

Formation for Enabling Ministry

Unit 10: Designing Learning

What is a Learning Task?

In Task 1 of this unit, we recognised the limited effectiveness of a lecture-based teaching strategy. In Task 2, we were introduced to a variety of alternative learning methods with the potential to make learning more effective and more enjoyable. The next step is to use these methods to create 'learning tasks'.

Here is an example of the way learning tasks can be used in preference to lectures, taken from Jane Vella's book *Taking Learning to Task*.

The theme of the presentation is the life and work of the composer Giuseppe Verdi. The traditional approach would be a lecture with slides illustrating the places in Italy and France where Verdi lived and worked with extracts from his music. After the presentation, the lecturer would allow time for questions. In Western culture, with its heavy emphasis on knowledge for its own sake, and its expectation that learning is an essentially passive activity, this form of presentation is the expected norm. However, it is not the only possibility.

Learning Task 1: Who, Where and When

The learning space is laid out café-style with small groups sitting together around tables. On each table there is a large map of Europe with certain locations marked, a picture of Verdi, and a list of his operas with the sites of their premiere performances.

The participants are asked to examine the map of Europe and the picture of Verdi as a man in his eighties. They are asked to note the place of his birth, his pastoral home in Sant'Agata, Paris, London, Milan (the home of La Scala opera house), Venice (La Fenice) and Rome. They are reminded that the period is 1814 to 1901, before the age of air travel or even the petrol engine. Each participant is asked to share with the others on their table one thing this geography lesson tells them about the artist. The presenter then invites contributions from the tables.

Learning Task 2: Viva Verdi

There is a short slide show with a description of some of the basic facts of Verdi's life. He lived from 1814 to 1901, so his life spanned much of the nineteenth century. He was born in the small town of Busseto in rural Italy. As a young man, he was rejected by the professors at a prestigious music school. His first wife died in the third year of their marriage, shortly after the death of their two daughters. His operas feature the themes of family, especially the relationships of fathers and daughters. Verdi was a staunch patriot in the period of the reunification of Italy under king Victor Emmanuel. He was once elected to the Chamber of Deputies. Patriots used to write on walls the message 'Viva Verdi', an acronym for 'Viva Vittorio Emanuele Re d'Italia.'

The participants are asked to circle one item in this brief description that speaks to them and to share this with the others at their table. The presenter then invites contributions from the tables.

Learning Task 3: The Music

Participants are invited to listen to two arias from *La Traviata* and *Aida* while reading the words of the arias on a handout. They then talk to the others on their table about the way these arias illustrate the themes from Verdi's life that they have been introduced to in the first two learning tasks.

What are the features of this way of designing learning that distinguish it from the traditional lecture? There are many. Here are some of the most important:

- The learning tasks provide the opportunity for participants to engage with the information rather than being merely passive receivers. The presenter has recognised that learning is an active process.
- The learners are engaging in more complex activities than merely comprehending and remembering information. They are also reflecting on the information and analysing it.
- Rather than starting with the assumption that the participants know nothing about the subject, the presenter assumes that they bring prior experience to the learning, and not only prior experience but feelings and values: they know something about conditions in the nineteenth century, they are able to empathise with Verdi's unhappy family life, they are able to respond to Verdi's role in the politics of his time. In other words, the presenter understands that adults bring copious amounts of prior experience to learning, that their experience is a valuable resource for learning, and that whatever they take away from the presentation will be what they have been able to connect with their prior experience.
- The presenter has recognised that learning is a communal experience and made the most of this. Sharing their insights with others is an opportunity to explain and develop these and makes it far more likely that they will remember them. Moreover, they are also learning from one another as well as the presenter.
- In essence, each learning task is an 'open question': What do you notice about the geography of Verdi's life? What particularly strikes you about Verdi's life story? What themes do you notice in the two arias? This puts the participants in control of their learning, an essential feature of effective adult learning.
- The presenter has a clear idea of the kind of thing the participants will learn from each of the learning tasks. In other words, she has built the session around *learning* rather than *teaching*. Her first question has not been, 'What information do I want to share?' but, 'What do I hope my audience will learn?'
- With a clear idea of what she hopes the participants will learn, she has limited the information she shares to the amount that participants will be able to engage with in the time available. In other words, she has designed the learning around *process* rather than *content*.

These are just a few of the many advantages of using learning tasks rather than lectures. There is still a need to share information that you, the subject specialist or person with greater experience, know and the learners don't. But this is done in a carefully controlled way with an eye to what you hope the learner will learn rather than simply with the aim of sharing something that you know.

There are learning tasks of several different kinds. Here are some of the most important:

- induction: helping learners to become aware of what they already know, believe and feel about the topic
- engagement with the new information: asking the learners to respond to the new information in some way, such as discerning what is relevant to them, noticing what is new, connecting it with what they already know, recognising the questions it generates for them
- forming concepts: analysing the new information to form tentative generalisations about the topic in question
- application: working out the implications of the new information and concepts, working out how to put them into practice
- transfer: transferring a new concept to another context, preferably one that is part of their everyday life
- everyday faith: exploring how the new learning might help to enable everyday faith
- integration: making links between this new information and what they are learning in other subject areas
- theological reflection: drawing on the Bible and Christian tradition to place the new information in a theological context, recognising and responding to any challenges the new information poses to Christian tradition

Having received this information, here are some learning tasks to help you engage with it:

Task 1: How do you feel about what you have read? Excited? Daunted? Uncertain? Try writing down your feelings about the idea of learning tasks and then reflect on why you feel the way you do.

Task 2: Pick out the two things in this paper that seem to you to be most significant. Write down the reasons you consider them to be significant.

Task 3: Describe the assumptions about learning that you see embodied in the three learning tasks about the life of Verdi.

Task 4: Look back at Unit 1 on Everyday Faith. Write a list of all the learning tasks that feature in that unit. For each one, write down what you think the learner is intended to learn.

Task 5: Try designing a learning task. To help you, start by asking these basic questions:

- Who are the learners?
- What do you want them to learn?
- How much information will you need to give them?
- What methods will you use to help them to engage with the information?

Task 6: Look again at the seven features of learning tasks listed on the previous page. What passages from the Bible come to mind as you think about this way of learning? What do these passages suggest to you about adult discipleship?