”)
- ☐ Apply (e.g., “draw a picture of an experience of reconciliation”)
- ☐ Analyze (e.g., “categorize the seven sacraments”)
- ☐ Evaluate (e.g., “evaluate a sample homily’s use of symbols”)
- ☐ Create (e.g., “prepare a prayer aid for a sacrament”)
- ☐ Have I planned an activity that gets learners DOING, not just listening, since they retain more of what they do?

3. Walking in the Door

- ☐ Do I have a small task ready for learners the moment they sit down?
- ☐ Have I planned a check-in activity (e.g., Rose, Bud, Thorn) to take the pulse of the group?

4. Reinforcing Learning

- ☐ Have I planned a way for learners to recall concepts from the last session (discussion or spot quiz)?
- ☐ Am I getting learners talking and thinking, rather than doing all the talking myself?

5. Discovering New Ways of Thinking, Speaking, and Acting

- ☐ Have I designed this session so learners discover key ideas themselves, rather than being told directly?
- ☐ Do I have a plan to summarize, fill gaps, and affirm learners after their discovery work?

6. Asking the Right Questions

- ☐ Are my planned questions open-ended (not yes/no)?
- ☐ Have I reviewed my questions to remove closed-ended phrasing?

7. Keeping Things On-Track

Be aware of these four learner types during discussion:

- ✓ The Dominator — talks too much; wait for other hands before calling on them
- ✓ The Shy One — rarely volunteers; gently invite them to share
- ✓ The Tangent Maker — steers conversation off-topic; politely redirect
- ✓ The Antagonist — has an agenda; may need a private one-on-one conversation
- ✓ Have I thought about how I'll handle each of these dynamics if they arise today?

8. Making Reading Active

- ☐ Have I planned a way to make reading active rather than passive (toss-the-ball, passing a light, etc.)?

9. Engagement Strategy for Today's Text

Choose one or more strategies to actively engage learners with the reading/content:

- ☐ Paired Interviews — learners read different sections and interview each other
- ☐ Listen to the Sound of My Voice — learners listen for and highlight key words as you read aloud
- ☐ Graphic Organizers — learners track Big Idea(s), key words, most interesting idea, and remaining questions
- ☐ Key Word Clue Cards — learners call "Time Out!" when they hear their assigned word
- ☐ Have I prepared the necessary materials for my chosen strategy (interview sheets, index cards, graphic organizer, etc.)?
- ☐ Have I reviewed the text ahead of time to identify key words and ideas?

10. Recalling and Sharing (Closing)

- ☐ Have I planned a closing moment for every learner to recall and share one insight, key word, or concept?
- ☐ Will this closing help me assess what comprehension actually took place?

Quick Session Planning Table

Use this table to plan the learner-facing elements of today's session.

Element	My Plan
Opening task/check-in	
Recall/reinforcement activity	
Bloom's skill(s) targeted	
Active reading strategy	
Open-ended questions planned	
Closing recall/share activity	

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