




make it
stick:

70



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Make It Stick

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People retain only 10
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but 90 percent of
what they experience.

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PART **one**

**the case for
experiential
learning**

make your sermon 90% stickier!

by Alan Nelson, Executive Editor of REV! Magazine

*“Education is not the filling of a pail,
but the lighting of a fire.”*

—William Butler Yeats

Trouble in the Faith Factory

Imagine you’re the CEO of a computer factory. One day, while touring the assembly line, you notice that nine out of every 10 computers are dropping off the conveyor belt, crashing onto the floor. Aghast, you sprint to the emergency switch and shut down the line. “What’s going on?” you shout. “Why isn’t somebody doing something to prevent this?” If you were in charge of the assembly line, you’d do something about it, wouldn’t you?

Now move from the computer factory to the sanctuary. By the time your people reach the exit of your church, they’ve already forgotten over 90 percent of what you just invested more than half of your work-week preparing. Let’s say the typical pastor in America works 50 hours per week, 25 of these hours on sermon preparation and presentation. Research numbers vary, but based on a \$40,000 annual salary and over 300,000 churches, that equates to more than \$115,000,000 per week in message preparation. In light of cultural trends and church growth in America, I would argue that we are not seeing a positive return on this significant investment.

What can we do to make our investment yield higher returns, assuming that the more God’s Word lingers in the minds and hearts of our people, the more their lives will be transformed?

Active Learning

There is a proven way to significantly increase the residual effect of our sermons. It is a method that Jesus often implemented as well as the approach that organizations such as Group (the publisher of this book) and the American Society of Training and Development utilize. Educators refer to it as active learning. And it works: research indicates that people remember 5 to 10 percent of what they hear but 80 to 90 percent of what they experience.

How Did Jesus Teach?

Whether he was mentoring one-on-one, instructing a small group, or teaching the masses, Jesus employed a variety of teaching methods: lecture, parables (with and without explanation), visual aids, the Socratic method, and active learning. Powerful examples of active learning include Jesus' turning water into wine (John 2:1-11), instructing one of his disciples to catch a fish and pull a coin out of its mouth (Matthew 17:24-26), healing a blind man by mixing his spit into the dirt and making mud (John 9:1-11), cursing a fig tree and causing it to wither in front of the disciples (Matthew 21:18-22), inviting Peter to walk on water (Matthew 14:25-33), and encouraging Thomas to touch his side (John 20:27). In all these examples, he moved his listeners beyond listening into the realm of *experiencing* the truths he wanted them to understand.

When you think about it, Jesus' primary discipleship method was a three-year experiential model whereby the Twelve did life with him, resulting in the most effective transformation of a single small group in recorded history! While we can't embark on three-year camping trips with our people, we *can* use brief, experiential learning events within the context of worship services, board retreats, staff meetings, and small groups to move them toward more profound learning.

How Do Business Leaders Teach?

The American Society for Training and Development is a 70,000-member professional organization that trains the trainers of American and international corporations, including Fortune 500 companies. When I registered for ASTD's certification, I assumed I'd be receiving a covey of training tools with powerful statistics, PowerPoint slides, and

notes on effective education. Instead I received two days of nonstop active-learning examples and experiences. Big business has discovered that active learning is not just for public school students; it is an effective way for adults to acquire vital job information. Churches would do well to discover what their corporate colleagues, if not their lead Teacher, know about how people learn.

The Importance of Interaction

In an educational study, during each of five lectures, a teacher paused for two minutes at three different times. During the pauses, students worked in pairs to discuss and rework their notes, and no interaction occurred between the instructor and students. At the end of each lecture, students were given three minutes to write down everything they could remember from the lecture; then, 12 days after the last lecture, the students were given a 65-item, multiple-choice test to measure long-term retention.

The researchers also tracked a control group, which attended the same lectures but wasn't offered the pauses, and this group was similarly tested.

