

# Designing Learning for Your Church



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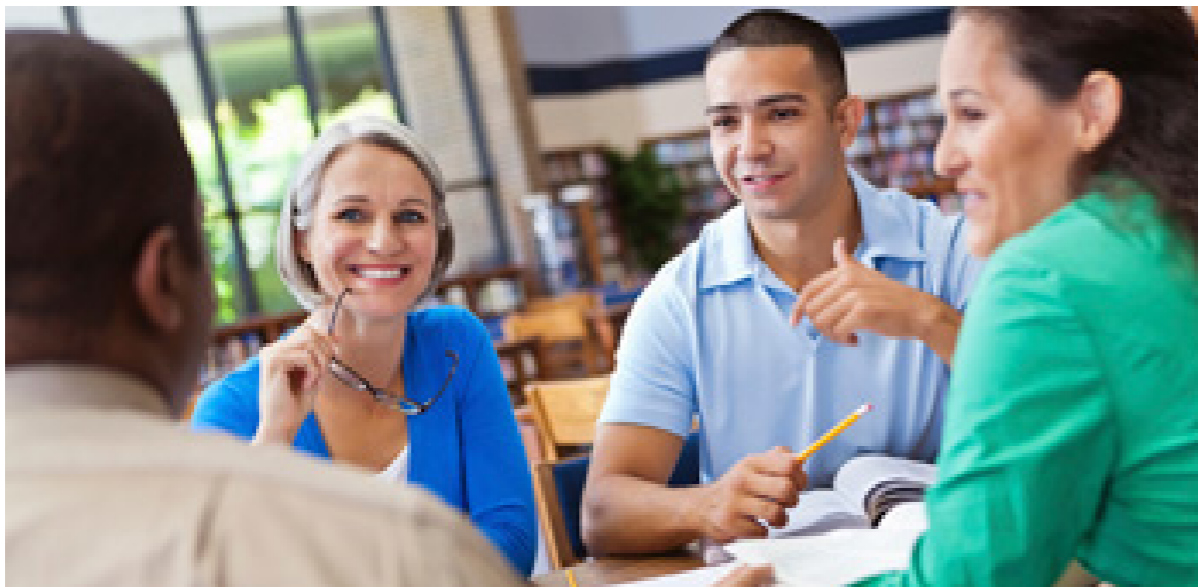
## Introduction

Followers of Jesus are learners. In the Gospels and Acts, Jesus' followers are called 'disciples', a word which means someone learning with a view to becoming like their teacher. And in the New Testament letters, the apostles urge their readers to grow towards Christian maturity, by which they mean a pattern of behaviour that reflects the way Jesus calls us to live.

One of our aims at ReSource is to provide a suite of resources to enable the members of your church to become learners in the way of Jesus. Some of these we have designed ourselves and others we are signposting to give you an idea of which we think are the best courses available at the moment. The courses and resources are divided into five sections:

- Living the Christian life in the power of the Holy Spirit
- Sustaining and deepening our relationship with God
- Sustaining and deepening the life of the church
- Reaching out in mission
- Equipping the church for ministry

Although there are many high-quality resources available, it is nevertheless the case that sometimes the best course for your church is the one you design yourself. This is because it is tailored much more closely to your situation and the people who make up your congregation. The aim of *Designing Learning for Your Church* is to provide some guidelines to help you design individual learning sessions and whole courses to enable your congregation to grow in Christian maturity and to reach out in mission and service.



Picture: Oxfordshire County Council

*Designing Learning for Your Church* is designed to answer four kinds of questions:

- What shall we do in Lent? For congregations used to a regular Lent course but little else in the way of learning together, how will you choose the Lent course likely to be most fruitful?
- How do we interest people in learning together? For congregations unused to learning for discipleship and mission, where do you begin? How can you begin to change the culture and attract people to learning?
- What is there out there? How do we choose from all the Christian courses and other learning opportunities available?
- When we can't find anything suitable, how do we design learning that will be just right for our church? You will also find *Design for Learning* helpful when thinking about how to design one-off events like a PCC day away.

