

RUNNING HEAD: Teaching CRE for Meaningful Learning

The Exodus from Rote Learning:  
Teaching Christian Religious Education for Meaningful Learning

Dr. Katrina A. Korb

University of Jos

Paper presented at National Association of Christian Religious Educators of Nigeria 34<sup>th</sup>

Annual Conference, Bauchi, Nigeria, 16 April 2009.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus described a farmer who spread seed into four types of soil: along a path, amid rocks, amongst thorns, and in good soil. The bible explains that the seed is the Word of God. The farmers can be interpreted as the people whom God has chosen to share the Word of God. In Nigeria, God has appointed CRE teachers as one of the most important types of farmers to share His Word. As God's farmers, CRE teachers can share the Word in such a manner that the Word will fall along the path, among rocks or thorns, or in good soil. Just as the location in which the farmer sowed the seed influenced how well the seeds grew and the eventual fruitfulness of the seeds, so too the strategies with which CRE educators teach influences how well their students learn and the eventual fruitfulness of their students. This paper is going to compare the seed that the farmer spread along the path and the seed spread in good soil.

The seeds that the farmers spread along the path were eaten by the birds, which Jesus explained as follows: "When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and *does not understand it*, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart" (Matthew 13:19). This means that, people who *do not understand* the message about the kingdom of heaven will not believe and be saved. On the other hand, the seed spread in good soil is "the man who hears the word and *understands* it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown" (Matthew 13:23). Therefore, the fundamental difference between the wasted seed scattered along the path and the fruitful seed scattered in good soil is whether the person *understands* the Word of God. God's farmers, CRE teachers, have a responsibility to sow the seed of the Word of God in a manner that helps their students understand God's message.

The two types of farmland, the path and good soil, represent two types of learning identified by educational psychologists. The path symbolizes learning through rote memorization, which is simply learning to repeat new information in the exact form that it

was taught. The good soil symbolizes meaningful learning, defined as having a meaningful understanding of the content as related to a students' prior knowledge and experiences. The teaching strategies that CRE teachers use determines whether their students engage in meaningful learning and truly understand the Word of God or rote memorization and then can only repeat the lesson verbatim. When CRE teachers make an effort to use teaching strategies that promote understanding, the students will be able to apply the Word to their daily lives and produce a bountiful harvest. However, if teachers utilize rote teaching strategies where students simply memorize the message of God, students will not understand God's Word and will be unable to apply God's principles to their lives. The devil then steals the seed of the Word of God, resulting in just a nominal profession of Christ. Therefore, CRE educators should use teaching strategies that promote meaningful learning by their students.

To illustrate, a lesson in the SS1 CRE curriculum focuses on nine methods of holy living in 1 Peter 1, including mental preparation, obedience to God, nonconformity to sin, dependency on God, and prayerfulness (Illori, 1998). This lesson could be taught by first directing the students to copy the nine methods of holy living in their notebooks, followed by choral repetition of the nine methods until the students have the content memorized. When faced in the future with the opportunity to engage in exam malpractice, will students taught in this fashion be able to apply any of the nine methods of holy living that they memorized in CRE class to prevent the temptation to cheat? Scattering the seed onto the path was a lazy effort by the farmer and only resulted in wasting God's seed. Likewise, while teaching in a rote fashion is easy and takes little advanced preparation, it wastes God's Word because the students will not understand the message, which is necessary for applying the Word to their lives. God has entrusted his CRE farmers with the precious seed of His word, so CRE teachers need to make the effort to ensure that they teach in a manner so that God's seed grows in a bountiful harvest.

The fundamental difference between teaching for meaningful learning and teaching for rote memorization is whether the teacher relates the lesson's content to the students' prior knowledge and life experiences. Meaningful learning is accomplished when a new concept is not just known, but is fully understood by the student. Teaching for meaningful learning is advantageous because the students will be able to apply what they learn in school to their daily lives. The opposite of meaningful learning is rote memorization where students simply memorize new information. Because information learned by rote memorization is not taught in the context of students' experiences, students can only repeat the new information in the exact same context in which the material was taught. Therefore, the students might be able to write the nine methods of holy living on an exam, but they will be unable to apply the knowledge to their daily lives in such situations as the temptation to engage in exam malpractice. Therefore, teaching for meaningful learning is desirable because the knowledge is not just known, but is also applied.