The same research test was conducted twice, and the results were striking and consistent: Students who interacted at various points throughout the lectures did significantly better on both the free recall and the comprehensive test. In fact, the magnitude of the difference in mean scores between the two groups was large enough to make a difference of two letter grades!¹

Do you realize what this means? If we talk six minutes *less* and engage in an activity that reinforces what we teach, people will learn *far more*.

How Do Pastors Teach?

More and more pastors are trying to make their teaching more meaningful and in the process are rediscovering their roots in the early church. They're communicating through story, experience, and word pictures. The rise of the arts in the church is also a move in this direction, since the arts touch us emotionally, making our messages more memorable. Through movie clips, high-tech sound systems, candles, and mood

1. K.L. Ruhl, C.A. Hughes, and P.J. Schloss, "Using the pause procedure to enhance lecture recall," *Teacher Education and Special Education* [Winter 1987], 14-18.

lighting, the church is intuitively embracing active-learning principles.

Even so, the concept of active learning still isn't on the typical pastor's radar. If Jesus and top trainers use this method, why don't most of us in ministry? I can think of at least five reasons:

1. We've not seen this method modeled. Most of us in church leadership have assumed that the best way to teach is to mimic what we've experienced in public education, seminaries, pastor conferences, and church services. We rarely question whether this is the most effective way to teach.

But if we bear in mind that the goal of Christian education is not content acquisition but life transformation, our methods will change. Remember, for a large part of his ministry, Jesus had only 12 students, and they accompanied him on a three-year experiential journey.

2. Using traditional lecture methods, the pastor gets to be the star. Traditional teaching methods make the teacher the center of attention. An underlying message is "Look at me. Listen to what I have to say. I'm in charge. I'm educated, the authority on this subject. You need what I know." But this approach is *teacher* based, not *learner* based.

The sage-on-the-stage mindset is a fact of life that even the most humble of us wrestles with, if we're honest. By designing messages and selecting methods that fit our teaching style instead of our listeners' learning style, we put ourselves first.

3. Active learning requires more work. Surveys show that the one facet of their calling pastors enjoy most is preparing and delivering sermons. That's one reason more than half of the typical pastor's workweek is invested in message prep. Most of us find pleasure in being sequestered in our studies, removed from the fray, preparing the spiritual meal of the week for our flocks. While much sermon preparation is constructive, it is not healthy if it lulls us into avoiding the hard work of ministry: understanding where our listeners are in their lives and crafting messages that will truly affect their lives. Designing a one-way message, lecture, or speech is far easier than crafting a compelling experience that moves people from being mere hearers of the Word to doers.

Jesus often pushed the envelope with his audience, asking strategic questions and challenging comfort zones. He called people out of the boat physically, not just intellectually.

4. Active learning is risky. Experiential learning is unpredictable. Neither you nor the participants can predict what the outcome will be.

But surprise is a wonderful part of authentic learning. When people are caught off-guard, they are much more likely to remember the lesson than if they'd seen the point coming from a mile away.

Handing over the learning process to disciples, even in part, is a scary process, for both teacher and student. When Jesus told his disciples

It's not that the Word is sterile; rather, our methods of teaching it are impotent.

he'd be leaving them soon, they were full of anxiety. But to produce true disciples, Jesus knew he had to release them to learn on their own.

5. Active learning expects more of learners. By providing listeners with notes,

PowerPoint slides, soft seats, and climate-controlled environments, we may be inadvertently sabotaging congregants' ability to grapple with and internalize the truths we're trying to impart. Are we creating consumers, spiritual spectators who only *think* they're participating? Because we have failed to engage them emotionally, physically, and relationally, are they absorbing less? We leave it up to them to apply what they've learned cognitively, but—let's be honest—how many people really do?

No wonder so many people can attend church for years, gleaning factoids and doctrine, and still fail to mature in their faith or reflect love in their relationships. They haven't internalized the messages they've heard because we've used methods that fail to engage them in dynamic, robust learning.

