

Constructing Knowledge with Your Learners

by Judith Deckers

Creating learning opportunities in which learners think, question, and explore new understandings about their faith is critical. Most of your learners come to you with prior faith experiences and want to understand more clearly their relationship with God. Appreciating this will allow you to construct learning opportunities that draw on their prior knowledge and involve them actively in their search for meaning.

For example, a class of older students who are reading the story of the penitent woman are ready to be challenged beyond learning the basic facts of the story. They are advanced enough in their cognitive thinking to be able to explore the meaning of the word *forgiveness*. Invite them to work in groups to make symbolic drawings reflecting their understanding of this word. Ask them to describe their drawings to assist them in developing a religious language and build meaning.

In education today, we recognize that learning involves more than acquiring facts. We are called to value our learners as thinkers. Involving them in problem solving experiences that include discussion and even debate helps them construct knowledge.

As they think creatively about their new knowledge, they are practicing and refining it, applying it to new situations, and gradually coming to true understanding.

According to the psychologist Len Vygotsky, cognitive development is not so much a series of stages as a continuum of experiences. There are two levels to this development. The lower level, *independent performance*, is what your learner can know and do on his or her own. The higher level, *assisted performance*, represents what your learner can achieve with help.

Remember that what your learner does with assistance today may be

Judith Deckers is a retired professor of education at Bridgewater State College in Massachusetts, where she taught undergraduate and graduate courses in reading and education. She is the author of an early childhood curriculum and has presented workshops nationally on the faith development of young children. She was project editor on the original *Echoes of Faith* and currently serves as Educational Specialist for RCL. Judith holds a masters degree in education from Boston University.