Article

How do saints learn?

Michael Allen reports on a piece of international research into teaching and learning styles within the Church.

by
Michael Allen

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'What comes to your mind as the most important learning experiences on your Christian journey?' As a 'saint' in your own community, you will have your own answer to this question, but I put it directly to seven church members in Derbyshire and seven in St Vincent in the Caribbean.

St Paul describes all church members as saints, but the people I spoke to were particularly identified for me by churchwardens or lay trainers as 'encouraging Christian examples'. Each conversation lasted almost two hours and all were recorded for analysis. David Hay, known for interviewing people about their religious experience, recommended this method of working with a few in-depth interviews. Allen Tough's research, using interviews to help people identify their learning, was also an inspiration. The purpose of this article is to reflect on the pie chart below, which summarizes the analysis of my interviews, and to draw out implications for our education and training practice. One interviewee's helpful summary was: *'So I guess you learn in roundabout ways.'*

Significant others

Particular relationships with particular people — family, friends, leaders — comprise 30% of the learning experiences.

'It's people that I have met: their Christian life in particular has been striking and you wonder what it is that makes them tick — also in interaction with them you kind of learn'

'X taught me how to be self-reliant. He's been the biggest influence ... God-fearing, deep friendship ... great respect to everyone'

'There are a few mentors in my life'

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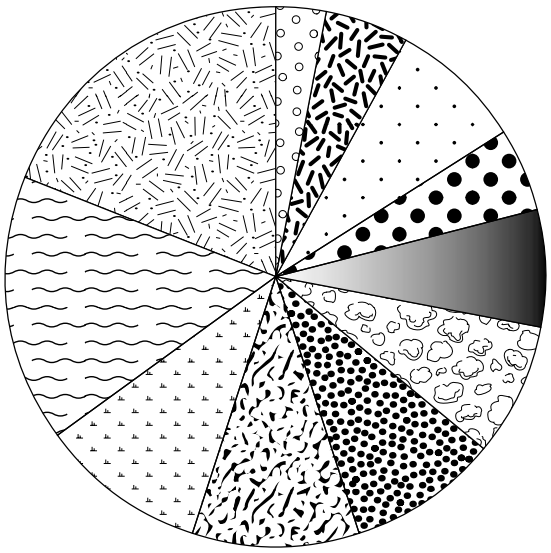
How far does — or can — education and training help with this learning from 'significant others' whom we as the learners choose? Such 'people' are not necessarily teachers or ministers, although some are. One interviewee identified a child dying of leukaemia who *'himself was a good teacher because here was a young child who would forget about his own things and fool about*



- Radio/Tapes/TV 3%
- Reading 5%
- Church work/Worship 8%
- Teaching/Leading 5%
- Group learning 7%
- Formal teaching 8%
- Work life/Training 9%
- Incidents in life 10%
- Family upbringing 10%
- Internal conversation 16%
- Significant others 19%

with the other little children and he talked to them...'

Anybody can be a 'mentor' for someone. Every person in the body of Christ has significance for some other people's learning.

Almost all learning, whether about doctrine or pastoral care, has elements of or potential for personal development. This research suggests that such personal formation has higher value than it is often given. Learning diaries, self- and peer-assessment, appraisal, group feedback, conflict resolution all ruffle the still waters so as to open us to the grace of God.

Another interviewee said, *'I guess one particular Sunday School teacher impressed me as a person; I could see something special — kind and genuine; practised what they preached — even at a young age I think that children spot things like that'*. The practice of writing a card at All Saints time to someone to thank them for their encouragement has great value — both to the 'other' and to the writer. My project consultant describes such a person as 'someone who has become what you feel you could be built up into'.

Daniel Goleman's book *Educational Intelligence* (Bantam Books, 1996) draws on research into what makes for effective or successful managers, teachers, parents, young people. It is self-awareness, delaying gratification, optimism, plus skills of empathy, self-control, communicating and relating. Further training in this emotional intelligence could help form us into the yoke of Christ.

Personal reflection

I have grouped together incidents, mainly wrestling with tragedies or problems, and internal conversation and radio/TV/books as personal reflection. These make up a third of the learning experiences.

'I worked with elderly people ... I remember coming home one day and nobody was home. I thought gosh I'm on my own ... I can remember saying thank you God for letting me have that feeling of what it's like to be alone ... and then I felt closer to God.'

'It has been self learning, I ponder quite a lot. You know at the end of the day you roll the activities over in your mind ... think if you could have handled a situation better ... what am I to learn?'

