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PRACTICES + SKILLS FOR CATECHISTS & EDUCATORS

Video Guide

Creative Learning Methods & Activities: Launching the Learning

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Launching the Learning Experience

Ideas from the Video Presentation

Creative learning activities begin from the moment learners come into the learning space. Let's consider 11 simple actions that can help launch the learning to best enable learner engagement.

1. Welcoming in the Space

First, have a pattern for how learners are welcomed into the space. Co-create with the learners a simple routine for how they will be greeted on arrival, for example a high five, and how their attention will be gathered to begin the learning activity. There is nothing more boring than starting a lesson with the sentence, "today in class we are going to learn about..."

2. Attracting Attention

Second, begin the learning with something that attracts student attention and that engages their brains and hearts to be curious about what will be happening during the class. I love starting with an image that I share with them and then invite their wonderings about what will be explored in class today or giving them a question to choose a picture of their own to share with the class. For example, I might say I want you to choose a picture that speaks to you about what prayer is. They return with the picture and describe to one another why they choose the picture that they did.

Sometimes simply asking a provocative question or a riddle about the topic being explored also gets them curious and ready to explore. In beginning a session about the sacrament of baptism, put forward a collection of items used in baptism and include some things that do not belong and see if they can both figure out the learning topic and then which items do not belong and why.

3. Bringing Everyday Life into the Learning

Third, launch the learning by directly bringing the life the learners have lived in the past week or days into the room. Engage in a simple basket pass prayer in which students are invited to place into the basket, figuratively, a word or image that describes how they feel about being together and the gift or challenge that is on the heart.

4. Using Objects and Artifacts

Fourth, use a concrete object or artefact and invite learners to name what they notice about it, know about it, or wonder about it. Perhaps it is a stalk of wheat to connect to the many grains in the gospel passage, or flat unleavened bread in contrast to leavened bread. What will spark learner curiosity?

5. Naming Connections

Fifth, a fun way to engage students is to name four or five things connected to the learning and inviting them to name the connections between the items. For example, you might say, "Our learning topic today has to do with Mark, Luke, Matthew, and John. "If learners name a connection, challenge them to share more about the connections they see. Move from individual thinking time, to sharing in pairs, to sharing with the larger group.

6. Hiding Words or Picture Cards

Sixth, with younger learners, it is fun to hide words or picture cards around the room and groups find cards of an assigned color and then figure out the connections between words or images. Ask them to discuss

the words and group them based on whether they fit with the topic. Then, after reading a text, learners revisit their word groupings and sort them again.

7. Naming Qualities

Seventh, go for a walk and challenge learners to find examples of the specific qualities of something. Find something (by pointing it out or writing it on a list attached to a clipboard) that changes each season...that looks dead but is alive...that shows evidence of negative human impact... and so on.

8. Sequencing Activities

Eighth, give learners sequencing activities, such as putting the ritual elements of sacraments in order, or putting the Triduum elements in order - this is challenging for young and older learners alike!

9. Identifying What Doesn't Belong

Ninth, play the "Red Herring" game: Give learners multiple examples that are linked. They must identify the red herring, the one that does not belong. Books of the Bible, parable story elements, and so on are some ways to use Red Herring.

10. Reading a Story

Tenth, use the first few minutes of a learning session to read or share a story that lends itself to the learning. Stories do not always need to be explored in depth. They can be read followed by connections to the learning you are heading into and then can be referred to as the lesson continues.

11. Calling and Responding

Finally, sometimes there are several launch points in the learning, and we need effective ways of gathering learners. A simple ritual is a set call and response to invite the learners to pay attention as a whole group conversation is about to happen. Consider the standard "God is good..." with the student response of "...all the time."

The first five minutes of learning time are gold – and we need to use every minute of it to solidly launch the learning and begin learning from the first moment.

Launching the Learning Experience – Checklist

Creative learning begins the moment learners walk into the room. Use this checklist when planning how to launch a session — before diving into content — to spark curiosity and engagement from minute one.

1. Welcoming in the Space

- ☐ Have I co-created a simple welcoming routine with learners (a high five, greeting, etc.)?
- ☐ Is there a consistent way I gather their attention to begin?
- ☐ Have I avoided starting with “Today in class we are going to learn about...”?

2. Attracting Attention

- ☐ Have I planned an opening that engages curiosity — an image, question, riddle, or provocative prompt?
- ☐ If using an image: have I prepared a wondering question or invited learners to bring their own picture connected to the topic?
- ☐ If using items/objects: have I included a few that “don’t belong” to spark figuring-out?

3. Bringing Everyday Life into the Learning

- ☐ Have I planned a way to connect learners' recent week/life into the room (e.g., a basket-pass prayer)?
- ☐ Is there space for learners to name a gift or challenge on their heart before diving into content?

4. Using Objects and Artifacts

- ☐ Have I chosen a concrete object or artifact connected to today's topic?
- ☐ Have I planned to ask: What do you notice? What do you know? What do you wonder?

5. Naming Connections

- ☐ Have I identified 4-5 items/names/words connected to the day's topic?
- ☐ Have I planned the sequence: individual thinking → pair sharing → whole group sharing?
- ☐ Am I ready to challenge learners to elaborate on the connections they name?

6. Hiding Words or Picture Cards (especially younger learners)

- ☐ Have I prepared word/picture cards to hide around the room?
- ☐ Are cards color-coded or grouped for the activity?
- ☐ Have I planned a “revisit and re-sort” moment after the reading/text?

7. Naming Qualities (Walk & Notice)

- ☐ Have I planned a walk or observation activity tied to specific qualities (e.g., things that change with seasons, look dead but are alive, show human impact)?
- ☐ Do I have a way to record findings (list, clipboard, etc.)?

