

# Location, Location, Location

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**Abstract:** Education in the Lutheran church primarily takes place in a classroom. Unfortunately, learning doesn't always transfer from there into the everyday life of disciples on the mission field. Educators must move beyond the classroom walls to design intentional learning experiences that more closely relate to the real life contexts in which the content will be used. This article uses prayer as an example of an important aspect of the life of a disciple that is limited by teaching *about* in a classroom, but can be enhanced through intentionally designed experiences across the life of a congregation. Readers are introduced to a simple three-part design structure to enable them to develop learning experiences in a variety of learning arenas.

Learning to cook? You can read lots of cookbooks, but eventually you need to get into the kitchen and crack some eggs. Learning to play basketball? You can read playbooks and even watch others play, but eventually you need to get into the gym and shoot some free throws. Learning to paint? You can read art history texts, and visit museums to see the masterpieces of great artists, but eventually you'll need to get into the studio and get some burnt sienna on your brush to see what happens on the canvas.

## How does learning happen?

Learning happens in a variety of ways. Knowledge, skills, and attitudes all come into play when we're talking about learning in depth. It's one thing to read about a topic, but it's another thing to do it yourself, and it's another thing to have the confidence that you can. This principle is true in secular arenas like physical education and the arts. It's also very true in Lutheran education. There is a lot of action learning that takes place as the Church makes disciples. It's one thing to learn *about* Jesus. It's another thing to follow Him. Learning to be a disciple living out the Great Commission? You can read lots of books on it, but eventually you need to go to worship, spend time in fellowship with the Body of Christ, serve others, and share Jesus with those who need His grace.

In his introduction to *Theology is for Proclamation*, Gerhard Forde writes about

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the difference between First and Second Order discourse by describing two people talking of love.<sup>1</sup> Imagine a wife asking her husband, “Do you love me?” He responds, “What is love?” He then proceeds to talk *about* love. She will ask again “Do you love me?” until he actually demonstrates his love. It’s one thing to talk about love, but it’s another thing entirely to love. Classroom environments provide an opportunity to talk about Jesus, but following Jesus entails more than a discussion about facts.

John Westerhoff began focusing on the importance of breaking through the classroom walls for more authentic education back in the 1970’s. Here he writes of the dangers of merely talking about Christianity in the classroom:

You can teach about religion, but you cannot teach people faith. Thus, this paradigm places Christian education in the strange position of making secondary matters primary. . . . It appears that as Christian faith has diminished, the schooling-instructional paradigm has encouraged us to busy ourselves with teaching *about* Christian religion. . . . The schooling-instructional paradigm easily leads us into thinking that we have done our jobs if we teach children *about* Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

It is dangerous to believe that education has occurred when one merely teaches about being a disciple. We must not feel comfortable with a classroom approach that neglects to bring learning into the everyday life of God’s people. Disciples are formed in many other areas of life beyond the classroom.

## Learning to pray

Consider prayer as an example. It’s one thing to read books and learn about prayer. It’s another thing entirely to pray. Christian education seeks to shape well-rounded disciples who not only know the facts of Christianity, but also have the skills and attitudes that correspond.

Where did you learn to pray? Think through your prayer life. When did you start praying, and why? Who was involved in teaching you to pray? Where were you when you learned to pray? When did you start praying on your own?

I’m sure that a classroom was involved somewhere in my prayer training. I spent a couple of years in Lutheran schools, confirmation classes, Sunday School, and VBS. I learned about prayer in all of those, but the practice of prayer didn’t come only in the classroom for me. I learned to pray in the sanctuary, at the kitchen table, in my bedroom, and in God’s creation.

Whether it is prayer, or the Lord’s Supper, Holy Absolution, or the Creed, we do our people a disservice by learning about the Christian life only in the classroom. We have the capacity to educate powerfully when we add other educational arenas to the mix in which students can not only learn about, but actually engage in living out the

Christian life. Learning is deeper and longer lasting when the content matches the correct context.

### **Where do we learn to pray?**

While most intentional education takes place in the classrooms of the LCMS, it is vital that we begin to consider a variety of other locations in which learning can take place. Authentic education takes place as close to the real life contexts in which learning is used. For prayer, think about the variety of places where prayer happens, and then intentionally create educational experiences there. A few examples might be the home, the sanctuary, in the midst of God's creation, and on the mission field.

The Lord's Prayer fits naturally into the home. Fathers and mothers teaching children the faith do well to expose kids to prayer from the youngest age. Both scripted and unscripted prayers can be taught intentionally in the home. The cycle of the day, or the cycle of life can offer opportunities to expand upon the Lord's Prayer and its petitions. Be intentional about teaching prayer in the home.