Lewis Carbone writes in *Clued In*, "If you are considering how you feel *about* Starbucks, you are thinking about the Starbucks brand. If you think about how *you yourself feel* as a result of a visit to a Starbucks, you are relating to the experience...What customers value is the experience. And that's what they associate with the brand."² In the context of the local church, good learning has taken place when people leave saying, "Wow, that was a wonderful message." *Great* learning has occurred when people leave saying, "I feel as if I connected with God."

The Big Reason: Bad Experiences

Many pastors have another reason to avoid experiential learning methods: They've had bad experiences with them. Perhaps they took part

2. Lewis Carbone, *Clued In: How to Keep Customers Coming Back Again and Again*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Financial Times Prentice Hall, 2004, 44.

in a cheesy activity at a camp or retreat or they participated in a poorly executed discussion that left them thinking, “If that’s active learning, you can keep it.” In order to prevent their own people from suffering through embarrassing moments and heading for the doors as fast as they can say, “Share with your partner,” they’ve given up active-learning methods altogether.

Poor teaching is poor, whether it’s done in the context of a lecture or an attempt at active learning. But just because a pastor has had a bad experience with active learning, continuing to deliver forgettable monologues every week is not the answer.

Developing quality active learning experiences is not easy. It requires practice and honing. But it is worth the effort.

Six Elements of Effective Active Learning

To really engage people in authentic learning, a quality active-learning experience should contain all of the following elements:

1. It involves everyone. Sitting in a comfortable seat while listening to a talking head is an easy but lazy way to obtain information. Why not watch television, read a book, or watch a video instead? Moreover, involving only a few people in an active-learning experience will not have much of an effect on the entire congregation. To be truly memorable, the experience should involve *everyone*.

2. It is an adventure. Participants in an active-learning experience don’t know

An easy way to remember the elements of authentic learning is through this acrostic Group has developed: **R.E.A.L.**

R.E.A.L. learning is

Relational—We often learn best when we’re interacting with others, who provide unique perspectives and insights as well as listening ears to our thoughts in process.

Experiential—Physical interaction that also engages multiple senses cements learning.

Applicable—Good teaching is relevant. It connects ideas with everyday life by focusing on *how* in addition to *what*.

Learner-based—Effective communication begins with an understanding of the audience. That’s why Jesus never used canned approaches when explaining the kingdom; rather, when he was speaking to shepherds, he talked about lost sheep; to farmers, vineyards; to fishermen, fishing for men; to a woman fetching water, living water; to philosophers, life’s riddles.

what the outcome will be; in fact, even the designer of the activity can't predict the outcome. That's what makes active learning different from an object lesson, the outcome of which is controlled. Participants might respond with laughter, embarrassment, chatter, thoughtfulness, and even tears. Whatever the responses, the learning will be rich.

3. It stands alone as a fun or captivating thing to do with friends. Effective learning activities are intrinsically interesting. They cause participants to want to share the ideas with people outside of church.

4. It evokes emotion. The emotional element is what drives an experience from short-term to long-term memory. When you ask people to reflect on the most memorable times in their lives, they nearly always refer to times of intense emotions, both positive and negative. Just as searing a steak locks in its flavor, emotions serve as the glue that seals learning.

5. It is age-appropriate. One reason pastors reject active-learning methods is that the ones they've experienced were childish or goofy. It is imperative that these experiences genuinely appeal to the age group to which they're directed.

6. It is coupled with strong debriefing and world-class questions. Even a modest time spent reflecting on an activity deepens learning. One of the most valuable benefits of discussions with a partner or a small group is the insight participants gain into *themselves* as a result of articulating their thoughts and feelings. Putting thoughts into words requires next-level thinking. How can we truly know or understand something if we can't begin to articulate it?

Great questions are open-ended; there are no right or wrong answers or simple, one-word responses. Instead, answers are individual and different, depending on the respondent's unique perceptions, knowledge, personality, and experiences. Great questions are never lame, obvious, or leading.

Reminders of Important Truths

When people have a good experience, they want a reminder of it. When they go on vacation or attend a theme park, concert, or camp, they want to take home something that will help them remember the experience. For many it's a photo. For some it's a T-shirt. For others it's a trinket. Physical objects stimulate our memories of important events.

