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Growing disciples through transformational learning

Clarence first attended church on a dare.

He promised his pastor friend he would give church a try if the pastor could beat him in two games of checkers. The pastor won, and Clarence found himself in church the next week. He responded to God’s Word and the love of the congregation, and eventually was baptized, along with his wife and children.

A few weeks later, Clarence went to his pastor with a troubled heart. He did not know how to live the Christian life. “Before I was baptized,” he said, “if you came to me and told me that you wanted to be a football player, I would not have just given you permission to do it, I would have *shown* you how to be one. I need someone to *show* me how to be a Christian.”

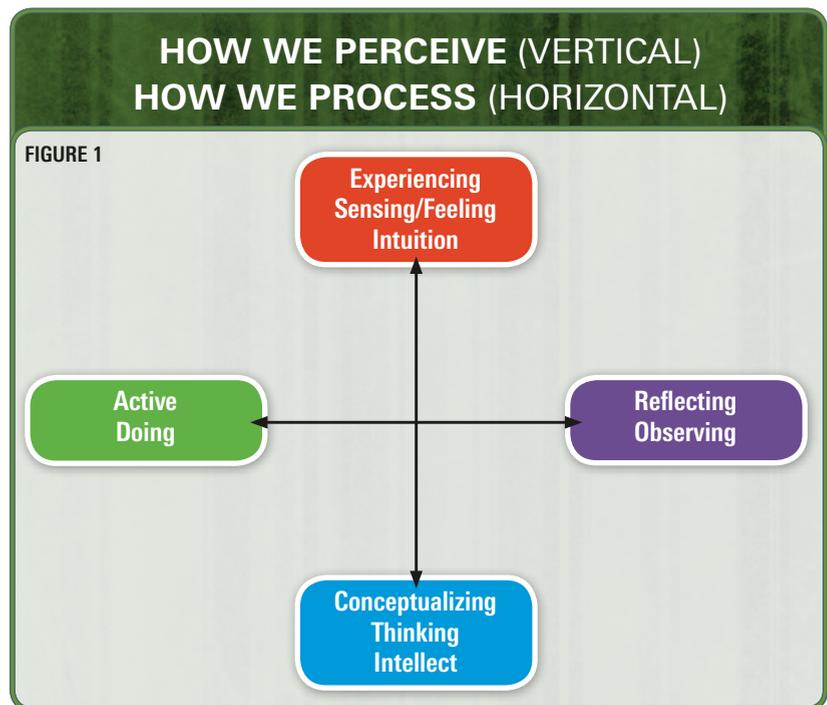
Most of the time, those of us in spiritual leadership can effectively share with our church members *why* it is important to be a disciple of Christ, but often we stop short in teaching our people *how* to be a disciple. Both are important to the maturation of a Christian. But how can we, as pastors, follow through on what is called “transformational learning”—learning geared to not only inform but to transform?

Serving as an editor and working with colleagues who have educational backgrounds has helped me appreciate the value of integrating

the educational and theological models of ministry within our church. Of course, Scripture links these two models of ministry together. In Ephesians 4, the apostle Paul writes, “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, *some pastors and teachers*, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the son of God, to *maturity*, to the

measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:11–13, NRSV; emphasis supplied).¹

This article will show how an integration of the Learning Cycle, taken from the educational model of ministry and used to encourage transformational learning, can enhance pastoral effectiveness in preaching and teaching and, thus, enhance church members’ understanding of the gospel and maturation as growing disciples of Christ.