To sow CRE lessons on good soil, CRE teachers should first critique their current teaching strategies to determine whether they are teaching in a manner that leads to rote memorization. Rote memorization results when a teacher simply presents the content of the lesson, like the nine methods of holy living, without connecting the information to students' prior knowledge, daily experiences, or the previous CRE lesson. To make a lesson meaningful to students, three steps are necessary. First, the teacher must activate students' relevant prior knowledge and experiences. Every CRE lesson is relevant to students' lives and experiences because God divinely created His Word in such a way that the bible is directly applicable to common experiences. Despite the fact that students will already have relevant knowledge about each CRE lesson, simply having that prior knowledge does not guarantee that the student will automatically apply the prior knowledge to the new lesson (Driscoll, 2005). The teachers' role is to creatively integrate the content of the lesson into

students' relevant experiences. To do this, the teacher needs to consider their students' lifestyles and brainstorm experiences that students have that are relevant to the lesson at hand. Then, every CRE lesson should begin by the teacher stating the objective of the lesson and then briefly relating the lesson to the students' experiences. For example, a teacher might begin the holy living lesson by stating that students will learn nine methods of holy living and then by asking a few students to describe a person they know who has lived a holy life. With each example, the teacher should ask for habits that the person engaged in that helped them live a holy life. By doing an opening activity that activates students' prior knowledge and experiences, the teacher helps orient the students to what they will be learning and how it will be useful to them.

After activating students' prior knowledge, the second step in teaching for meaningful learning is to make the instruction meaningful to the students. If a teacher presents material that does not make sense to a student, then students will resort to memorizing the material (Driscoll, 2005). Imagine a lesson where a teacher stated "Gird up the loins of your mind." If the teacher does not explain the meaning of the statement, then the students will resort to memorizing the statement. When students memorize, they learn the content in isolation from other knowledge and experiences and will be unable to apply the knowledge to a new situation. However, when the teacher explains the meaning of the statement and relates the statement to the students' prior knowledge and experiences, then the students will not have to memorize the statement because they will understand the underlying meaning. Every concept that the teacher covers in a lesson should be explained and connected to students' prior knowledge and experiences. For example, the teacher needs to explain each of the nine methods of holy living. The teacher should not assume that the students can develop a meaningful understanding of any concept without the teacher's instruction.

There are four major strategies whereby teachers can make instruction meaningful to students. The first strategy of teaching for meaningful learning is to ask meaningful questions. Note that simply asking a question does not facilitate meaningful learning. Instead, the type of question that is asked determines whether students will engage in meaningful learning or rote memorization. To teach for meaningful learning, students must think deeply before they are able to respond to the question. Questions that can be answered with “yes” or “no” are rote questions. For example, “Did Joseph live a holy life?” does not require the students to think deeply. Questions that can be answered by simply repeating what the teacher has previously said are also rote questions. “What type of questions are rote questions?” would be an example. Rhetorical questions do not require an answer from students, such as “Questions that can be answered by simply repeating what the teacher has previously said are rote questions, right?” This type of question, too, does not demand a meaningful response from students.

On the other hand, meaningful questions require the students to think deeply. A meaningful question is, “How did Joseph’s life demonstrate holy living?” A question like this requires students to apply the lesson to a novel context, which fosters meaningful learning. Meaningful questions typically begin with *Why...? How does...? What is an example of...?* Why did Joseph run away from the pharaoh’s wife? How do you know that Joseph was living a holy life? What is an example of a person you know who has lived a holy life? All of these questions require students to think meaningfully about the lesson, apply the content to a new context, and foster a meaningful integration of the CRE lesson into students’ experiences.

Asking good questions have two benefits. First, as previously described, meaningful questions require the students to think deeply about the content that has been taught and therefore promotes meaningful learning. A second benefit of asking good questions is that students’ responses help the teacher determine whether the students have understood the key

points of the lesson. An incorrect answer provides information about the aspects of the lesson that the students still do not understand. The teacher then knows that they need to spend more time explaining that concept so the students have a meaningful understanding.

Since students have to think deeply when answering a meaningful question by applying what they have learned to a new context, they oftentimes cannot answer immediately after the teacher poses the question. Therefore, a teacher has to learn how to use adequate wait-time. After asking a meaningful question, the teacher has to wait for the students to think about their response. Quietly waiting for students to respond is often difficult, so the teacher might have to count slowly to ten before a student will venture an answer. If the teacher has counted to 15, then perhaps the students did not understand the question so the teacher should think of a way to rephrase the question that would be more comprehensible.

To summarize, the first teaching strategy to make a concept meaningful is to ask meaningful questions. Another teaching strategy that fosters meaningful learning is to illustrate a concept by telling a story. The story could come from the bible, the teacher's personal experiences, or the story could be fictional, such as an African tale that illustrates the point. When discussing the principle of nonconformity to sin, the teacher can illustrate with the story of Joseph fleeing from the pharaoh's wife. After telling the story, the teacher should ask the students questions about the story to ensure that they understand the relationship between the story and the concept. The purpose of telling a story is to illustrate an abstract concept in a context that is more relevant and understandable to the student.

