

Planning Your Lessons

Children (and adults) are naturally curious. They have questions *about* God, the Church, and the world around them. They also want to know what the answers to their questions *mean* for their lives. One major task as teachers in the Sunday Church school is to create a learning environment that encourages questions to be asked and answered, opens up the sources of our Faith for study, and makes connections to the lives of the learners. A well-planned lesson is a key component in that task and includes the following:

Objectives

Each lesson you create should have objectives for the student. The best learning objectives are “behavioral,” that is, the student will demonstrate knowledge through some action that he or she performs. That means the objective should include an active verb, such as “name,” “list,” or “compare.” Too often, objectives include passive verbs such as “learn” or “understand,” which are too vague. One way to check your learning objectives is to include the statement, “The student should be able to . . .” before the rest of the objective. Another way is to ask yourself, “How will I know that the student has learned this idea? What will the student do to show me?”

For example, how would you determine whether or not the students have learned the Creed? By their ability to recite it from memory—the same way they will apply their knowledge during worship and life. So, the learning objective would be “Recite the Creed from memory.” And with something as lengthy as the Creed, you may need to be even more precise, dividing the Creed into parts, so that the learning objective for successive weeks would be “Recite part one, part two, etc.” until at the end of the unit the student is able to recite the entire Creed.

Teaching the Lesson

There are many methods of instruction that we can use in our lessons. Try to vary them as much as possible. This will increase student interest in the class. Repeating the exact same lesson format, week after week, can be deadly dull, prompting a student to “tune out” before a lesson has even begun. Since all of us learn in different styles—some through watching or reading, others through listening, and most of us through doing—we need to be able to engage the different learning styles of our students. Remember, we learn the most by doing and the least through passive activities, such as reading or listening. As in cooking, reading the recipe can teach us something, but actually cooking the meal will teach us far more.

One week, do a Bible study; another week, have the stu-

dents role-play the same Bible story. Have students work in small groups on a poster project about a topic from history. Then hang the posters in the church hall and have students explain their work during the parish coffee hour.

Activities

While Sunday Church school is not meant to be a weekly arts and crafts fair or game show, students enjoy activities in class. Games and art projects should reinforce concepts being taught and not just fill the time. So, for example, making a quiz show out of the facts being taught is fun for the students, but it can also become a way for you to determine how much students are retaining from lessons.

Music

The Orthodox Church is a musical church, filled with hymns and melodies that have come down to us through the centuries. Teaching the hymns of the Church should be a regular part of Sunday Church school. Songs that fit the concepts being taught should also be included. Linking words to a melody is a time-honored way of increasing recall. How many of us could recite all fifty states without relying on the melody to the folk song, “Fifty Nifty United States”? Singing together helps build community, uniting people in song. One of the most powerful moments in the life of the Church is at the Resurrection service, when an entire congregation bursts into “Christ is Risen” as soon as the priest sings the first notes.

There are other elements that you will also include in your written lesson plan, such as a prayer to open and close the session, new terms and ideas being introduced, announcements for the class, and the like.

Even a well-planned lesson will not always go as expected. Perhaps someone will ask a challenging question that takes the lesson in an unexpected but meaningful direction. When these teachable moments happen, be ready to put aside the plan. Sometimes, things will move more quickly than planned, so you should always have a few backup activities that you can use to review previous material or expand on a new topic. A good planning tip is to have more material than you can possibly use in one class session.

Do you have a lesson plan that worked really well? Why not share it with us and possibly other PRAXIS readers? E-mail us at tvrame@goarch.org or religiously@goarch.org. Also, to share ideas and information, join our “Orthodox Christian Religious Educators” group on Facebook.