*Designing Learning for Your Church* is structured around a mnemonic that is widely used in the adult education world: **NAOMIE**. The letters stand for:

- **Needs:** How do we discern the learning people are ready for and will most benefit from?
- **Aims:** What are we trying to achieve – for individual church members and for the church as a whole?
- **Objectives:** What difference do we hope each individual learning session will make? What do we hope that people will learn?
- **Methods:** What are the best ways of achieving our aims and objectives? What methods will people most enjoy and help them to learn best?
- **Implementation:** How will we design and run the event?
- **Evaluation:** How well did that go? Did people enjoy it? Did they learn all that we hoped?

And, of course, the next question is, 'What shall we plan to do next?' which takes you back to the needs once again.

The section on discerning needs will help you to answer the first three types of questions in the list above, and you may not feel the need to read any further. The rest of *Designing Learning for Your Church* takes you through the process of designing learning for yourself. But do remember that even if you have chosen an off-the-shelf course it is important to evaluate how well it went, so you will need the section on evaluation.

If you want to read more about adult learning in a Christian context, you could try my book *Kingdom Learning*. It is written with clergy and lay leaders in mind and is the core text for several of the courses on adult learning run in our training institutions.



Picture: Wallpaperflare

## Discerning Needs

Where do you begin? How do you choose a topic for a course or single session? Or, having completed a successful course, how do you decide on the next topic? And if you are in a church without an existing culture of Christian learning, where do you start?

It is a central principle of any kind of adult learning that adults are self-directed people. Unlike children, who are told by their teachers what they need to know, or university students who, having signed up for a degree course, rely on their professors to decide what they should learn, adults decide for themselves. Adults need to see the relevance of what they are learning. They also need to be able to apply what they learn in real life situations or they will quickly forget.

This means that you are looking for 'felt needs': the areas that members of your congregation are interested enough to want to learn about. There may be areas that, with your level of training and awareness, you can see would be beneficial. Perhaps you would like your congregation to read their Bibles more, or to have greater confidence in prayer, or you would like the PCC to address the question of welcoming newcomers.

As leader, it may be that you set out to teach your church members the value of these things, and, depending on the culture of the church, they may be persuadable. But fruitful learning will only begin when they see the need and the relevance of what you want to offer.

So, how will you go about discerning the felt needs, the areas in which people are ready to learn? There is no one way of doing this and the most effective ways of discerning needs will depend on your situation. But here are a few to think about:

- Observation. Keep your eyes and ears open when people are talking over coffee. Listen to the questions people raise. Start conversations to see what the response is. If someone shows interest in something, talk to others to see if they share it.
- Consult key people in the church, the ones who have been around the longest, perhaps. Find out what their main concerns are, not only for the church but for the community and wider world.
- Look back through the church's records: newsletters and magazines (if you have them), reports from the Annual Parochial Church Meeting, minutes of the PCC. See if you can spot the issues that are mentioned and the questions that keep on coming up.
- Gather a focus group, perhaps some of the core members of the church. Ask them what they think the church needs to deepen its life together, or what they think the issues are on people's hearts.
- It may even be possible to devise a questionnaire, asking people what they would like to learn about. This will help to guide people's thinking about the possibilities and will also refine yours.
- And sometimes the need finds you! Someone approaches you, or you pick up a chance remark, or you simply have a gut feeling that people might respond to an invitation, which you can then check out by asking around.

Several of the suggestions above might be needed if you are beginning from a 'standing start', seeking to encourage learning in a church without a learning culture. In this kind of situation, you may need to be on the lookout for 'teachable moments'. These may come in the shape of national or international issues, like wars or the housing crisis. Or there may be a local issue that people are willing to come together to think about. In *Kingdom Learning* I share the story of a friend who led a group in response to the issue of people trafficking, using an outline drawn from his ministerial training. Having studied the issue, shared their conclusions with the church, and devised a response, this group then went on to study several similar issues. Or it may be that you have a few members who would like a better understanding of the regular worship in which they take part week by week. You could then devise a course around the eucharist or the creed, or perhaps use one of the Pilgrim courses (you can find the link on the ReSource website), praying that this will whet their appetite for further learning.

