

Nine Noteworthy Necessities for Activities

Janet Schaeffler, OP

Recently I overheard a conversation between two catechists: “There’s no place in faith formation sessions for artistic expression. That’s what happened when I was a child and it didn’t work. We don’t do that anymore.”

If, by that, we mean arts and crafts for the sake of arts and crafts, that would be totally true.

Artistic expression is at the core of who we are, who we have been as a church, for our entire history: icons, stained glass windows, poetry, journals, music, dance, paintings and murals, sculpture, drama, etc. Artistic expression is how we integrate what we believe, how we come to multi-faceted understandings of the depths of faith.

Thus, artistic expression – activities of all kinds - need to continue to be part of faith formation today. The question is: which activities, expressions, are most meaningful? Are there some practices which might not be helpful?

Some of the many noteworthy necessities for activities:

1. Activities are theologically sound. What are we doing in faith formation? Leading our young people to the meaning of Scripture, the meaning of our tradition and heritage, the meaning of spirituality, the meaning of catholic social teaching, etc.

All that we do needs to help learners delve deeper into and remember the meaning. Often times, our choice of activities might concentrate on the details (not that many times they’re not important), but neglect the core meaning, the religious import.

In studying the Creation story, rather than drawing (or coloring) seven pictures of the seven days, a room-length mural of all of creation, with the words “God saw that it was good,” emphasizes the foundational meaning.

Rather than some type of project concentrating upon all the animals in the story of Noah’s Ark (cute as it might be), a large rainbow filled with some of God’s promises recorded in Scripture would depict the Scriptural meaning of the story: God keeps promises.

2. Activities are catechetically/educationally valuable. Activities are used to deepen the learner’s understanding or appreciation of the theme by illuminating the truth, the personal implications of the belief, and the relevance of faith.

Rather than simply reviewing by inviting the children/youth to list/make a poster of the Corporal Works of Mercy, invite various pairs/groups of learners to draw a picture, do a PowerPoint or video of how each is/can be lived by those their own age.

3. Activities belong to the learner. The essence of the activity is self-expression: how does what we have just learned apply to my life? Therefore, there is no need for patterns or samples to illustrate “what it has to look like.” No rules for “it has to be this way.”

Because the activity helps the learners interpret and deepen, not just repeat, what has been learned, it takes them a step beyond the “presentation.” After a study of the psalms, re-writing a psalm in one’s own words or writing a psalm for today, from the learners’ everyday experiences/needs will help to make the meaning of psalms more personal.

After a discussion on God: if you were to paint God, what color would you select?

After the Scripture story of Zaccheus: if you were Zaccheus, what would you say in a thank you note?

4. Activities touch upon each person’s creativity. The skilled catechist invites the children/youth, saying just enough to spark their thoughts, but leaving them with freedom so that they can imagine, dream, think, apply.

Rather than doing a puzzle, fill in the blanks, etc. about the call of the disciples, children/youth can be invited to imagine they were there, they were called by Jesus. They write a letter to their family about what happened, their feelings, what they will now do.

Creating a newspaper about a Scripture event or a billboard that advertises God’s love calls upon individual creativity, imagination, and deepened learning and appreciation rather than a word game which only uses memory.

5. Activities take various expressions. Activities are much more than crossword puzzles, drawing pictures, etc. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if each new session invited the learners to respond through a new type of media, different materials, participative experiences, employing the various creative expressions of our heritage, of who we are as humans.
6. Everyone doesn’t need to do the same thing. Children/youth will have different abilities and interests. Whenever possible, suggest options that they can do for any given session. Within a lesson on prayer, give four options from which they can choose: using paint, show you feel when praying alone, when praying with others; rewrite the Magnificat in your own words; design gestures to accompany your favorite Psalm; select a popular song that can be used as prayer with a PowerPoint presentation to accompany it.
7. Activities aren’t fillers. In lesson planning, catechists don’t dream things up just to keep the learners busy. Activities/projects flow from the theme and reinforce the core teaching.

Neither do activities have to always take place at the end of the session, during the last ten minutes. At the very beginning, invite the learners to mold a sculpture from clay that expresses their idea of God’s forgiveness. These sculptures, then, can be referred to throughout the session, and might be a focal point for a closing prayer service.

8. Activities relate to life outside the group session. Faith formation sessions, of course, are never an end in themselves. They send children/youth forth to a life of discipleship, a life of prayer and witness, a life of serving in their everyday lives. All learning answers the “so what?” question. What does this truth, doctrine, belief, practice of our heritage have to do with my everyday life?

Invite the learners to interview someone, such as the owner of a store or the principal of a school about respect for property and possessions. How do these real-life encounters deepen the discussion and learning which happened during the session?

9. Utilize the full potential of each activity. Even though the process (what happens within) is more important than the finished product, learners quickly figure out what is/what isn't busy work by the way catechists care for and take an interest in their work.

The more useful the better: with pictures of children living the Beatitudes, don't just post them. Compare, discuss, make an album, show and explain to another class; display in the church gathering space; publish.

The more prayerful the better: write a prayer to accompany a drawing or activity; bring written/drawn activities in procession to the prayer corner to use/to offer during prayer.

jschaeffler@adriandominicans.org
www.janetschaeffler.com