



EDUCATION IN MINISTRY THAT IS LEARNER-CENTERED AND COMPETENCY-BASED FOR DIACONAL EDUCATION AND FORMATION PROGRAMS.

Introduction

What do we mean by learner-centered and competency-based?

We expect students to be responsible for their own learning. Our role as teachers or facilitators is to make resources available to students, coach them in their learning, help them assess their knowledge and skill against their goal or competency targets (developed with us as advisers), and help them build a community of learners and servant leaders to support each other after they pass through our hands.

In addition, we want to help other teachers and program coordinators make the shift to this kind of understanding. We are touting new skills because of a renewed understanding about where responsibility for learning lies, and what learning is for.

I. Rethinking assessment

A. Why begin with assessment design?

In teaching, those of us who have been using competency-based approaches prefer to develop the assessments (tests or assignments) first, and then determine the learning activities that will help the learner be successful with the assessment or assignment.

For example (and this example will thread through this document) if our competency is that the participant should be able to write prayers of the people, then the learning activity focuses on that skill. The learning activity should model how one goes about writing a litany, then provide opportunity for practice, and culminate in an assessment in which the participant writes prayers of the people for a specific context.

Assessment of skills goes hand in hand with defining outcomes or competencies. How do we determine that a learner has achieved what s/he set out to do? A key point is to expand our understanding of assessment to include much more than paper-and-pencil tests, which are limited in their authenticity, that is, how well the performance on a test aligns with the expected performance in an authentic context.

Again, asking questions about writing litanies for prayers of the people is quite different from actually writing them.

Writing the prayers for a specific context is authentic. That is what we expect a deacon to be able

Assessment refers to measuring the learner's skill or knowledge. Paper and pencil tests are one common assessment tool, but there are many others. Authentic assessment refers to measurements set in a realistic context, such as asking the learner to solve a problem rather than simply answering questions about something.

Competencies are knowledge, skill or attitudes that can be developed by learning. "Write prayers of the people for a specific worship service." They are observable, in that another person can judge whether the competency has been accomplished.

to do, not answer questions about writing prayers.

How then do we authentically assess learning? We create tasks that help us see how the candidate will perform as a deacon. That kind of assessment requires us to think about how competencies are used by the deacon. For relatively concrete skills, such as our example, it becomes obvious.

How do we assess academic skills? Let's take a different example, biblical interpretation. It becomes important to think through how we would know that our diaconal student or deacon has the required skill or knowledge if we were to encounter her or him doing biblical interpretation in an actual ministry context. We can ask the learner to prepare a Bible study, or to provide a rationale, anchored in Scripture, for plans or proposed actions taken as a deacon.

Role plays and simulations are useful assessments for skills that require confidentiality or might put care receivers at risk if observed by an instructor. We can role play a pastoral care visit, for example, rather than observe the real thing. We can simulate an encounter that poses risk of boundary violations. These not-quite-real situations allow demonstration of skills and knowledge in a low risk setting.

What becomes clear very quickly is that such assessments are more challenging for both the mentor and the student. They are, however, much more valuable. The collection of the artifacts produced for assessment becomes a useful portfolio. See more about portfolios below. The portfolio, when made available to commissions on ministry, a bishop, or a congregation, demonstrate the capability of the deacon far more effectively and accurately than a transcript of grades would.

Creating assessments also benefits those who develop curricula for diaconal formation. By knowing what it is the students will have to do, it becomes much clearer what needs to be taught. What should the student do in preparation for the assessment?

We design the instruction by working backwards from the assessment, if the assessment is authentic and valid. What will the learner need to know and do in order to succeed at the assessment?

To keep working our prayer example, if we know the student will need to write litanies for prayers of the people, instruction and practice will build toward performing that task. The theology and history of liturgical intercessory prayer, writing skills, discerning seasonal and topical emphases, all will play a part. The assessment or test is a valid, useful measure of competency. We will teach the student to pass the test, because it is authentic and representative of the learning outcomes we seek.

B. Writing and using competencies

Competencies are clear statements describing how we can determine that a person has learned a skill or knowledge. We write and use competencies to set a target for the learner and the

instructor. Competencies often describe a behavior or an ability that we can expect someone with the knowledge or skill to exhibit. And competencies are developmental, that is, one is never done with a competency; there is always room for growth and improvement.

Following our example:

- The learner will write litanies for the prayers of the people for use in their own congregation.

