

Know. Believe. Do.

Curriculum and Learning Objectives

Aimee Cox Ehrs

We confidently approach teaching many of the “landmarks” of the Orthodox Christian Faith, such as having students learn to recite the Nicene Creed from memory. Naturally, this task will have to be broken into smaller, more specific steps, such as learning a statement or two each week. Assessing whether they have reached the goal is pretty straightforward. After a clean recitation or two, mission accomplished.

Then we try to add more dimensions to that knowledge: *Believe it. Live it.* However enormous these tasks may seem, leading students to the point of “believing” and “living” is the goal of religious education.

When creating lessons, keep in mind all three of Bloom’s learning domains (cognitive, affective and psychomotor), his levels/classifications, and the verbs associated with them. For each lesson, we want the students to know something, to believe something (or at least have the mustard seeds of belief planted within them; Matthew 17:20), and to do something, however small. Visualize the end—the “takeaway.” And *then* work out the means to reach it.



But we know that being able to recite the Creed isn’t enough, especially for older students. So we forge ahead with the more complicated bits: *Understand each phrase of the Creed. Connect the Creed to Scripture. Compare it to the creeds or core beliefs of other faiths. Discuss these differences with peers.* (These objectives fall under the cognitive domain of Bloom’s Taxonomy, as Stephanie Mardigian described in the Fall 2011 issue of *PRAXIS*.)

Think about the range of knowledge and attitudes kids might bring with them into the classroom. The first parts of a lesson help the teacher (and the students themselves) identify what the students already know or think. Then the teacher can guide them from A to B—the objective—with an emphasis on “helping” rather than “ferrying.” Learners benefit most if they reach B at least partly on their own power, especially for the higher-order objectives.

Learning Materials

Textbooks and supplementary resources, such as articles, storybooks and videos, are some of the common “delivery vehicles” content. These materials follow the path of a curriculum via structured units and lessons.

Designing units and lessons in a disciplined and methodical way, with content and instructional methods that clearly further the curriculum, can be difficult. Whenever I come across a great article, book or video, I have the urge to run directly to the classroom with it. “This changed my life! It’s everything you’ll ever need to know! You’ve got to read it! Here it is!” The class sessions devoted to it would be filled with fresh energy. Enthusiasm and conviction *are* invaluable—and I know they can be hard to maintain, week in and week out, year after year.

But instead of going AWOL from a carefully thought-out curriculum—even when the textbooks are dated—religious education directors and teachers can follow the established path but rework parts of the lessons. They can modernize the instructional methods, working toward the established goals in an interactive way that reaches today’s kids. Swapping out activities and crafts is another way to keep teachers from becoming bored or burned out after using the same text for several years.

Even as the DRE is writing new series and reworking older textbooks that were published in the 1980s and 1990s, we are trying to help by reviewing supplementary materials from other publishers. Many Orthodox Christian authors and educators have published wonderful story books and classroom materials, but we also carefully select some “merely Christian” materials from other publishers. For example, *Thirteen Very Cool Stories and Why Jesus Told Them* was released in 2009 by Standard Publishing. We ordered a sample copy, and it looked like great fun. I was tempted to use the book in its entirety for the Sunday school class I was teaching that year. But I restrained myself and instead used some of its activities to breathe fresh life into lessons on the various parables in the textbook I was using. The new activities simply supported and supplemented the fullness of the textbook’s Orthodox Christian objectives and content.

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For young children, this type of lesson plan will probably be very clear and uncluttered; the “content,” in the traditional sense of “concrete items to be learned” or “actions to do,” will often be stated simply and concisely: *Recognize that Jesus wants us to love one another. Make the sign of the cross.* We are shaping general attitudes, such as “loving God.” Yet this is not to be confused with simplicity of mind. Even young children and elementary schoolers are developing higher-order thinking skills and can work with some abstraction—more so than we used to think.

Learning objectives for middle schoolers and older students may be more complex and will likely move more quickly into higher-order skills, such as analyzing, evaluating and creating. It’s at this point that we begin asking learners to meet objectives like *Connect the Creed to Scripture*.

ASSESSMENT: BY WHOM?

Another characteristic of benchmarks and learning objectives is that the result should be measurable. I sometimes get questions from religious educators who are sensitive to the assessment-driven nature of secular education today. “Why aren’t there tests in the DRE’s books?” Part of the answer is that we are passing on not only orthodoxy, but also orthopraxis. To reinforce our curriculum and materials, the DRE has created “What Your Child Should Know” documents, and we are looking at creating parent talksheets for each unit. By engaging families in the task of religious education and spiritual formation, we will be able to do a better job of following through on the less-measurable goals, especially those in the affective domain.

Sunday Church school teachers probably don’t see themselves as being in the business of evaluating student achievement on “believing” and “living” the Faith. We wouldn’t presume, for example, to issue a grade on a person’s prayer life or to gauge the sincerity of his or her repentance. (Naturally, some of this is in the parish priest’s purview, especially in the context of confession.) As for teacher performance evaluations? They could quickly get scary. Former students’ attendance in the Divine Liturgy on Sunday mornings? The content of their late-night Facebook postings when they’re college freshmen?

Levity aside, I worry and question myself. I wonder what I could have done, and what to do now. I accepted the responsibility of teaching, but have I “left a child behind”? But I know that unity with God cannot be (entirely) effected by forty-five-minute sessions on Sunday mornings from ages four to eighteen. Our paths toward Him may sometimes be steep and sometimes gentle, the pace quick or slow. Theosis is the “long run,” the journey and goal of a lifetime.