The sanctuary is also a natural place to learn to pray. Corporate prayer is essential to the worship life of the congregation. Learning to pray, praise, and give thanks with the Body of Christ offers the Christian an opportunity to suffer with those who suffer and rejoice with those who rejoice. The language of prayer learned in the context of public worship among the entire Body of Christ produces pray-ers who have a fuller, broader, and deeper prayer vocabulary. Learning prayer in this context expands one beyond personal needs to include the entire life of Church and world in prayer. Be intentional about forming pray-ers in the sanctuary.

God's creation is another location where one can learn the wonder of prayer beyond the walls of a classroom. Where else can one really learn to pray a psalm of praise than standing under the heavens that declare God's handiwork? I remember learning to praise God for His creation from my older brother as we drove along a gravel road in the Iowa cornfields at sunrise. The sky was vivid with reds, oranges, purples, and pinks as the sun peaked from behind an old farmstead. He said, "Grab the Bible and read Psalm 19." "The heavens declare the glory of God . . ." And, we hallowed His name from the bucket seats of an old maroon station wagon. You can't fabricate experiences like that inside a schoolroom looking at photographs. Be intentional about designing opportunities to teach prayer in the wild.

The mission field is also a place where learning takes place. Prayer can be learned in the homes of neighbors as you pray for them. New missionaries learn the importance of prayer and desire to make it a part of their lives. It can be talked about in the classroom, but the vitality of a life of prayer becomes real on the mission field. Prayer might even be welcomed by people from other cultures looking for spiritual support.

## Learning to pray intentionally

If prayer belongs in the home, sanctuary, creation, and on the mission field, then how does one intentionally lead learning experiences in these environments? Understanding By Design (UBD) can help. Understanding By Design is an educational design process developed by Wiggins and McTighe to encourage more authentic education in schools.<sup>3</sup> It is also readily transferable to designing educational experiences across the life of the Church. Here I will share a stripped down version of UBD that can be used by Lutherans who are looking to intentionally shape disciples beyond the classroom.

Prayer provides a good example for us to consider as we look to design educational experiences beyond the walls of the classroom, though any of the Six Chief Parts could work. In fact, the entire life of a disciple on God's mission provides experiences that are ripe for teaching beyond the classroom. UBD begins at the end with developing a clear picture of what it means to understand your topic. What does it mean to understand prayer? Many of us have had the experience of teaching a seven-week confirmation session on the Lord's Prayer only to sit down at a meal with our confirmands and see that they've torn into their pizza and chips without even a thought of thanking God for the provisions set before them. They've memorized the Lord's Prayer, petition by petition with Luther's explanations, yet they don't know when to pray. Or, maybe worse, they've memorized and know when to use prayer, but don't have the desire to pray. Understanding involves more than the ability to recite. One who understands prayer can recite facts, but also knows the skill of praying at the right time and place and also has the desire or attitude that seeks God in prayer. To understand prayer is to have knowledge, skill, and desire.

It's one thing to memorize the Lord's Prayer and be able to recite the explanations to each petition. It's even better to have the skill to know the right situation for the right petition. It's best to know the words, be able to apply the words by expressing them in appropriate situations, *and* have the desire to use God's gift of prayer. All three together show a depth of understanding that we're aiming at as Lutheran educators.

## Assessing learning to pray

Once we have an idea of what it means to understand prayer, we'll take a step back and look at step two of UBD—assessment. How will we know if our disciples have learned or not? What is the evidence that we're looking for to see if a person is a praying disciple who knows the Lord's Prayer, can use the Lord's Prayer, and wants to seek God in prayer?

Many Lutheran readers will appropriately have their Law/Gospel antennae raised at this point. Yes, assessment is in the realm of the Law, and yes it's all right

and even important for us to do it. Most pastors are already doing educational assessments without necessarily realizing it. A visitor asks to come to the Lord's Table on Sunday morning and you talk through their beliefs concerning what will be taking place. That's an example of educational assessment. Do they know what they need to know? Can they examine themselves properly? Do they desire an amended life? Or, consider for whom you will or will not perform a marriage. Do they know what marriage is for? Are they capable of living out their God-given roles as husband and wife? Do they intend to commit to one another for life? These are educational assessments that pastors do regularly.

Doing educational assessments within the context of disciple-making provides the teacher and the student with the tools to know how they are progressing. Assessments give evidence of growth. Before the teaching even happens, teachers should take the time to determine what progress they are looking for as they lead their students to follow Jesus. In prayer one might hope to see if the student can recite the Lord's Prayer and its meanings in an age-appropriate manner. One might look to see if a disciple is comfortable praying in front of others and leading others in prayer. One might see how well the disciple writes his or her own prayers for specific situations. Be intentional about looking for important evidence for growth.

