

Understanding the 'What if Learning' Approach

This website aims to help teachers see what it might mean in practice for education to point in a Christian direction. The 'What if Learning' approach uses three brief phrases or steps (Seeing Anew, Choosing Engagement and Reshaping Practice) as a broad framework. They do not cover everything that needs to be said about faith or about teaching. Rather, they are offered as aids to focusing on some key points of contact between Christianity and the way that we teach. They also serve to identify some common threads in the many examples described on other pages. They are meant to underline that our concern is with how teaching and learning happen, not just with what content gets taught and when certain Christian words and ideas feature in the curriculum.

Seeing anew

A student complained to the teacher at the start of a compulsory foreign language course that he wished he did not have to take the course. He did not think he was very good at languages and couldn't see much use for them in relation to his future career plans. He thought it was unfair that he was being made to spend so much time on something that would not benefit him. Over the school year, the teacher encouraged his students to think about language learning in a new way; it could be a way of loving our neighbours by showing interest and speaking to them in their own language rather than expecting others to do all the work. Before Christmas, the same student shared with the teacher that his attitude to his learning had changed, and he now thought language learning should be required for everyone.

As this true story vividly illustrates, teaching and learning are not only about the content to be taught and efficiency of the teacher's methods. What teachers and learners imagine is going on plays an important role. Teachers come to see children, schools, and the subject matter they teach in particular ways, and these affect how they teach. Are children empty buckets to be filled with information perhaps? Is learning seen mainly as a prelude to the world of work? How would it, for instance, change mathematics learning if we actively considered how maths skills are used to serve others?

Students also come to see their learning and the world around them in particular ways, ways influenced by their teachers. Is language learning, for instance, mainly about getting ahead in the world, making more money, or submitting to exam requirements, or could it be a way of relating better to people from other cultures? How do students come to imagine their own growth and place in the world in our classrooms? Do we take responsibility for guiding the ways in which they come to imagine the significance of the things they are learning about?

A first need, then, is to begin to think about how a Christian focus on faith, hope and love might help

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us to see anew – to see students, subject matter, and what goes on in classrooms in fresh ways and help learners to do the same.

[Explore strategies for seeing anew](#)

Choosing engagement

A Primary class were about to encounter a Bible story, and their teacher wanted to find ways of helping them to listen more actively and ask good questions, rather than just passively listening to what the teacher told them or perhaps rest too easily on what they remembered from hearing the story before. The teacher decided to tell the story without mentioning the characters' names, instead calling them things like 'the man who prayed'. Small figures with blank faces were also used during the telling of the story, which happened while seated in a circle on the carpet. The pupils then re-enacted the story using the figures and were asked to think about what each one might be thinking or feeling. Finally, the pupils read the Bible story from a children's Bible.

This example points to the need to match the way we envisage a lesson with engagement. This teacher thought carefully, not only about what content should be taught, but also about the different ways in which pupils could be guided to engage with it, leading to different ways of experiencing the material and different kinds of learning. Suppose a teacher talked a great deal to students about the importance of faith, hope and love, but then allowed no time for students to talk about their own beliefs, or never asked students to address questions of faith in their own work. The talk of faith, hope and love would probably quite soon begin to ring hollow – or, perhaps worse still, students might adopt the talk but also learn not to connect it with their day-to-day choices. Vision and engagement would drift apart.

Engagement is about how we take part in learning. There are many possible ways of engaging – listening quietly, vigorous discussion, answering questions, writing essays or poems, responding through pictures or music, taking part in role-play or dance/drama, doing independent research, collaborating with others, helping fellow learners, praying for one another, looking for life applications, and so on. For any given lesson, we have to choose the ways of engaging that best fit our learning goals and support the new way of seeing we are inviting students to share. This means paying attention to whether the ways in which we enable learners to participate in class, and our own participation, are really conducive to spiritual and moral growth. The central issue is not the ideas and information to be learned, but how each person in the class is to relate to them and to one another.

[Explore strategies for choosing engagement](#)

Reshaping practice

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A teacher taught labelling plants as part of science. He wanted to communicate that a plant was much more than the sum of its parts. He wanted his class to have a fuller experience of flowers and not reduce plants to a list of botanical terms, missing the wonder. The teacher chose a standard labelling exercise but had fresh flowers on the desks and at the end of the session he showed a few images: a remembrance poppy, a wreath and a valentine's day rose. All have leaves, stems, etc., but they are so much more than that. A diagram of a plant was also displayed alongside a Georgia O'Keefe painting of a flower.

This third example points to the next step. We allow ourselves to see anew and think about ways in which Christian ways of seeing the world can inform how we teach. As a result, we consider the kinds of interactions and engagement with people and the world that we want to encourage by our teaching. At some point we have to decide how we translate our change in vision into concrete classroom practices. We will begin to establish fresh patterns of practice – concrete ways of using classroom resources, space, words, pictures, and so on. It is in these patterns that a great deal of implicit learning takes place. Practice includes the kinds of questions we ask and when we ask them, the kinds of activities and tests we design, the ways we organise groups, the stories we tell, the layout of the room, the images we display – all of these, and more, say a lot about what really matters in our classroom. If we say that faith, hope and love are essential but our testing only asks for lists of information rather than responses that are concerned with meaning and significance, or if our gestures do not communicate respect, then tensions will remain between the Christian way of seeing what we are doing and the concrete patterns of practice that shape our classrooms. To take seriously the task of framing education in Christian terms implies seeking patterns of practice that are rooted in core Christian values, and encouraging forms of engagement that reinforce them. (Does this make Christian teaching practices different from all others? Explore further [here](#).)

[Explore strategies for reshaping practice](#)

[Digging Deeper](#)