

Reaching Every Learner

One Size Doesn't Fit All

by Wendy Guthrie

Walk into the average adult Sunday school class and you will find a group of adults sitting in chairs (usually three or four rows deep) listening to a lecturer. Now this is not necessarily a bad thing, but it does assume that every member of that class learns in the same way—which just isn't true.

The apostle Paul reminds us of each member's uniqueness when he uses the analogy of "many members" in "one body" (Romans 12:4). Paul was referring specifically to the giftedness of each member and his or her place in service to the church. By extension, we can apply the "many" idea to the learning styles of the students who sit in your Sunday school class. Students take in and process information in different ways. Marilee B. Sprenger proposes that there are four types of learners.

Four Types of Learners

The imaginative learner is people-oriented. She learns through emotions; she trusts her perceptions. This learner needs dialogue in order to process information and is most interested in how the content of the lesson applies to her personal life. She wants to know the value of the lesson, so her favorite question is "Why?"

The analytic learner is knowledge-oriented. He needs information, and lots of it. This learner thrives in the lecture format. He is a sponge that soaks up the information and then needs time to process it and reflect on it. This learner thinks logically and analyzes content before he is ready to do anything with it; his favorite question is "What?"

The common-sense learner is solution-oriented. She needs to put her knowledge into action. This learner is a pragmatist; she doesn't need much time to think through material, and she processes information better if it is

hands-on. This learner is most interested in the usefulness of the lesson material, so her favorite question is “How?”

The dynamic learner is discovery-oriented. He sees the world differently from most; he is the visionary. This learner takes in information through all of his senses and processes it through his actions. He likes to “think outside the box” and try things that “have never been done that way.” This learner is most interested in what the lesson content could become, so his favorite question is “What if?”

As you read through the characteristics, I’m sure you found the one that best describes you. However, I’m also sure you said “Well, that could be me” about one or two other learning styles. Thus the four styles are not “air tight.” In his infinite wisdom, God has placed aspects of these various learning styles within each of us. That means we all need lessons that meet the criteria above if we are going to be the disciples Christ has called us to be.

The Learning Cycle

Right about now you may be tempted to throw your hands up in surrender and say “I have only 45 minutes for a lesson; how can I possibly address everyone’s learning needs in that amount of time?” Let me assure you it’s not as hard as it seems. By following a learning cycle called *4MAT*, developed by Bernice McCarthy, any teacher can meet the needs of every learning style in the class.

The cycle has distinct phases. First, you must connect the lesson to students in some way that makes them want to learn. When you have done this, students will attend to the specifics of the lesson in order to derive value from it. At this point, students are ready for the underlying theories and are able to imagine or conceptualize them.

Then comes the time to inform students of the facts of the lesson. (This is the part of the cycle with which most teachers feel most comfortable.) After students know what the lesson says, they’re ready to practice or master that information.

But the lesson cannot stop there. Students also need to know how to extend the information outside of the classroom. They will need to refine it so it fits the needs of the community. Finally, they need to perform or put it into action so it makes a difference in someone’s life.

The best way to make sure your lessons reach students in each of these phases is to ask yourself the following questions:

- How will your students connect with the lesson? (*connect*)
- How do you plan to deliver the lesson content? (*inform*)

- How do you plan for your students to practice the content? (*practice*)
- How will they examine or reflect on their experience? (*attend*)
- How will your students apply this lesson to their lives? (*extend*)
- In what ways will your students need to critique and modify the lesson for application? (*refine*)
 - How can your students share what they have developed with others? (*perform*)
 - How well do your students understand everything that has happened in the lesson? (*imagine*)

Creating the Lesson

Once you've wrestled with these questions, you're ready to turn the answers into a lesson. Here's how you could develop a lesson from Leviticus 8:1-13 using the 4MAT system:

1. Retell the details of the dedication of Aaron's family for special service to God and the community; help learners understand the principle of being dedicated for service; encourage individuals to accept roles of special service and to recognize persons called for service.
2. Summarize the details of the text and write them on strips of poster board (one concept per strip). Have students read the passage to themselves and then work as a group to put the strips in the correct order.
3. Have students work in small groups to plan a Sunday school teacher dedication service. Make sure the groups translate the principles from the Scripture text into their services.
4. Ask students to recap a dedication or installation service they attended.
5. Have students reflect on what made the service in #4 special. Connect their remarks with the principles from the lesson text.
6. Have one or more groups volunteer to work with the Sunday school superintendent (or other leader) to plan a teacher dedication service prior to the kick-off of the next "curriculum year" (typically in the fall).
7. Have students brainstorm ideas about having dedication or installation services for those who perform other tasks in the church.
8. Have students take a spiritual gifts inventory to determine their spiritual strengths. Then have each student identify at least two areas of service they could perform within the church that would enable them to use their spiritual gifts.
9. Have students identify some guiding principles from the lesson text that could apply to ceremonies within the church today. (This activity will need to follow the one in #2 above.)

Once you establish the various activities that can be used in the lesson, the next step is to organize them into a plausible order for the lesson. The nice thing about the 4MAT system is that you don't have to organize the lesson in the same way every Sunday. Some days you may want to start with the text, while other Sundays you may want to start by having students connect with the lesson topic.

One possible order for this lesson is to begin by having students recap a dedication service they attended (#4) and then explain what made it special (#5). From that point you can move right into the Scripture by having students arrange the lesson events in the correct order (#2); then formulate overriding principles from the text (#9).

This naturally leads into the application phase of the lesson by asking students to prepare a "mock" dedication service using the principles from the previous activity (#3). Extend that activity by asking students to brainstorm similar services they could design (#7).

It's important to make sure that applications that begin in the classroom make it outside the door. Having students volunteer to organize a teacher dedication service based on the class activity (#6) is one way to accomplish this. Suggest that students complete a spiritual gifts inventory on a Web site such as www.churchgrowth.org; they can use the results to commit themselves to greater service within the local body (#8).

Conclusion

If you use the 4MAT system, be prepared for students to take notice. The *imaginative learners* will now engage in conversation that relates to the lesson rather than conversation that distracts others. The *common-sense learners* will be motivated to put hands and feet to their faith. The *dynamic learners* will no longer feel like misfits because your class will encourage them to cast the vision for everyone else. The *analytic learners* will still be sitting on the front row taking in every word.

The important thing to remember is that learners are more in tune when the lesson is relevant. The best way to make a lesson relevant is for you to stay in tune with the learning styles of your students.