But even in a church where groups meet regularly, there is still a need carefully to discern the learning needs. The question that then arises is: Who will take responsibility for this? Will it be the vicar on his or her own? Or a sub-committee of the PCC. Or a specially convened group? And how will you go about choosing? You will need a good sense of how the church works, what the expectations are, and consult widely so that whatever is decided will have the backing of as many as possible. If you are fortunate enough to be able to convene a group of people enthusiastic about Christian learning and ready to do most of work, it may be worthwhile considering inviting someone who is not a specialist, a 'gritty non-expert' from within the congregation, to act as the sceptical voice who needs to be convinced, and in this way help the group to make better decisions.

So you have decided on a course or are ready to design one. What do you need to know about your target audience? You probably already have a good idea, but here are a few things to check on:

- Level of education. Well educated and confident or less well educated and needing help? I once led a Bishop's Certificate course, which, although very well targeted at people with no more than secondary education, still needed careful 'translation' in some places.
- Existing knowledge of Christian faith. How much can you take for granted? Where might you need to fill in gaps in understanding? Courses like *Saints Alive!* and *Pilgrim* assume no existing Christian understanding. Others assume much more.
- Attitudes to learning. All adults have been through school and for some it was a discouraging and even damaging experience, which they are not keen to repeat. Many others are worried by the idea that a course may prove too 'academic' for them. With people unused to learning in a Christian context, you may need to provide a good deal of reassurance.
- Expectations of church life. What do church members think church is for? Mainly for deepening their own spiritual life? Mainly for mission and service to the community? A combination of these and more?
- Pattern of relationships. Do people know each other and get on well? Or are there some with few relationships in the congregation? It is always worth thinking about an 'ice-breaker' or 'get-to-know-you' exercise at the beginning of a course, and possibly more than once, to help the members of a learning group to relate well to one another.

And finally on discerning needs, once a course has been chosen, the publicity has gone out and people are ready to come, it is usually worth contacting a sample of your audience to find out what they are expecting and why they will be there. Everyone comes to learning with specific hopes and often with fears and hesitations and the more you know about these the better you will be able to take them into account when leading.



Picture: PxFuel

## Aims and Objectives

In any venture it is important to 'begin with the end in mind'. What are you hoping to achieve? In the case of a course of learning, what difference do you hope it will make to the life of the church and to those who take part?

The English language has a variety of words for purpose or goals, and the words 'aims' and 'objectives' have a specific use in the context of education. 'Aims' express the purpose of the whole course, 'objectives' the purpose of each session of the course, or even of each activity.

Suppose you have discerned a need for a course on prayer. People have told you that they feel uncertain about how to pray and would like to pray with greater confidence. Reflecting on what you have heard, you then come up with an aim for a course on prayer: that as a result of the course, people will be able to pray with greater confidence. You may also want them to become familiar with some different ways of praying or patterns of prayer. You may also have a secondary aim: that there will be enough people with the confidence to lead intercessions in worship, ready to go on to some specific training for this.

There is huge value in formulating your aims in an explicit way:

- They help you to design the course. You have decided that you want people to become familiar with different ways of praying. This tells you that you will need to make space for people to learn and practice these methods. You have decided that your goal is greater confidence in prayer. So you will need to refer to Jesus' teaching on prayer and include some opportunities to try things out.
- They help you to publicise the course. You will not just be telling people that this is a course on prayer but explaining what it will involve and how they can expect to benefit.
- They help you evaluate whether the course was a success, whether the aims were achieved.