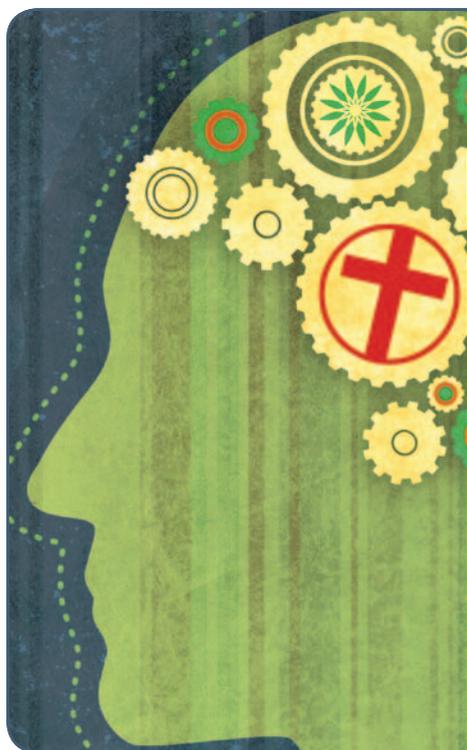
What is the Learning Cycle?

People learn in different ways. In the early 1970s, David Kolb identified two dimensions of learning: *perceiving* and *processing*.² The ways in which people perceive and process information constitutes their “learning style.”

first one into the water. And everyone usually knows it, since his zest for life is difficult to keep under wrap, and he yells with excitement as he enters the water! “Come in, Bonita,” he will urge. “The water is *perrrrrrfect!*” I, on the other hand, sit back and observe the situation for a while before I feel comfortable enough to go in. My

to think about an activity more than others before they actually do something about it, and we have those who would much rather think and reflect on it than do something.

Using Kolb’s work as a foundation, Bernice McCarthy, in 1987, described four basic learning styles and the corresponding teaching



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Some *perceive* life through their senses and feelings—by direct (subjective) experiences. Others perceive life through their intellect (objectively) by conceptualizing or thinking. Most of us have a blend of these two lenses, but we usually favor one.

People *process* new experiences through *reflecting* (observing) or through *action* (doing)—or somewhere in between.³ (See figure 1.)

For example, while my husband and I share the same style of perceiving life—through direct experiences—we process it differently. He processes new experiences through action while I process them through reflection. Both are valuable. So, when we go to the beach, he is the

internal dialogue runs along these lines: *OK, Bonita, there appears to be no undertow—Roy’s still standing. . . . It’s a sunny day, so the water won’t freeze me to death. . . . There aren’t too many people around, so I won’t have to dodge them.* Once I have gone through this reflection time, I am usually ready to jump into the new experience—unless I have a great book to read; then, forget the water.

Just as my husband and I perceive and process experiences in different ways, so do members of our congregations. They are of both types—and perhaps more. Some want to act, do, and experience; others want to reflect and observe before they experience. Some want

strategies most effective for people to learn. According to McCarthy, each learning style asks different questions and displays different strengths during the learning process. These learning styles use both right- and left-brain processing techniques.⁴ Thus, when we integrate all four learning styles in our preaching and teaching, we are educating the “whole brain.” (See figure 2.)

The *relational* learner asks the question, “*Why* is this subject important to me?” The *analytic* learner asks, “*What* do I need to know about this subject?” The *practical* learner asks, “*How* do I use the information?” The *dynamic* learner asks, “*What* if I use the information this way?”

My primary learning style is relational; the dynamic being my secondary style. Thus, as a preacher, I typically am very strong in answering for my congregation the questions, "Why is this subject important?" and "What if I use this information this way?" I am also fairly strong in the analytic aspect of "What do I need to know?" Unfortunately, I am often weak in answering the question, "How do I use the information?" Thus, as I prepare my sermons, I must be *intentional* about connecting with the practical learner.

each component into our sermons, more of our listeners may connect with our message.

How to use the new learning style

So, how do we incorporate this educational model into our preaching and teaching?

First, visit the Web site listed within the sidebar of this article and take the learning style inventory for yourself. That will give you a better understanding of your own learning process, as well as the needs of others.

be just for "entertainment." With a weak introduction, your listener may not feel engaged enough to continue listening to you. In writers' terminology, the introduction comprises the "hook" that draws the listener in.

