1 LEARN

What Does This Teaching Mean?

A teacher's primary responsibility is not to teach; it is to ensure that students learn. That may sound like the same thing, but in practice these two approaches are very different. Many educators lead with the mindset, "I teach; they listen and learn." The unfortunate truth is that learning doesn't happen that way, at least not effectively.

As I listen to many teachers talk about their work and think back to my own experience in education, I realize that the stress of teaching can blind us to how actively our students are learning. We often fall into the trap of thinking that if we teach something to our students, then it is their responsibility to learn and understand it. We feel that we have done our part in presenting the information and it is up to them to rise to the challenge.

The biggest mistake I made in my early days in education was to focus almost exclusively on what

I was doing rather than on how the students were learning. I concentrated on *my* lectures, *my* PowerPoint presentations, *my* lessons, *my* explanations, *my*, *my*, *my*, etc. Not only was this an ineffective approach to education, it was an exhausting way to teach! I was the active one, doing all the hard work, while the students were passively coming along for the ride.

When I shifted my approach from active teaching to active learning, the students started remembering so much more. They were the ones doing the work, while I was there to coach and guide. I would introduce ideas quickly and efficiently, while the students set out on a journey of discovery. This is the experience you will have, too, if you apply what you read in this chapter to your own method of teaching.

If our students are unsure about something we have taught, then it is our responsibility—not theirs—to come up with a plan to help them learn it better. We do not stop until they have mastered the material, because once they understand what we want them to learn, they are ready for that all-important encounter with Jesus Christ.

THE MASTERY MENTALITY

What happens when a student does not understand a concept? What happens when they perform poorly on a test? The response we make as educators depends on whether we have a "move-on" or a "mastery" mentality.

Educators with a move-on mentality record grades and check performance on assignments but do not use performance to inform their teaching. They move on without much concern for mastery. They would rather present everything they are expected to, hoping students get it, than spend time focused on making sure students learn what they are supposed to learn.

Educators with a mastery mentality, on the other hand, monitor student progress and make changes to the way they teach based on that progress. They see performance on assessments as feedback, sometimes prompting them to change their approach and explain concepts in new ways. They care deeply about the students' progress and want them to grow.

The tools and tactics in this chapter can help you embrace the mastery mentality. But first, it is important to understand how humans learn. Once you know how the brain works, mastery is much easier to achieve.

HOW THE BRAIN WORKS

The brain is made up of a network of neurons. Each neuron is connected to other neurons. When we learn something new, we make a connection between that new idea and another idea that we already understand. Within the brain, this means we biologically connect two neurons.

As we master that new idea or skill, the connections between those two neurons are strengthened more and more. In fact, as we learn something new we make multiple connections to ideas we already understand, deepening our comprehension through the various connections running through an entire network of neurons.

Here is the most important thing to remember: every new idea you introduce needs to be attached to an idea your students already understand. Therefore, you must ask yourself: What connections am I helping my students make? What do they already know and understand, and how does this new idea fit into what they already know? The best approach to ensure that connections are being made is to use one of what I call the Seven Scaffolding Strategies.

THE SEVEN SCAFFOLDING STRATEGIES

Recognizing that knowledge is constructed along neurological paths, some educators have found the analogy of scaffolding to be helpful in teaching. Imagine, for a moment, the construction of a building. As each new level is added to the building, a scaffold is elevated next to it to help construct and support it. Once the building is completed and sturdy, the scaffolding can be removed. Likewise, using a scaffolding approach to teaching means providing support while students learn new ideas. When this support is no longer needed, it is removed as students show mastery on their own.

Every idea that you introduce to students for the first time needs to be connected to ideas they already understand. Think of these new ideas as pieces of a building not yet attached to the foundation that is already there. As the teacher, you can use a scaffold to help connect the new to the old. Once that new idea is attached, you can remove the scaffold because that information is linked within your students' long-term memory—or, if it is a skill you are teaching, the skill has become automatic.

Here are seven ways to use scaffolding to teach new ideas, each of which we will refer back to later in this chapter.

1. ADVANCE ORGANIZERS

Post an advance organizer on the board in the front of the room or on a sheet of paper on the students' desks. Think of an advance organizer like a map or a table of contents for your lesson. Some teachers write their lesson objectives or curriculum standards on the board as advance organizers. Others list the main topics for the lesson of the day. Still others will use visuals like mind maps for students to reference as a lesson progresses.