'Objectives' are much more specific. They express the purpose of an individual session of a course. When Alison Fleetwood and I were designing *'Alive in Christ'*, we decided that the aims for the course as a whole should be that each member of the group would:

- understand more deeply the nature of God as a loving Father,
- experience God's love in a way that will enable them to build their lives on it,
- grow in love for one another and learn the importance of forgiving one another,
- identify anything in their lives that may be preventing them from knowing and experiencing God's love and, with the help of the course leaders, allow God to address these issues,
- find their relationships gradually transformed as they experience the security of knowing that God loves them.
- Become confident about serving Jesus as a member of his Body.

The objectives for the first session are that each member of the group would:

- come to know what the Bible teaches us about the nature of God our loving heavenly Father,
- become familiar and comfortable with Ignatian imaginative contemplation as a way of exploring the message of a Bible passage,
- come to know and feel God's love for them deep in their hearts, not just in theory but in a way that transforms their attitude to themselves,
- and that this love will begin to transform the way that they relate to other people both in the church and the wider community.

There are several things to notice about these aims and objectives:

- There are several types of aim and objective. Some they express what we hope that people will come to know, others the skills they may learn, and others how we hope their attitudes will change, and how this will impact their relationships. In a Christian context, attitudes and relationships are the most important. They might become familiar with the idea of God as a loving Father, but the deeper aim is for them to receive his love and for this to transform their relationships.
- They are written from the point of view of the learner. We have not written down what we want to teach but what we hope the group members will learn. Expressing aims and objectives from the point of view of the learner is one of the most vital and yet difficult skills in designing learning. It directs attention away from merely content (What do we want to teach?) and towards the process (How do we think people will best learn?). Although it means learning and practising a discipline of thinking, being able to think from the learner's point of view is a vital element in designing learning. A starter sentence such as, 'As a result of this session, group members will ...' can be a useful tool in helping you to get into this way of thinking.
- They can all be evaluated in one way or another. Your aims and objectives have told you the difference you are hoping the course will make. You can then use questionnaires or simple observation to find out whether this has come about (see the section below on evaluation).



Picture: Flickr

## Methods

Especially if we are older, the method of learning we may be most familiar with is listening to someone teaching, perhaps while taking notes. It is what many of us have encountered in school, is still the standard method of teaching in universities, and something with which we are all familiar through the time-honoured institution of the sermon. So widespread has this method been that the word 'teaching' is almost synonymous in many people's minds with someone standing at the front explaining things to people.

But there are many more ways of learning than listening to someone else talk. And in fact, the talk is one of the least effective of all ways of learning. Really to learn something, we need actively to engage with it, respond in some way, think it through for ourselves, connect it with other things we know, and try it out. This is the reason that practice in schools, especially primary schools, has changed radically in the last twenty to thirty years, and why educational standards have progressively improved as active learning has become standard. Listening to a talk is only one way of learning. In fact, there is a huge variety of possible methods of learning. Here are some of them:

- **Discussion:** sometimes in small groups of two or three, sometimes in larger groups. The smaller the group, the more people become engaged. Quieter people, who may not have the confidence to contribute in the large group, may feel more at home with one or two friends.
- **Debate:** two or more people primed to present opposing points of view.
- **Panel discussion:** Two or more experts discussing and taking questions.
- **Film, video or response to a picture:** A picture is worth 1,000 words. About 25% of people learn more effectively from visual images than from words, and another 50% more effectively from a combination of the two. If you look through the material for 'Alive in Christ', you will see some of the ways Alison and I have combined the two.
- **Picture cards:** Asking people to choose one or more cards they are attracted to or speak powerfully to them. Often a good way of helping people to express feelings, values and attitudes.
- **Case studies:** usually worked on in groups. What would you do if ....? How would you respond to this situation ....? These are a good way of helping people work out how to put ideas into action.
- **Quizzes:** Often a good way of starting a session: these can help make both you and the learners aware of what they already know. They can also help to kindle interest in the topic.