The next question to ask is, *What does my listener need to know about this subject?* This, our homiletics teachers tell us, is the "Body" or "Argument" of the sermon. In this section, you want to offer information, facts, and state or define your subject more finely. Possible techniques to be used include comparing and contrasting, relating it to other subjects or even illustrating your points. As an experiential learner, I can say that while I appreciate our church's more recent emphasis on the *experience* of salvation and our relationship with God, in some cases we may have gone to the extreme and not given our members enough facts about their faith.

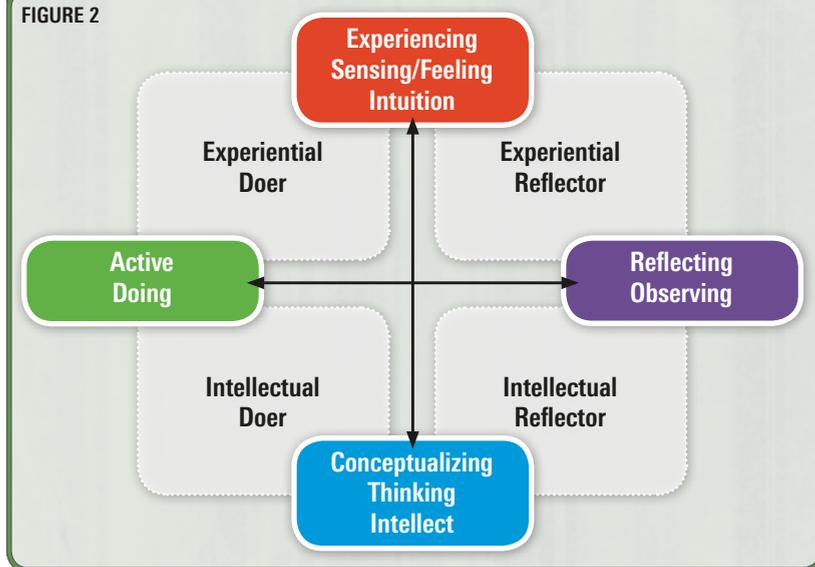
Our next question is, *How can my listener use this information in everyday life?* This comes as the application section of our sermon. Recently, I found something interesting as I perused one of my preaching books. While the other aspects of sermon preparation were given a page or two, the element of application was given *two* paragraphs!

This component, when strong, encourages action—not merely "talking the talk but walking the walk." It is here that we want to persuade our members of the benefits of applying the message to their lives.

The last question for us in creating our outline is, *What if my listener puts this information into practice; what will their life look like?* I believe this can correspond with our conclusion. As one teacher of homiletics describes, conclusion consists of "A few striking, well-chosen, soul-moving sentences or illustrations that give the central idea and purpose of the sermon."⁵ A strong ending to a sermon is as important as a strong introduction. As I recap the sermon, *What vision am I going to leave with the congregation? What*

LEARNING STYLES

FIGURE 2



Have you ever heard church members say about their pastor, "He's a nice man, but I just don't get anything out of his preaching"? Or "Her sermons are too 'dry,' too 'shallow,' 'just a bunch of stories,' or 'just plain irrelevant to my life.' " First, we must face the fact that we will never be able to reach everyone. However, as we come to better understand the learning cycle, I think we will begin to realize that one of the reasons people feel that way is because often we are skipping one or more of the components of the cycle. And, when we incorporate

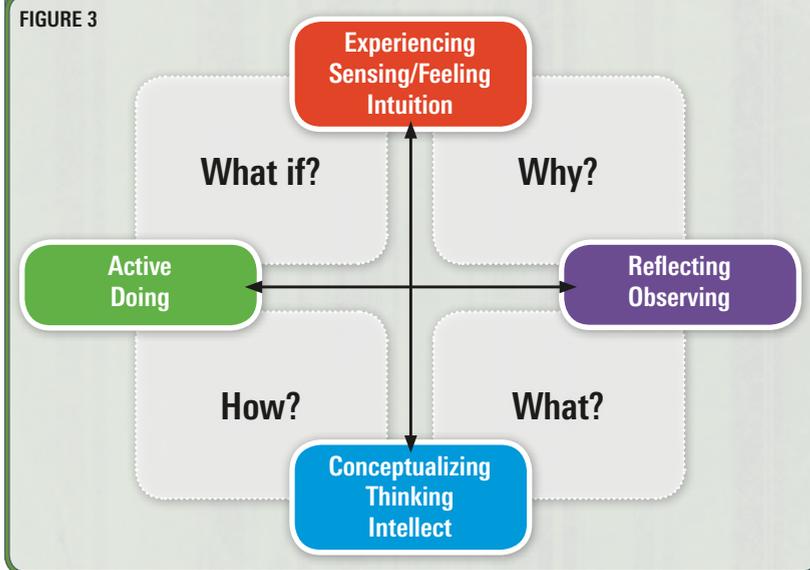
You will also find other articles in the Web site explaining this concept.