Note that this competency is much clearer than a topical or thematic statement or goal such as

*Original litanies for prayers of the people

or

*Writing or adapting forms for prayers of the people

By developing competency statements, we help the facilitator select or develop learning activities to help the learner attain the competency and we help the learner know what is expected. We also are able to use the competencies to develop assessments so the learner and facilitator know the level of knowledge and skill the learner has gained.

The most effective competencies have an assessment built in.

Consider this as an even better competency statement

- Demonstrate skill in writing litanies for prayers of the people in one's own congregation by submitting litanies for three different occasions or seasons in the language of the congregation.

Carefully written competency statements identify the content or subject area as well as what the learner is expected to be able to do with the content or knowledge. In the same vein there might be competencies for adapting litanies, leading litanies, or helping a team of members of the congregation craft a litany - all different applications of basic knowledge about prayers of the people..

Curricular goals are often general statements about expectations of those who complete the curriculum. The goals may be that the learner "understand" a broad topic or "master" a set of skills. Perhaps the goals are that the learner "demonstrate knowledge" about something. These statements are not specific enough to use as competencies.

If we start with goals, then we must further delve into the performance that we expect of someone who demonstrates the knowledge. What would we expect the learner to do? Under what circumstances? In what contexts? It may be useful to think of the decisions they might make, problems that someone may be expected to solve or the products they may be expected to create. Further, we may want the learner to justify the decision or solution to the problem, through references to scripture, tradition or reason.

C. Portfolios

Portfolios are a systematic collection of work that demonstrates what a person has learned.

1. Why should learners build portfolios?

They are a way of capturing evidence of progress on a learning plan or toward learning goals. Portfolios respect learner centered education, since they are built from the perspective of the individual learner. They also are particularly well-suited to demonstrating learning in a competency-based model.

2. What goes in a portfolio?

All kinds of things!

Portfolios may be assembled electronically, or manually in a binder or large file folder, or some combination.

We tend to first think of portfolios as a collection of documents. Types of documents include but aren't exhausted by essays, poems, stories, journals, sermons, book reviews, outlines of workshops led or dialogues convened, transcripts of interviews, survey results, liturgical texts including litanies, and correspondence.

Many things other than documents can be included in a portfolio: photos of all sorts of events, people, places, inventions and artworks; audio recordings such as podcasts, sermons and music; video recordings of an interview, event or performance (music, dance or drama); maps, charts and diagrams; power point or similar format presentations.

3. How are the artifacts of learning used to demonstrate what has been learned?

Most items in a portfolio will need some further reflection to accompany them. This reflection should be from the learner's perspective and answer the question: how did you learn what you learned? For example

- How was this learning experience for you? a struggle, unmitigated joy, easy, difficult, etc.?
- If it's not obvious, who was involved with you in this learning process?
- What research and resources did you use that might not be evident in this document or product?
- What questions do you still have or how might you build on this learning in the future? If you were to do it again, how would it be different?
- How are you different as a result of this experience?

This second level learning (reflecting on how one learned) may be done by the learner and attached to the items in the portfolio, or it may be done in an interview with a mentor or assessor of learning and documented by them to be included.

4. What about putting it all together?

Every portfolio, when complete, should include an introductory memo which reflects on why the items in the portfolio were chosen for inclusion, what the learner most hoped to show by including them, and what themes the learner sees running through the various learning artifacts. It may be a helpful stimulus to the learner to work with a peer or mentor in developing the memo.

II. Helping individuals develop learning plans, set goals and choose ways of learning

A really useful activity for learners is to do a regular self-assessment of their goals and their progress toward them. Consider an activity in which we listed the canonical areas and asked each participant to rate themselves in each area. They could also list, for each area, what they thought they did well and what they needed additional work in. They file their assessment for their own use and do not need to share it with a facilitator or other participants unless they choose to. At a convenient time interval later, probably months, repeat the assessment without first looking at the initial one. When the second assessment is completed, then compare the two to see what progress has been made or how their own self-assessment has changed as they learn. This self-assessment could be repeated several times as the participant goes through the program. We hope it would show some progress. It can also be used a tool to select additional areas for study.

III. Teaching and facilitating on-line learning

A. On-line learning leadership

There are several challenges associated with teaching and learning online. (There are challenges associated with teaching and learning in a face-to-face context, too, but those are so familiar to most teachers and students that they often pass without notice.) Among those new challenges are maintaining engagement and personal relationships when we can't be in the same place, giving and receiving feedback and reinforcement, and replacing or reframing classroom activities in a virtual environment.

A common assumption that we need to examine and then set aside is that the online environment should attempt to duplicate the classroom. Each learning environment has its own set of advantages and disadvantages.