- **Questionnaires:** These can help people to express their values and attitudes, through ticking strongly agree, agree, disagree etc.
- **Brainstorming** (today often called thought showering): A way of collecting ideas from the group rapidly. The rule is that no one comments on any of the suggestions until later.
- **Role play:** The leader scripts the parts and group members act out a situation. Often a very good way of getting at feelings and values.
- **Simulation game:** Making the scenario into a game. Remember that, as with role play, reflecting together afterwards on what has been learned will usually take as long as the role play or game itself.
- **Silent reflection:** Often welcomed by those who need time to process their thoughts.

Learning how best to use each of these methods comes about gradually as we experience them when led by others and try them out for ourselves. Learning what each of these methods can achieve similarly comes gradually with experience. It is always best to start cautiously, trying out the methods we are most confident about, before thinking about those that may be less familiar.

We will think about the rules for putting the different methods together in the next section on 'Implementation'. For now, here are two golden rules to remember:

- The methods you choose will be guided by the objectives for the session. If you want people learn a skill (such as using a variety of different approaches to prayer, interpreting a passage from the Bible, or welcoming someone new to church) then telling them about it is not enough: you need to offer them the opportunity to try it out. If you want people to become aware of and consider their attitudes, such as the willingness to forgive or compassion for the poor, then you need to choose methods that will engage these attitudes, such as case studies, response to pictures or role play.
- The methods you choose must be comfortable for the learners. Some may be new and will need careful explaining. Some are more obviously risky than others. Discussion in small groups is usually easier for people than contributing to the whole group. Role play takes considerable confidence from the participants.

Having said this, activity and variety is usually stimulating. Your learners will enjoy the session more and almost certainly learn more when you use a variety of different methods.



## The Learning Cycle

Since the 1980s, and especially since the work of David Kolb, the author of a book called *Experiential Learning*, learning has been widely understood as a cycle. You can find diagrams and explanations of the learning cycle readily on the internet, but I will give a simplified explanation here.

Our learning has four elements: experience, reflection, conclusion (which Kolb called conceptualisation), and action. These four phases of learning work together. They don't always have to come in this order, and they all interact with each other. But the order in the diagram is a helpful way of remembering them. It is also a helpful tool for designing a learning session, because if you want your learners to really learn, you need to include all four phases of the cycle.