A third strategy for making instruction meaningful is to ask students about their related experiences. When teaching about obedience to God, the teacher can first give an illustration about a time when they were obedient to God's commands and then ask students for examples about times when they were obedient. As students share their stories, the

teacher should use directing questions to assist the student in articulating the relevance of their story to the lesson. For example, if a student tells a story about a time when they were helpful to their parents, ask them to name God's command that they were obedient to and then ask them how the story relates to holy living. Asking students about their relevant experiences is beneficial because it encourages students to apply the knowledge that they are learning in school to the practical situations faced in their daily lives.

The fourth teaching strategy to foster meaningful understanding is to use analogies. Some of the content to be taught in CRE might not yet be directly related to the students' experiences as illustrated in the bible because of the differences between the cultural experiences of Nigerian youth and Jewish adults. In these instances, a teacher can present an analogy, a more relevant situation that is conceptually similar to the lesson in the bible. For example, I observed a student in their teaching practice who was teaching about Abraham's obedience to God in sacrificing his son. Students in JS1 would have difficulty in understanding the surrender necessary to be obedient to God's command to sacrifice a child. Therefore, the teacher used a conceptually similar situation that the JS1 students would understand: God commanding the students to sell all of their possessions and move into the bush to live with the Fulani as a missionary. By then asking meaningful questions about how the students would feel in the more pertinent situation, this teacher was able to effectively teach in a way where the students had a meaningful understanding of the concept of obedience to God.

Once the lesson has been taught in a meaningful fashion, the final step to teach for meaningful learning is to require the students to use the new information in different contexts. One of the most important goals of education is for students to be able to transfer new knowledge into contexts outside of the classroom (Driscoll, 2005). However, educational research has demonstrated that transfer of knowledge to new contexts is very difficult for



students (e.g., Cheng, Holyoak, Nisbett, & Oliver, 1986). Consequently, teachers have to explicitly teach students how they can apply the new knowledge into contexts outside of the classroom. Teachers therefore have to conclude each lesson by explaining how the new information can be applied to practical situations. For example, the lesson about the nine methods of holy living can be concluded by posing a temptation that students regularly face, such as the possibility of engaging in exam malpractice, and asking the students how they would apply the nine methods of holy living to the situation. Homework assignments can accomplish the final step in teaching for meaningful learning by having each student apply the lesson's content to a situation that was not discussed in class. A homework assignment that requires students to repeat information that was covered in class promotes rote memorization because the students simply repeat the words of the teacher. However, a homework assignment that requires the students to think about situations that were not discussed in class can foster meaningful learning.

To summarize, three steps are necessary for teaching for meaningful learning: activate students' prior knowledge, make the instruction meaningful, and require the students to apply the new knowledge into different contexts. Four strategies can be used to make the instruction meaningful to students: asking meaningful questions, telling stories, asking students for their relevant experiences, and using analogies.

A fundamental difference between teaching strategies that encourage rote memorization and teaching strategies that result in meaningful learning is the quality of activity that the student is engaged in throughout the lesson. Students will learn via rote memorization if they are required to repeat information that the teacher has presented. Meaningful learning occurs when the students are compelled to actively think about the information presented by the teacher. Students are actively engaged when they are required to

answer meaningful questions and think about how the material applies to their own experiences.

The strategies that teachers use in the classroom influence how students learn. Teaching CRE for meaningful learning is considerably better than teaching for rote memorization because students who understand CRE are able to apply the lessons to their daily lives. To foster meaningful learning, teachers need to abandon teacher-centered methods where the teacher lectures and students copy information into their notebooks. Instead, educators need to make an effort to make their teaching student-centered where teachers focus on making CRE meaningful to the students. When teachers use student-centered teaching practices, students will be more successful in learning.

In conclusion, teaching for meaningful learning helps our students truly understand and apply God's word to their lives. Jesus said that "the seed that fell on good soil is the person who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown." When CRE educators teach using strategies that help their students understand and apply God's word to their lives, then they are scattering God's Word on fertile soil that will surely produce a bountiful crop unto God's glory.

#### References

- Cheng, P. W., Holyoak, K. J., Nisbett, R. E., & Oliver, L. M. (1986). Pragmatic verses syntactic approaches to training deductive reasoning. *Cognitive Psychology*, 18, 293-328.
- Driscoll, M. P. (2005). *Psychology of learning for instruction* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Ilori, J. A. (1998). *Manual for teachers of Christian Religious Knowledge in senior secondary schools*. Jos, Plateau State: International Institute for Christian Studies.