'On the lay training programme ... I am getting to the point where a lot of things I actually address to God and I ask him to help me understand ... so I become trusting and say that this was meant for me and this was the answer to my questions. And that's how I learned.'

'About a year after my daughter died I found myself questioning if only I knew that she was up and walking and was OK in another world and I vividly remember having a dream and she was running and walking around.'

Personal reflection is learning from the university of life, but the outcome of reflection is not always learning. The comedian Peter Cook exclaimed, 'Of course I learn from my mistakes. I can repeat every one of them perfectly!' We need assistance to help overcome our blindness. Spirit-expectant prayer to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is one big help. Practices that can help are keeping a diary or journal, having a soul friend or consultant, reflective exercises with feedback, a close friend who can tell us what they really think. We need help to reflect to the point where we come to recognize our own self-deceptions.

Much reflection or self-talk is negative — 'I'm no good; they're no good'. Some research suggests that 75% is negative. A well-known spiritual teacher who accompanies people on Ignatian retreats said that, 'We are beholden to what other people will think and say in ways that are damaging'.

One fairly successful approach with smokers, handicapped children and athletes in changing behaviour or improving performance is to help people to change self-talk, mental images and assumptions. This gives substance to the confidence building that can happen on training courses. With personal reflection at the heart of learning then we have to see that any training event offers opportunities in the brochure, in preparatory papers and in follow-up conversations for deepening reflection.

Work life learning

Only one third of the interviewees spoke of learning through work, but when they did it was very significant.

'This experience I had with the bully boss … even as a Christian you shouldn't sit down to it ... you can be brought down to nothing … God where have you gone? ... you've got a mind of your own ... I think I've learned from that ... I don't let anybody walk on me any more.'

'I used to be very independent ... On an internal management course we had to search deep into our souls ... I learned a lot about myself and my mistakes ... it very much

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opened my mind up to looking at other people.'

As the final section on Church teaching will demonstrate, we learn from the life of the community. We need also to recognize that church members learn from their 'work' community and often need further opportunity to reflect on and learn from what is happening at work. This can happen in one-to-one conversations. Only rarely is it allowed to come before church business. Almost all teaching needs to draw in people's work experience as well as church and home. Adult educators need to keep a close ear to the ways in which industry and the institutions help people face change creatively. One example is the way Peter Honey and Alan Mumford's *Learning Styles Questionnaire* is becoming commonplace in the Church, helping in the designing of learning opportunities and giving people insight to direct their own learning.

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Church life and teaching

Church teaching, group learning, church life and worship contribute less than one third of the learning experiences. This is not a disheartening or unexpected result. Allen Tough in Canada (see 'Self Planned Learning' in a book edited by Malcolm Tight — Brook Helm) was the first to interview adults about their learning projects. This produced the result, verified by other studies, that people have on average seven learning projects per year, of which five are self-directed without a teacher. So less than a third are teacher- or institution-directed. The implication is that church teaching needs to be done effectively and with some awareness of the other learning going on in people's lives.

'The way he presented his session, it was all so just refreshing and meaningful — he was relating it to things that touch you.'

'The lay training programme ... I learned a lot ... the best thing about the programme was that there was someone to whom we could address questions.'

'In Bible study groups ... I've learned more than in the rest of my life.'

'I've learned with the Church ... teamwork.'

Some remembered opportunities that were lost:

'When I was confirmed I found the classes very, you know, difficult ... I wanted to ask a lot more probing questions and the vicar was very sort of disturbed by that ... so I tended to put it on the back boiler'

The problem may not have been that the vicar was unable to help but that the interviewee and the vicar had different learning styles. I was surprised at the fairly clear expressions of learning styles by the interviewees: by doing the job (pragmatists); by understanding first (theorists); by taking time to reflect (reflectors); by action (activists). Do we really train clerical or lay ministers adequately for the complex ministry of teaching?

Adult educators may best be seen as accompanists of disciples in whom the Spirit Teacher is at work in many ways. This might be why group learning is significant to many people. Malcolm Knowles, who first raised our awareness about differences between adults' and children's learning, says: 'The Teacher's responsibility is to act both as an educator and an encourager of maturity and self-direction.'

Educators also need to sense when the time is right for people. One interviewee says, *'It is only since the 1990s that I am remembering and learning and it's sticking and staying and being internal like and becoming part of me.'* If I could help that to happen, I'd die happy.

I close with a philosophy of learning passed from father to son in St Vincent and then to me: *'My father always says when we experience it, bad or good, there is something to be learned ... instead of only poor me, you wonder why it has happened to me, what am I to learn, you see.'*

Michael Allen