This simple practice enables students to make connections between every new piece of information you introduce and the advance organizer that you have provided for them. They can see where each new piece of information fits on the map. This way the information you present is always associated at least with the advance organizer, if nothing else, in their brains.

Let's imagine, for example, you are teaching a lesson about sin. The advance organizer that you write on the board can be as simple as this:

1. Sin
2. Original Sin
3. Mortal Sin
4. Venial Sin
5. Free from Sin

You can also frame these topics in the form of questions:

1. What is sin?
2. What is original sin?
3. What is necessary for a mortal sin?
4. What are venial sins?
5. How are we freed from sin?

You can check off each item as you progress through the lesson, and students will be learning new concepts knowing exactly where they are on your map. When you introduce Adam and Eve, for example, they know you are in the original sin section of the lesson.

2. OBJECTS AND VISUAL AIDS

As Catholics, we have so many choices of visual aids to link new ideas and information together.

Everyday objects as well as sacramentals can help your students make connections to new ideas. Display the chosen object prominently and refer to it frequently during your lesson to help students make connections between the object and the new ideas. Coming back to our example lesson on original sin, you might decide to bring in an apple with a bite taken out of it or a rubber snake (or both).

3. SONGS AND CHANTS

Songs and short chants are popular with younger students. Setting sentences and words to a familiar tune or easy-to-remember chant helps with memory recall. Again, once the new ideas are mastered, the songs are no longer needed. They are very helpful, however, early in the learning process.

When I teach the concept of sin to young people, I like to use the saying "sin separates, the Savior reunites." The alliteration in this simple phrase makes it easy to remember, and I repeat it frequently during the lesson. I also set this simple definition of sin as separation from God and others to the birthday tune: "Sin separates me from you. Sin separates me from you. Sin separates me from Jesus. Sin separates me from you."

4. HAND MOTIONS AND OTHER GESTURES

Another effective way to teach new ideas is to use hand motions and other gestures to help students remember the meaning of words. The students will rely on these gestures at first, and you may even see them mimicking them during tests, but eventually as new ideas are mastered, the gestures are no longer needed.

Gestures are very helpful in teaching definitions. Take mortal sin, for example. The three conditions for a mortal sin are (1) grave matter, (2) full knowledge, and (3) deliberate consent. Each condition itself is difficult to understand without further explanation. So, to assign a gesture to each one of these conditions, you can direct the students to (1) make a shocked face or a big frown to indicate the serious nature of the sin (grave matter), (2) point to the side of their head to show that a person must know what he is doing (full knowledge), and (3) point toward their heart to indicate that a person must freely choose to commit the act (deliberate consent). The students can even make all three gestures at the same time: shocked face, finger pointed to their heads with their right hand, and thumb toward their heart with their other hand.

Hand motions and other gestures work well in combination with songs and chants. Take my

example of "sin separates, the Savior reunites." Students clasp their hands together, then separate them while they say "sin separates," then clap them together when they say "the Savior reunites."

5. GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS

Many people are visual learners rather than verbal learners. They understand ideas better when they are presented in images, charts, graphs, or other visually distinctive ways rather than strictly through words in line one after another. A graphic organizer is a handout that represents the connections between ideas in images rather than simply as words. Students remember how each idea is associated with other ideas depending on where it appears on the graphic organizer.

Using a graphic organizer is often the best way for students to absorb information as they listen to lectures or read a textbook. It allows them to more easily process what they are hearing or reading and make connections between ideas as they go. Graphic organizers can also be great tools for students to practice what they have learned, helping make new connections to ideas that have not been introduced in class but that they know from elsewhere.

To teach the difference between a mortal sin and a venial sin, for example, you can create a Venn

diagram to show their similarities and differences. A Venn diagram is two circles that overlap with each circle labeled as one of the two connected ideas. So in our example, one circle is labeled Mortal Sin and the other Venial Sin. Ask your students to write the similarities between the two types of sin in the space created where the two circles overlap and the differences in the separate spaces of the two circles.

6. DEMONSTRATIONS

Demonstrations can be an effective way to scaffold a particular skill. You as teacher may perform the step-by-step process that you will subsequently ask your students to perform using a set of instructions. The demonstration models for the students the skill you want them to master. Sometimes you must do this demonstration multiple times in order for your students to grasp the process.

Think of this in the same way as watching YouTube videos to fix something around your house. You often have to view those videos multiple times before you can repeat the process you have observed in the demonstration. The more you watch, the more likely you are to execute the skill correctly.

During a lesson on sin, you would probably introduce the practice of an Examination of Conscience (a meditatio practice that we will come back