Second, think in terms of the four questions of the learning cycle as you prepare your sermon outline. (See figure 3.)

After you have chosen and exegeted your text, ask yourself the question, *Why should my listener find this subject important?* The objective of this question is to awaken an interest in the topic and prepare the listener for what will follow. Often, the introductory story answers this question. Thus, the purpose of an opening story/illustration should not

ANSWER THESE LEARNING QUESTIONS

FIGURE 3



will their lives look like after they have taken in this message?

Third, once you have used your outline to create your sermon manuscript, enlist the aid of a spouse and/or elder to evaluate your effectiveness. Your spouse may have already given you an unsolicited opinion—and preachers need that! But be intentional about asking for it. Ask several people who have different learning styles from yours. Use their feedback as a means to discover if this model has helped you strengthen a possible weak area in your sermons. With pre-sermon feedback always preferable to post-sermon feedback, you still have time

to make adjustments to your sermon before preaching it.

The preaching moment

Preaching God's Word remains a profound privilege—a supernatural experience. God uses our strengths, personalities, life experiences, and even our weaknesses to accomplish His purpose in the lives of His people. But God's empowering does not negate the need to do what we can to be the most effective vehicles through which to fulfill that mission. The Spirit works through learning cycles. And, sometimes, the Spirit even works through a game of checkers. **M**

Resources

- To discover your personal learning style, go to <http://bit.ly/ghWXHU>.
- For a Growing Disciples Curriculum Framework to help you grow fruitful, mature disciples based on the Learning Cycle, go to www.growingfruitfuldisciples.com.

- 1 For an excellent article on the need for these two branches of ministry to collaborate, see George Knight's "Two Ministries, One Mission," *Ministry*, December 2010.
- 2 <http://effective.leadershipdevelopment.edu.au/david-kolb-learning-styles/experiential-learning/>.
- 3 Charles Betz with Jack Calkins, "Leading Adult Sabbath School" (Lincoln, NE: Advent Source, 2001), 20.
- 4 See Dr. McCarthy's office Web site at <http://www.aboutlearning.com>.
- 5 William Evans, *How to Prepare Sermons* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1964), 90.

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Revival and REFORMATION

God's goodness revives and reforms

The platform upon which all true revivals and reformations stand is the goodness of God. His goodness speaks to our hearts, changes our motives, and inspires us to become more like Him. His demonstration of love "while we were still sinners" (Rom. 5:8, NIV) melts the hardness of our sinful hearts. His "kindness leads you [us] toward repentance" (Rom. 2:4, NIV).

Revivals and reformations are initiated by God's desires or actions, not ours. He first loved us (1 John 4:19). By beholding His character we are drawn back to God (cf. *The Desire of Ages*, p. 761). From God's own goodness we are called "to participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2 Pet. 1:3, 4, NIV). Whatever goodness we possess emanates from God's goodness and gives authenticity and power to our own witness. In other words, "who" God is precedes "what" God does. His actions flow from His character. It is the same with the converted Christian. Our acceptance of God's invitation ushers us into His kingdom—bringing to each one a revival of true godliness, a continued response bringing transformation into His image.

Revival and reformation is, in part, an accelerated response to the goodness of God.

—LARRY R. EVANS, DMIN, SERVES AS
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