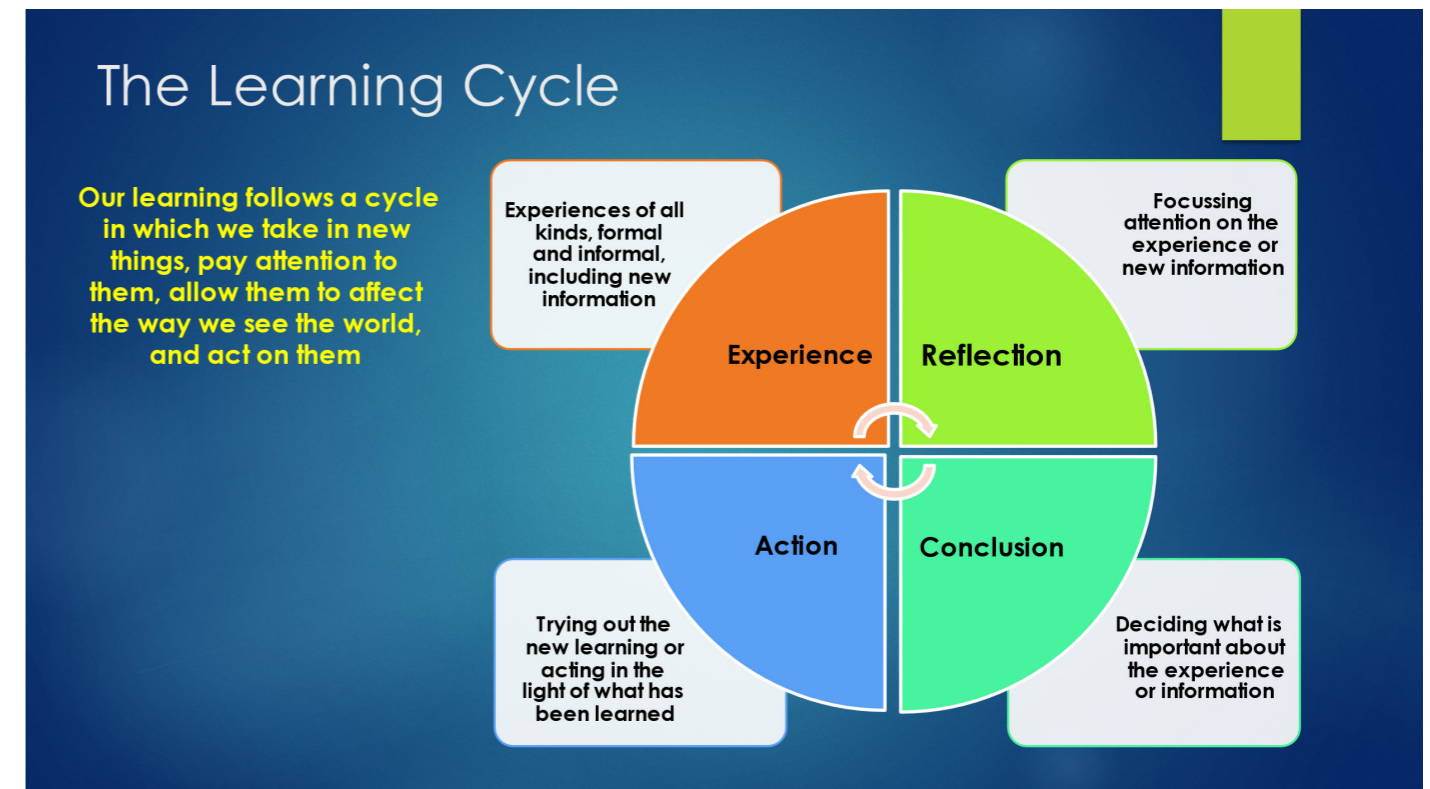
Experience comes in a multitude of different forms: reading a book, watching a video, taking part in a discussion, looking at a picture, having a conversation, taking a walk in the country. The list is endless. Some of these are types of 'formal' learning – when someone is trying to teach us something, from books to TV documentaries to recipes to instruction leaflets. Others are 'informal': having an accident, visiting a new place, arguing with a colleague. The 'experience' element in your design will be the way you introduce new information, such as a short talk or a video, or asking people to watch or read something beforehand. Or it will be an activity designed to get people to think, perhaps choosing a picture or filling in a questionnaire.

## Implementation: Putting it all together

You have decided what you want the course to achieve, decided on the topics for the individual sessions and formulated your objectives for each session. You have begun to think about the methods you might use that will best achieve these objectives. Perhaps you have several possibilities in mind: a video, a short talk, a period for discussion around some questions, a practical activity with time for reflection afterwards, and so on. Now is the time to begin putting it all together: designing the session.

Notice all the things that have come first before you reach this stage. You are clear about your aims and objectives and have hopefully been able to frame these from point of view of the learner: the difference you hope the course as a whole and each individual session is going to make to them. You have begun to think about possible methods and have hopefully avoided the common trap of building your design around some method you really want to include: a particular film or activity that you have experienced elsewhere and now want to share.

There are two crucial questions that affect any design for learning: 'How do people learn?' and 'How do people learn best?' What is learning, and how does it take place? What changes when people learn something new? And what helps that change take place? This is an enormous topic and there is only space to give an outline answer here. But two things are crucial, and closely related to each other: the learning cycle and learning styles.



Reflection is when we take time to think about the experience, to make connections with what we already know, to become aware of how we feel about it, to think about its possible implications. In ordinary life, this can take place very quickly. On the other hand, some experiences leave their mark and it may be years before we can say we fully understand. Having presented new information, or arranged an experience, it is vital to provide opportunities for your learners to reflect, perhaps on their own through a period of silence or writing in a journal, perhaps together through discussion. Notice that when listing role play or simulation games above, I made the point that the time taken for reflection afterwards is likely to be at least as long as the activity.