Assessing matters of faith is always tricky business. How does one assess how much a person desires to pray? Classroom assessments like quizzes and essays might not accurately account for the depth of a disciple's prayer life. Lutheran educators might not be able to grade praying like a math teacher can grade multiplication, but finding a way to assess prayer use and desire can be a big help to the growing disciple. Allowing the disciple to be a part of his or her own assessment can also be helpful. Self-assessment is important for growth because it allows the student to continue to grow apart from the direct instruction of the teacher. A violin teacher teaches self-assessment from the beginning of lessons as he helps a child develop a keen ear for tuning. Young kids playing the violin learn to adjust tuning pegs and finger placements for best performance without needing the instructor to continually be present to tune and adjust for them. Self-assessment in matters of faith allow the disciple to pay attention to his or her own attitude, skills, and knowledge and make adjustments throughout life without having to return to the teacher at every moment.

## **Planning learning experiences**

We first developed a clear sense of what understanding prayer looks like. Second, we identified clear evidence for assessing growth. We can now turn to the last piece of educational design: planning learning experiences. How will we teach so that the students can learn? It includes such matters as choosing curricular resources, planning learning experiences, and helping students transfer learning to real life situations.

Now is the time to go to the Concordia Publishing House (CPH) website to see what resources are available. If I'm teaching on prayer, I already know what I want the student to know, do, and want. I know what evidence of growth I'll be looking for. Now, I'm looking to see what resources will help them move from where they are today to where we want them to be in the future. Many of us do this planning backwards. We start by looking for the right book, and hope we'll teach something valuable. The problem is that we don't really know what we're aiming at if we don't begin with the results in mind. UBD structures our planning in the correct order for maximum impact.

### **Where and when?**

In this third step, it will be important to consider the role of the classroom and other venues for education. Is the classroom the best place to teach prayer? If it is, use it. If it's not, then find the right location to teach. Get into the sanctuary and into the woods, and let your students praise God with their brothers and sisters in the midst of God's wonderful creation. Learning that takes place close to the context where knowledge will be used is always more effective than learning that takes place in one arena (the classroom) and needs to be transferred to another (the sanctuary).

Making disciples will happen best when education takes place in a variety of locations. The classroom will be a piece of the entire educational experience, but it cannot be the only place, and it cannot be the central focus of teaching things like prayer or other active elements of the Christian life. Authentic education happens when learning takes place in ways that understanding is transferred easily into real life experiences. The closer to these experiences that education can happen, the better the understanding. Christian educators and missionaries can design educational experiences in a variety of contexts that will allow the faith to be shared in powerful ways.

### **Scripture: the ultimate resource**

Consider the Early Church in Acts 2. Where did they learn? Five areas are described by Luke:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (**Instruction**) and the fellowship (**Fellowship**), to the breaking of bread and the prayers (**Worship**). And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need (**Service**). And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number

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day by day those who were being saved (**Evangelism**). (Acts 2:42–47; bold emphasis added)

These five areas are all educational! One learns to follow Jesus and lead others to follow Him in these areas of the life of the Church. Instruction is one important piece, but it cannot support the educational work of the entire Church. You can discuss evangelism in a classroom, but you can't really learn how to do it unless you're in the public square engaged with people who do not yet know Jesus. You can have fellowship in a college classroom, but the quality and type of fellowship is nothing compared to the fellowship experienced late night among friends in the dorms. You can talk about and plan for service learning in a classroom, but one actually needs to get out the basin and the towel to wash someone's feet in love and service.

The five educational areas shown in Acts 2 can provide a valuable schematic for educational designers in the Church. Pastors, missionaries, DCEs, teachers, and anyone interested in creating experiences that intentionally shape people as disciples will do well to attend to those areas beyond the classroom.

Prayer is a great example of a piece of the life of a disciple that can be learned in a classroom but would be most effectively taught in a variety of educational arenas. Many other aspects of the Christian faith belong in places beyond the classroom. Be intentional about using the entire life of the Church and designing learning experiences beyond the walls of the classroom. Missionaries know that Jesus ties education and mission intimately together in the Great Commission. Like two sides of a coin, or two wings on an airplane, one cannot function without the other. Missionaries might be able to use classroom instruction effectively in their ministry, but most likely learning experiences will be designed in other arenas of life. The home, the workplace, the sanctuary, and the public square become some of the locations in which disciples are formed.

Learning to be a disciple who makes disciples? You can read about Jesus and discuss faith in a classroom, but one of these days you've got to leave the classroom behind and invite others to join you as you follow Him.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is For Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>2</sup> John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith? Revised Edition* (Toronto, Canada: Morehouse Publishing, 2000), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding By Design, 2<sup>nd</sup> Expanded Edition* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005).