The affordances of live classrooms support conversation, dialogue and discussion, for example. But note that the live classroom rewards those who think and respond quickly or even impulsively, placing at a disadvantage the student who would rather reflect and respond only after considering alternatives and consequences. The affordances of discussion boards, which do not require instant response, level the playing field. The reflective student ponders the situation, composes a response, and only when ready, posts a contribution to the discussion.

Using our example of writing litanies for prayers of the people, brainstorming ideas for a litany works well face to face. But the on-line medium offers an opportunity for thoughtful reading and postings on background materials and for commenting on or editing others' draft litanies

In the on line environment, it is easy to share drafts and finished products, so that students learn from each other's work. Posting ideas and drafts allow students to collaborate, improving their work as they learn from each other. If these drafts and other tentative works are not graded, but only used to try out ideas and strategies, students are encouraged to experiment and take risks, provided that the culture of the learning environment fosters constructive comments and critique.

B. Choosing and balancing on-line and face-to-face opportunities for learning

The social structure of the online class is helped by periodic face-to-face meetings, so that the members of the group get to know each other personally, so they can then work together in the virtual environment.

How to design hybrid classes

A critical decision is which activities are best done in a face-to-face presence and which can depend on a virtual presence or solitary work. Much information can be imparted well through online presentations, readings, and mentoring through discussion boards, blogs and other social media.

Reserve precious face-to-face time for building community, skill practice like role plays, liturgy, pastoral care.

Note a shift in thinking here. The normal communication for many deacon formation programs will be at a distance and asynchronous. Times when all are in the same physical room will often be limited to retreat weekends or monthly seminars and worship.

Face to face communication is emotionally rich, real-time, and physically present. The community is enhanced by physical presence, to make eye contact, exchange handshakes and hugs, and even each person's distinctive presence. Reflection, reading, listening, writing, drawing and asynchronous exchanges work well, perhaps even better, at a distance, on schedules that are individually determined to accommodate other life demands.

Synchronous, distance communications, such as web conferences, work well between face-to-face meetings for discussions and questions and for keeping the group together between physical meetings.

When you have the opportunity to use both online and face-to-face modalities, these criteria may be helpful in deciding how to best use each:

Synchronous communication is at the same time. Web conferences are synchronous. Everyone meets at the same time, though not at the same place.

Asynchronous means at different times. Communication is recorded, whether audio, video, or print, so that learners can access it at their convenience

- Face-to-face instruction is best used when our instructional strategies require live interaction among people. The requirement may be driven by content or strategy requiring immediate responses, emotional support, social presence, or group work
- Distance modes work best for individual work, reflection, reading, thoughtful responses or study. Peer review and critique work very well in distance learning.

When we are able to use both live and distance or online formats, the resulting hybrid approach allows us to use each mode to its best advantage.

Starting a course of study with a live workshop allows learners and facilitators to meet each other, making the online communication more personal and more effective. The live workshop format allows demonstrations and practice with the technology to be used, avoiding problems later.

The initial live workshop or seminar is a time to establish norms and expectations for the group, build community, worship together, and begin to get to know each other. Then as the individuals go their separate ways, to work online, the interaction can be more personal than it would be if all that is known about the others is a name and a picture.

A common instructional approach to distance learning combines recorded presentations followed by discussion, writing, or research. Learners can be expected to prepare for a presentation by reading or viewing web resources. The presentation itself should not merely duplicate the readings or other preparatory materials. Instead the presentation should highlight content, present opposing views, personal opinions, or controversies related to the content. It may also provide additional explanation or examples for complex or difficult concepts.

We often use locally recorded presentations to localize or update published readings or web resources. Textbooks will not address diocesan policies or practices. Any print resources may be out of date in some respects within months of publication. Web resources may be more current, but not include local adaptations. Presentations in the form of podcasts or videocasts can bring in the local context and be immediately current.

Learners post their work to a discussion forum, allowing others to respond, critique, or build on their work. In the best discussions, the learners are the most active contributors, with the instructor's role being that of a coach, to bring the discussion back on track if it wanders, correct misunderstandings, and reinforce and encourage good work. Because of cost and technology issues, many of these discussions are text based, but inexpensive voice tools now make it possible for learners to post recordings of their comments, lending a greater social presence.

The online learning both follows and prepares learners for face-to-face learning in a retreat or workshop.

Similarly we will want to conclude a course of study with a live session, for discussions and reviews of the course, integration of knowledge and skills across the range of topics studied, demonstration or presentation of works produced during the course, and always celebration, thanksgiving, and worship as a community.

For Trial Use