In the conclusion or conceptualisation phase, we bring it all together. We decide what is important to us and what we want to take away. This may take place when you sum up a discussion, or by asking people to share in small groups what they want to take away from the session. Sometimes, what we learn simply adds detail and new information to what we already know, and we can fit it fairly easily into our existing way of seeing the world. At other times, it changes the way we see the world. In sessions when we are aiming for attitude change, perhaps learning to forgive others, or growing in compassion for the poor, or recognising the presence of God in our everyday lives, it is this change of the whole picture we are aiming at. It is part of the gradual transformation of Christian disciples into the image of Christ.

Learning is not complete until we put it into practice. Sometimes this will be through practising a new skill, or consciously deciding to do something differently next time. At other times, it is more subtle: it is a case of approaching situations with new eyes, new feelings and new values. For example, instead of being quick to take offence, we become more ready to forgive. It has happened as we have considered Jesus' teaching, prayed about it and allowed the Holy Spirit to change us. Case studies are a good way of moving the cycle on from conclusion to action: we have learned the principles, so how do they work out in practice?

Thinking about the four phases of the learning cycle should give you an idea of the weaknesses of the straight talk. Very often, a talk involves telling people what you think they should know. In other words, it goes straight to the conclusion phase without allowing the opportunity to reflect or to put the ideas you want to convey into practice. And research suggests that people will forget roughly half the contents of a straight lecture within an hour of hearing it unless they have an opportunity to engage with the learning and put it into practice. That's why 'teaching' involves far more than giving people information and ideas. It means designing learning sessions that allow people to engage, reflect, draw conclusions and think about how they will respond. Rather than a 'sage on the stage' passing on their knowledge and expertise to others, the Christian teacher needs to be a 'guide on the side', whose aim is to help people to learn and grow.

## Learning Styles

Thinking about the learning cycle leads to consideration of learning 'styles'. Again, it is possible to find a good deal about these on the internet. The four phases of the learning cycle all involve different kinds of thinking and inevitably some people find one or more phase more congenial than others. Some will enjoy the experience: they love encountering new things and new information. Some people are natural reflectors, who like to take time to think before arriving at their conclusions. Others want everything to make sense: they are looking for information or experience they can fit into a pattern. And then there are those who want to try things out, for whom the action phase of the cycle is the important one.

These four preferences were carefully studied by two researchers called Peter Honey and Alan Mumford and became the basis of the Honey and Mumford learning 'styles'. Activists are more comfortable at the experience phase and look for variety and stimulation. Reflectors are more at home reflecting and generally want to think deeply about things. Theorists are those who want things to make sense and are more at home with ideas and conclusions. Pragmatists are action-orientated and prefer to get stuck in and try things out. Knowing that these styles exist warns us that not everyone learns best in the way that we ourselves do, so that it is important to plan for the group and not be swayed by our own preferences. It's also important to remember that very few people have only one style or preference, and most people are ready to cope with activities that may not be their preference for the sake of the group.

From the list of methods above, there are some that appeal to activists, some to reflectors, some to theorists and some to pragmatists. This is why it is important to include a variety of learning activities in any learning session. By choosing the right mix, you take people through all four stages of the learning cycle and satisfy people with a variety of learning styles.



## Nuts and Bolts

I have paid a lot of attention to the theoretical aspects of designing learning because these lie at the heart of the process. But you will also need to pay attention to the practical: the nuts and bolts. You will need to think about the venue, and, having decided on a venue, how you will arrange the seating to facilitate the learning activities you have planned. You will need to think about the best time to meet, how long the sessions ought to be and how you will organise a welcome. A useful guide to timing is the 'football' rule: 90 minutes with the possibility of 30 minutes extra time. But do make sure that you keep your promise about starting and finishing times: it is part of your contract with the group. You will need to make sure that any technology you want to use works properly. And think carefully about the timings for each activity. How long do you expect each activity will take? And where might you be able to save time if something overruns?

