

Religious Education Cluster Questions

Biblical cluster:

One of the key elements of supporting learning community in Christian contexts is helping people attend to the stories of God's relationship with human beings, and God's action in wider Creation. One of the most important sources of those stories is the Bible. Sometimes this learning goal gets reduced to simplistic slogans like "increase biblical literacy." But I think what we're actually aiming for is something much richer and more nourishing than mere literacy. I think what we want, what religious educators work towards, is a way of being in relationship with the Bible that involves integrating not only concrete stories from that sacred text into our lives, but also allowing deeper questions and challenges that emerge from the text to question us.

During this course, each small group will work on the question of how to draw on biblical texts to shape learning goals, and how to allow learning goals to be shaped by biblical texts. You can go at this task in a variety of ways, but try to answer at least the following questions about the particular "focus situation."

Start with how, if at all, the Bible is present in the focus situation. What kinds of biblical texts, what biblical metaphors, what stories and characters, are present?

Then think about whether there are any other texts that come to mind for you in relation to this situation. Sometimes biblical texts may emerge in a snippet of a hymn that wafts across your consciousness, or through a line in a prayer you find yourself saying. Other times you might consider what the lectionary is offering for a given week, and whether there are any connections to be drawn.

Once your group has brainstormed some responses to these two questions, start to think about what the people in the focus situation might be learning about God through the biblical texts present. Please note: just because a specific text is explicitly mentioned does not mean that the people present are learning something useful or credible about it. Some of the focus situations I'll use in this class are actually examples of problematic uses of the Bible. Given what they're learning, do you want to reinforce it? Or are there contrasting messages or ideas you'd like to present?

Ritual cluster:

We always learn in at least three modes – through our ideas, through our feelings, and through our actions. Educators tend to speak about this as the “cognitive, the affective, and the psychomotor” elements of learning. Religious community is generally particularly rich in weaving these elements together through our ritual practices. Liturgy is one very specific form of ritual, but there are many other rituals – large and small – to be found in religious community. Think about the ways in which people gather for coffee after liturgy, or the specific pews they tend to sit in.

One of the key teaching challenges religious educators often face is that of preparing people for initiation into specific rituals of the community. In the Lutheran context, churches often prepare children for first communion, or for confirmation. In the Catholic context there is specific instruction for reconciliation, for marriage, and so on. In this class – and for this cluster of questions – I want you to be aware of both the “big” rituals of sacramental life (communion, for instance) as well as the “little” rituals such as preparing to begin a Sunday School class, or gathering for coffee.

We learn best when our “ideas, feelings and action” are all engaged congruently, in a coherent fashion. That is, when we do what we believe, when we say what we do, when we feel within that action, and so on. This cluster of questions about ritual invites you to observe the rituals that are present in the focus situation, and to consider how learning is happening within them, and whether are other, additional pieces you would bring to the task.

Start with simply listing all of the behaviors you can observe in the focus situation that might be at least routine, or perhaps even rise to the level of ritual. Pay attention to all of them, big and small, and make as long a list as you can.

Next, sort through that list and identify those rituals that seem most explicitly Christian to you. Perhaps there’s an obvious ritual — like communion — being portrayed. Or perhaps someone offers a prayer in the situation.

Once your group has brainstormed these two lists (all of the rituals, and then those that are more explicitly Christian), start to think about what the people in the focus situation might be learning about God through those rituals. Please note: just because a specific ritual is explicitly Christian does not mean that the people in the midst of it are learning something useful or credible about it. Some of the focus situations I’ll use in this class are actually examples of problematic examples of Christian ritual. Given what they’re learning, do you want to reinforce the ritual? Or are there contrasting messages or ideas you’d like to present?

History cluster:

There are so many ways in which history shapes learning, that it's hard for me to know where to begin. Particularly in a course as short as this, I'll have to rely in large measure on the knowledge you bring into the "room." But think even in basic terms about what history is: the series of past events that lead up to the one you're currently experiencing.

Your own experience of this class, for instance, was likely shaped by your previous experiences with religious education. Maybe you were a kid who LOVED Sunday school. If so, you probably come to this class eager for ideas about how to help other kids have similarly engaging experiences. Or perhaps you're someone who learns best through memorization. The past memory work you've done will shape what you can take from this class.

If we had the time, I would have invited you to read some of the wonderful texts which tell stories of religious education over the years. Such history shapes current learning for good – and ill.

The questions your group needs to ask as you engage this focus situation stem from digging into the history of the situation. What can you glean about prior events, practices, meanings that have shaped what is occurring in the situation?

First you need to ask: what are the stories of the individuals present? What are the stories of the church or churches? Do these stories conflict in any way? What other history seems to be connected or informative in this context? (thinking about race in church, for instance, inevitably involves thinking about race in larger US settings, too)

Next, take Mary Boys' grid and see if you can figure out where in her grid this focus situation might be found. Even if you can't determine it for sure, at least come up with some basic answers to her questions, using the focus situation as the raw data.

What do you appreciate about the history(ies) that is present in this situation, and what might be elements of the history(ies) that you would want to ignore or at least give less attention to?

Learning cluster:

This cluster of questions is going to ask you to delve more deeply into the social science and education lenses that we bring to religious education. There are elements of learning that spread further than religious community, forms of teaching that occur not simply in church but also in the wider world. This is the cluster where I'm asking you to pay specific attention to learning challenges, and learning design.

Start by considering whether any explicit teaching is going on. Can you identify a "teacher" and a "learner"? How is that teaching and learning taking place?

Next I want you to see if you can identify any of the implicit learning that is going on. Another way to think about "implicit" learning is to think about learning that is not necessarily intentional, but rather that occurs somewhat incidentally, or without intentionality. You've probably had the experience yourself of someone teaching explicitly that God is love, but treating you very disrespectfully. So that while the explicit message is one of love, the implicit message suggests that (for whatever reason) love does not come attached to respect.

Next try to identify unintentional learning, learning that takes place through absence, or taboo; learning that is referred to as the "null" curriculum. Many middle class white people, for example, learn a lot about race through the null curriculum. Many of us have learned a lot about religion in public school contexts by its obvious absence (note: what we have learned may not be what religious communities would want us to learn).

Finally, take the "Nurturing Faith" handout, and see if you can identify where in those ages/stages the participants of the focus situation would most likely fit. Does the situation contain learning support that's appropriate for the ages of the people present?

Assessment and evaluation cluster:

This cluster of questions is going to focus more narrowly on trouble-shooting learning environments and making good choices about specific learning designs. These questions may be particularly hard early in the course, so if you're one of the first groups working with them, don't despair! You'll continue to learn from your colleagues in other groups as they process them, too.

Start by using Jane Vella's list of principles for learning. Go down that list and see which, if any, of these principles were at work in the focus situation. In some of the pieces we're engaging, there is not a very explicit learning setting, so you'll have to be creative as you think about how if at all the principles might be active.

Next take the Bloom list of verbs, and the MI list of verbs, and see which if any of those verbs can be found in the focal situation. An easy way to do this is simply print off the lists and highlight with a marker any words you can find in the situation.

Ok. Now that you've done some "diagnosis" – or at least thought about what is going on in the focus situation from a variety of perspectives, what can you conclude about the learning challenges found in the situation? In what ways can the social science/education theories help you to think through ways to engage that situation more effectively? (or, if the situation is a great example of learning, then in what ways do these theories help to explain why it is so effective?)