When the people of Israel crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land, they took a dozen stones from the river bottom and

created a monument that would cause future generations to ask why the stones were there (Joshua 4:4-7). Jesus gave new meaning to mud, to fish and small loaves of bread, to water and wine, to ointment, and to an instrument of death. The items became significant because of the meanings attached to them. Throughout biblical history, mundane items took on special meaning when attached to important events and principles.

By giving people simple items symbolizing biblical truths, we can provide daily reminders of those truths.

People retain only about 10% of what they hear or read, but up to 90% of what they experience.

Creating a Buzz

One beneficial side effect of active learning in the church is that it gets people talking about their Sunday experience throughout the week. They tell their friends, neighbors, associates at work, and relatives about the unusual thing they did in church, or they share the souvenir they took away from the Sunday message. The more people talk about these experiences, the more your church will stand out and the more others will want to visit. Because you've made the Bible relevant to their lives, you've turned spectators into participants, consumers into evangelists.

But Still...

All these considerations aside, when you think about employing new teaching methods in your own church, you may still have reservations. For example, you may be wondering,

Is active learning really feasible in large groups? You might consider employing active-learning techniques in relatively intimate settings such as staff meetings, leadership retreats, and small groups, but you still can't envision using them in typical Sunday morning worship services.

So begin with baby steps. Don't go for the deep end right away. Wade in first; then swim. You'll be amazed at how well people respond if you gradually introduce active learning at nonthreatening levels and then occasionally deepen the involvement. Here are levels you might move through as you gradually introduce your congregation to the idea of active learning:

- **Level 1:** Employ a visual aid, creating a metaphor for a key point.
- **Level 2:** Recruit one or more members of the congregation to demonstrate a point in front of the entire body.
- **Level 3:** Ask everyone to participate in an experience by creating a written or visual aid of their own.
- **Level 4:** Involve everyone in an experience and then ask them to debrief the experience with two, three, or four people sitting near them. The key at first is to acknowledge that people aren't used to this sort of thing and to ask them to give it a try. Comments such as "Now we're going to do something a little different" and "Let's try this and see what happens" will lighten the mood and take some of the awkwardness out of your first few experiments with active learning. It's also important to provide exits so that people don't feel forced to share at levels at which they're uncomfortable.

Especially in "seeker-friendly" churches, won't people be scared away if we ask them to share their thoughts with the strangers sitting next to them? Today's "seekers" are different from those of the 1980s, when the term described people returning to church who desired anonymity. Today's postmodern seeker values experiences and authenticity over anonymity.

Can I really expect my traditional congregation to accept a new—and threatening—method of learning? First, remember that, as the leader of your church, you're its cultural architect. Through your words and actions, you establish the norm for your congregation. If you don't, then you're not doing your job.

Anyone who's been attending church more than five years has an innate problem caused by the reticular activator. This finger-sized portion of the brain actually blocks messages that are deemed familiar and nonthreatening. In essence, when confronted with familiar information, the brain says, "Been there. Done that. Bought the T-shirt." For veterans of the faith to hear old things anew, you *have* to teach differently.

After Getting Your Feet Wet, Take the Plunge

Are there risks? Of course there are. Any dynamic learning process is dangerous. But remember that, when Jesus washed his disciples' feet, he said, "You don't understand now what I am doing, but someday you will" (John 13:7). In the same way, when you lead people through active

learning, there will be times when they don't understand why and what you're doing, but when done well, your efforts will be transformational.

If you've measured the results of your preaching over the years and are happy with your congregation's spiritual growth, then by all means keep doing what you've been doing. But if you suspect there might be a better way to grow people into the likeness of Christ, I encourage you to try something different.

Begin simply. As with every new skill, you'll become more adept the more you practice. Use the activities in this book and as you become better at developing your own experiential lessons, your people will increasingly anticipate and welcome them. Include active learning in your repertoire of methods. Transform the way you teach—teach like Jesus.

Further Reading

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