8. Sequencing Activities

- ☐ Have I identified content that lends itself to sequencing (sacrament rituals, Triduum elements, etc.)?
- ☐ Have I prepared materials/cards for learners to physically order?

9. Identifying What Doesn't Belong

- ☐ Have I prepared a set of linked examples plus one red herring?
- ☐ Is the topic suited to this game (Bible books, parable elements, etc.)?

10. Reading a Story

- ☐ Have I selected a short story connected to today's learning?
- ☐ Have I planned how to briefly connect the story to the lesson (without over-explaining it)?
- ☐ Will I refer back to the story as the lesson continues?

11. Calling and Responding

- ☐ Do I have a consistent call-and-response phrase to regather attention (e.g., "God is good..." / "...all the time")?
- ☐ Have I planned for multiple gathering points if the session has several transitions?

Quick Pre-Session Launch Planner

Pick 1-2 launch strategies per session — not all eleven at once. Create a plan for using the launch strategies. Revisit this form to plan new strategies and continue your growth.

Element	Strategies I'll Use	Materials Need
Welcome Routine		
Attention -Grabber		
Connection to Life		
Object/Artifact (if used)		
Closing Gather Ritual		

Reflection After the Session

- ☐ Did the launch capture attention and curiosity, or did engagement lag?
- ☐ Which learners seemed most/least engaged during the launch?
- ☐ What would I adjust next time?

Tip: Rotate through different launch strategies across weeks so the routine stays fresh, while keeping a consistent welcome and closing ritual for stability.

Launching the Learning Experience – Activities

Welcoming Rituals

1. Custom Greeting Handshake. Co-create a simple greeting routine with the group (a high five, fist bump, or short phrase) used every week at the door.

- *Children:* Keep it playful and physical — a silly handshake works well.
- *Adolescents:* Let them design it themselves; a simple nod-and-word greeting often feels more natural than something “cute.”

2. Attention-Gathering Signal. Establish one consistent, non-verbal cue (a raised hand, a chime, a clap pattern) that means “gather now.” Practice it once at the start of the year so it becomes automatic.

Attention-Grabbing Openers

3. “Choose a Picture” Wondering. Show a set of images and ask a wondering question tied to the topic (“Choose a picture that speaks to you about what prayer is”). Learners share with a partner why they chose it before the whole-group discussion.

4. Mystery Object Table. Lay out several items connected to the topic, plus one or two that don’t belong (for a baptism lesson: water, white garment, candle, oil — plus something unrelated like a soccer ball). Ask learners to guess the topic and spot what doesn’t fit.

- *Children:* Make the “odd item” obviously silly for an easy win.
- *Adolescents:* Make it subtly wrong so it requires real thinking.

5. Riddle or Provocative Question. Open with a question that has no easy answer (“Can you love someone you’ve never seen?”) tied to the day’s theme. Let it sit for a moment before moving into the lesson.

Bringing Life into the Room

6. Basket-Pass Prayer. Pass a basket around and invite each learner to “place in” (name aloud or silently) a word or image describing how they’re feeling or what’s on their heart this week.

- *Children:* Use an actual object to drop in (a small stone, a bead).
- *Adolescents:* Can be entirely verbal/reflective — some teens prefer not to hold something publicly.

7. One-Word Weather Check. Ask each learner to describe their week in one word (their “emotional weather report”). Quick, low-pressure, and gives you a read on the room before starting content.

Object-Based Curiosity

8. Notice, Know, Wonder. Hold up a concrete object tied to the lesson (a stalk of wheat, unleavened bread, a small lamp) and ask three questions in order: What do you notice? What do you know about it? What do you wonder?

9. Touch-and-Guess Bag. Place an object in an opaque bag and let learners feel it (without looking) and guess what it is and why it might matter to today's topic.

Connection and Pattern Games

10. Name the Connection. List 4-5 names/words tied to the topic ("Mark, Luke, Matthew, John") and ask learners to guess the connection. Move from individual thinking → pair sharing → group discussion.

11. Hidden Card Hunt (especially younger learners). Hide color-coded word or picture cards around the room. Groups collect their color and sort them by whether they connect to today's topic. After the lesson, revisit and re-sort based on what they learned.

Movement and Observation

12. Curiosity Walk. Take a short walk (indoors or out) and challenge learners to spot examples of a quality tied to the lesson — something that changes with the seasons, something that looks dead but is alive, evidence of care or neglect. Record findings on a clipboard list. Adolescents often engage more if framed as a "mission" or observation challenge rather than a nature walk.

Ordering and Sorting Games

13. Sequence It. Give mixed-up cards representing steps in a ritual (sacrament elements, Triduum days) and have learners work together to put them in correct order. Genuinely challenging for both age groups — a good equalizer activity.

14. Red Herring. Present several linked examples plus one that doesn't belong (Bible books, parable elements, etc.) and challenge learners to spot the outlier and explain why.

- *Children:* Use very clear, familiar categories.
- *Adolescents:* Increase subtlety — nuance makes it genuinely fun rather than obvious.

Story-Based Openers

15. Quick Story Launch. Read or tell a short story (not necessarily Scripture) in the first few minutes that connects thematically to the lesson. Don't over-explain it — let it simmer and refer back to it as the session unfolds.

Gathering Rituals for Transitions

16. Call and Response. Use a consistent phrase to regather attention mid-session: "God is good..." — "...all the time." Works for any transition point, not just the opening.

Age-Adaptation Note

Younger children respond best to physical, sensory, and playful launches — objects to touch, cards to find, silly greetings. Teens respond better to launches that feel intellectually or emotionally real — provocative questions, subtle red herrings, honest life check-ins — since anything that feels babyish can shut them down fast. The through-line for both: the first five minutes set the tone for whether the rest of the session feels alive or rote.