

Learning that Transforms¹

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It happened on a dirt basketball court under some palm trees on the other side of the world. In less than two minutes, my whole approach to education was turned upside-down and my life was set on a new trajectory.

Two weeks after graduating from Tabor College, I found myself in rural Congo. My formal assignment was to manage a feeding program for tuberculosis patients at a Mennonite Brethren mission hospital. When political turmoil disrupted local schools, I also became a part-time math and religion teacher. Without me, the students would be unprepared for their end-of-year examinations.

A four-week course and the help of a tutor gave me some basic conversational skills in Kituba, the local language. Armed with several translations of the Bible and an English-Kituba dictionary, I began to teach religion. Immersed in Kituba, I learned the language quickly.

The class did poorly on their first religion test. After my students said they had trouble understanding my accent, I began putting my outlines on the blackboard. From that point on, they not only heard my lectures but could re-copy my notes into theirs.

Teaching Math

The math class was another matter. Having done poorly in math myself, I was hardly equipped to teach. What little I understood was the “old” rather than the “new” math. The textbook was written in French, Congo’s national language, which I neither understood nor read.

When I had originally raised this as a potential problem, the school director advised me to teach in Kituba, assign lots of homework, take French lessons and remember that I was the students’ only hope.

The first day I assigned several problems and told the students to work them out during the remaining class time. The next day I began by asking for volunteers to show their solutions on the blackboard. One student presented his answer to the first problem. It looked and sounded reasonable so I congratulated him and started to move on when another student protested, “That answer is wrong!” I invited him to work out his solution on the board; again, I was impressed. After another student insisted that both answers were wrong and worked it a third way, someone asked the inevitable question: “Which is the right answer?”

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I had no idea. I called for a vote and declared the most popular answer the correct one. That seemed to work so I continued that pattern throughout the semester. I assigned problems, students worked them out at home and then presented their solutions in class. I asked questions and students answered them, becoming fluent in Kituba and learning some math in the process.

My ongoing frustration in math class was offset by the sense of fulfillment that came from teaching religion. The students seemed highly motivated because they copied everything I wrote on the board. They memorized their notes and did well on the tests, so I concluded they were learning.

Basketball

One afternoon while playing basketball with several of my students, they gathered around me and said, “We’d like to talk with you about something.” “Sure,” I replied, “go ahead.” It’s about your class,” one of them said. “What about it?” I asked, growing defensive. “It’s nothing,” another responded, “lets’ play ball.” No,” I insisted, “you wanted to tell me something so say it!”

After a long silence a student blurted out, “Your class is not good!” Furious, I reminded them of the political crisis in Congo that led me to become their math teacher. “If my class is ‘not good,’” I snapped, “I’ll quit teaching and you can take the state math exams without any help from me!”

Horrified, another student protested: “No, you don’t understand! You’re the best math teacher we’ve ever had. Because of you, we understand math. It’s your religion class that doesn’t make any sense!” I stood in shock and disbelief.

Several days of reflection led me to three conclusions. First, people learn best what they discover for themselves. Second, by asking questions, I could actually help people learn what I myself did not fully understand. Third, the teacher did not have to be the expert on everything. Students could help each other learn.

Transformation

I then considered how to apply these new insights to my religion class. I now knew what worked, but never having taken a course in education (or even read a book on the subject), I had no idea why. Neither did I know how to ask questions in another content area. Math had been easy: “Who has the answer?” “How did you work the problem?” “Why did you do it that way?” “How do you know you’re right?”

After some thought, I simply transformed my religion lecture notes by inserting a question mark after every declarative statement: “The thesis of this chapter is...” became “What is the thesis of this chapter?” “The author is writing to...” became “To whom is the author writing?” “The implications of this passage are...” became “What are the implications of this passage?” It worked. Instead of regurgitating my lectures, the

students learned to think for themselves. They read the biblical passages, noted the basic facts, debated their meanings, proposed implications and talked about applications to their lives.

This not only revolutionized what happened in my classroom, it changed my whole approach to leading Bible studies. At the time, I only understood that it worked, not how or why.

New Understanding

In graduate school several years later, I learned that the method I had discovered in desperation has a name: the inductive approach. It also has a supporting theory. If understood, it can make our Bible studies more effective. The rest of this article will suggest how.

Begin by looking to see what a passage says—reviewing context, clarifying facts and identifying key ideas. This ensures everyone shares the same knowledge base and the conversation focuses on the most important ideas. The leader engages learners in a careful review of the passage—identifying key words, recurring themes, central concepts, actions taken, relationships and the like. Oletta Wald’s delightful little monograph, “The Joy of Discovery,” proposes some very useful questions that can help learners uncover the structure, content and meaning of a passage.

Next comes the search for significance. Learners discover meaning as they examine key ideas within context. What was the author saying to the original audience? What did these words mean to those who read them? As learners examine the passage (discussing, debating and constructing arguments), the meanings behind a particular word, phrase, verse or idea become clear.

In the third stage, learners connect the passage to their own lives. This involves finding personal applications of the general principles examined during the second phase. If this is what God’s Word is saying, what should I do about it? What should I do first?

The Leader’s Role

The leader’s role in the inductive process is critical as he or she takes responsibility to shape learning by:

- *Creating a good learning environment*—Discussions are more effective when learners can comfortably discuss what matters deeply. Leaders should help people get to know each other, care about each other, listen respectfully and openly exchange ideas on subjects over which they may disagree profoundly.
- *Building connections*—An inductive learning process not only examines the context of a passage, it connects with (and builds upon) what has already been learned. Leaders must see that new ideas and materials link to previous lessons.

- *Using questions to guide the conversation*—The best inductive Bible studies do not leave discussions to chance. Effective leaders prepare by identifying key questions that guide the process through which people review the text, examine its meaning and identify applications.
- *Synthesizing*—Asking questions is not enough. Leaders who ask questions must also help learners take the answers and weave them into conclusions.
- *Calling for action*—Too many Bible studies and Sunday school classes never get to application; they stop after a great discussion. Leaders can help learners put hands and feet on faith by asking questions that lead to action.

Leading inductive Bible studies involves helping learners discover the meaning of passages. Effective leaders ask questions through which participants examine what a passage says, what it means and what we should do about it.

Conclusion

Over the past three decades, I have led workshops around the world on adult education and community development. I have seen many community organizers, agricultural extension agents, health workers, Bible study leaders and teachers embrace this problem-posing approach. Some have said it revolutionized their work. Others have opposed it strongly.

Those who are the most confident about what they think they know, are usually the most reluctant to accept someone else's knowledge. Even experts must be willing to learn. More than any others, they have rejected indigenous knowledge, devalued personal experience and failed to recognize people's capacity to discover ultimate meanings and to apply them to their own lives.

As for me, the lesson learned on that basketball court in Africa endures. It transformed my approach to Bible study. It also taught me humility and gave me faith in people's capacity to solve their own problems, learn and grow.