It can be a great advantage to have two leaders. This way, you can share the tasks. One might be the assistant, perhaps learning from someone with greater experience. Or one might focus on leading the session, the other on care for the group members. In any group, there are three needs: completing the task, in this case the learning; the needs of the individual group members; and the needs of the group as a whole, to function well and promote harmony. The leaders' role is to pay attention to all three of these tasks, deciding at any one point what their next intervention should be: to move the group on to the next part of the session, to pay attention to the needs of one or more of the group members, to help the group to focus on how they are working together or perhaps to resolve a possible conflict.

Except in very small groups of six or less, it is difficult for one leader to focus on all three tasks and maintain the balance between them. On the other hand, if you have more than one leader, it is essential that you have agreed on the aims of the course, the objectives of each session, and the relative importance you are placing on each. That way, when you need to respond to circumstances, you will be acting from a basis of mutual agreement.



## Evaluation

In my experience, it is not common for churches to evaluate their learning activities. Perhaps the leaders don't want to burden the group members with an extra task at the end of a course. But this is most unfortunate because evaluation is essential if you are to build a learning culture in your church:

- Carrying out an evaluation lets people know that you are taking the event seriously and that you care about whether or not the course was a good experience. All this helps to build a positive learning culture in the church.
- If you ask people what they think they have learned, it can encourage them when they realise that the course has made a difference.
- Evaluation tells you what you need to do next. You might even include a question asking people what they would like to focus on next. You will certainly discover what went well and what needs to change next time.

In brief, there are four 'levels' of evaluation. Level 1 focusses on the experience. Learners are evaluating the teaching rather than the learning. You might ask such questions as:

- whether the venue was comfortable,
- whether the timing of the course was suitable,
- whether the teaching was easy to understand,
- whether they enjoyed the learning,
- whether there was enough, too little or too much participation,
- whether the methods used were stimulating,
- whether they would recommend the course to others.

Level 2 is designed to find out what people have learned – how far have you fulfilled the aims of the course. Depending on the topic, it might be appropriate, if you can make it fun, to give people a quiz. But where this isn't appropriate, you can still ask what are the most important things people think they have learnt, what has fascinated them, and what has puzzled them. You might devise a questionnaire based on your aims and objectives, asking people to respond, 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'unsure', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'. For *Alive in Christ*, this might include statements such as:

- Since the course, I now have a deeper experience of God's love.
- I have learned the importance of forgiving those that hurt me.
- I am more confident about serving Christ as a member of his Body.

Level 3 takes a longer view. It asks whether the learning on the course has stuck and is continuing to make a difference. This means that it is best left until some time after the course, perhaps 3 to 6 months. At that stage, a simple email asking perhaps two or three questions might give you some valuable information. These might include:

- What has stayed with you about the course?
- What, if anything, are you now doing differently since the course?
- Have you discerned an impact on others of anything you are doing differently?

Level 4 is probably the most difficult to determine. It is looking for the longer-term impact. This may be hard to discern because changes rarely have one clear cause. But sometimes you can be reasonably confident that the course has made a difference. Perhaps people are remarking on how much better the intercessions are following some training, or you notice that more families are coming back after their first visit to church since you have trained the welcoming team, or that more people are offering for ministry of various kinds following a SHAPE course, or simply that people seem to be more confident and find it easier to talk to others about matters of faith.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul writes about his desire to see all God's people growing to maturity and of how he is striving for it, 'with all the energy that [Jesus] powerfully inspires within me' (Colossians 1:29). Few things are more important than helping Christians to grow in their faith and equipping them to serve Christ in their places of everyday life and work as well as through the church. I hope this paper has helped you to make good choices among the resources on offer and perhaps given you confidence to design courses of your own, so that our fellow-disciples may be 'mature and complete, lacking in nothing' (James 1:4).