

IMMERSE

A JOURNAL OF FAITH, LIFE AND YOUTH MINISTRY

Developing Learning Environments

Researchers and educational theorists have been suggesting for some time that the most effective way to teach is to create environments where learners are central to the learning process. Far too often, learning is conceived not as a holistic, formational process but as an information dump. When we are allowed, however, to interact with material in a variety of ways, things begin to stick.

Unfortunately, youth ministry has not done the best job of creating the kind of learning environments that truly transform. Initially in my ministry, I was far more likely to talk *at* students rather than with them, far more likely to lead a few worship songs than to help them discover new ways of worship, and far more likely to pray a short prayer with them than to invite them into new prayer practices. My point is that I was far more likely to teach *at* them than to invite them into a process of discovery, reflection, and engagement.

Discovery. In developing learner-centered environments, we as youth workers must help students discover new things about God, themselves, others, and the world they inhabit. Using the word *discover* evokes a sense of exploring, adventure, inviting students to look at things in ways they may not have done before. We believe that barefootministries.com can help you in the discovery process.

For instance, our Faith and Film series is built around this idea of discovery. This wonderful curriculum invites you and students to watch a movie that at first seems like nothing more than entertainment (like the movie *Hancock*, for example). However, through discussion-generating questions, this series you and your students begin to discover theological and biblical themes that abound in cinema. Not only does this give students talking points; it also teaches them to interpret the culture around them. They are, therefore, not only learning explicit content but a *way* of learning. That is learner-centered teaching.

Reflection. This aspect of learner-centered environments was implicitly articulated under discovery, but we need to flesh it out here. Every learner-centered environment needs to create space for reflection. Reflection is different from simply answering questions. Reflection is providing space for students to both answer and ask questions, to be okay with hard questions where answers don't readily come, and to be willing to wrestle with doubt. Reflection can be processing these questions out loud in a group, or it can be moments for quiet introspection during a large group talk. Journaling is a key ingredient to reflection. Invite students to journal and even draw their reflections on given passages of Scripture, thematic points, or even other students' questions.

The importance of reflection is reflected (pun intended) in our curriculum series, where you will find questions for discussion and journaling in many of the different series. For instance, in the Digging Deep series, you can download both a leader's guide and student book. Both items are filled with questions that lead to honest reflection. Space is provided for students to journal their responses to these questions, to honestly reflect on the passage. One of the most important aspects of creating a learner-centered environment, though, is being willing to let the students' conversation and reflection drive the discussion. That means—if there is one question that seems to elicit more conversation than others—being okay with that and willing to diverge from the overall lesson and discuss what students are really reflecting upon in that moment. Generally I have found these are often the moments when God's Spirit is truly at work.

Engagement. All truly learner-centered environments share in common that they provide opportunities for concrete engagement that come from and lead back to discovery and reflection. Does our teaching take place in a situated context where our students know they will be given a chance not only to discover and talk about new ideas but also to enact them in concrete and tangible ways? I've found that some students who seem checked out of other things, when given a chance to engage in concrete action, come alive. This is their learning moment. I believe that far too often we miss these kids because we don't often address their learning style.

Engagement can be anything from a service trip to regular opportunities to serve others to simply providing space for kinesthetic learning. For instance, imagine having conversation about Jesus' call to his disciples to come and follow him while taking a walk along a path. This is concrete engagement. Students are actively practicing the act of following, even as they discover and reflect upon what this might have meant for the disciples and even for them. Engagement is simply being willing to experiment with practices that can turn into habits for students in their own journey with God in the way of Jesus. In our curriculum series Life Journey, you will find a four-part section on building habits for life. This is a great example of making sure your learning environment includes the crucial element of engagement. Use it to get your creative juices flowing as you envision other ways your group can develop its rhythms.

We all want our students to be inspired, excited, and engaged. There is no trick or formula for making this happen. However, I believe that sometimes it has been our inability to truly create learner-centered environments that has led students to seem uninterested. Focusing on discovery, reflection, and engagement is not a formula, but I believe it can aid you in developing a more robust, holistic, and ultimately transformational environment for your students. And I believe barefootministries.com has resources that can help you in this process.

