

DEVELOPMENT AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING MODELS

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A growing concern among youth leaders, and mentors within various churches is the need to develop methods of teaching and learning that incite and nurture young adults' interest in issues of faith. The turn of the millennium gave rise to numerous studies and discussions regarding young adults' posture on matters of faith, and many assumptions have been made.¹ Based on some of these findings the need to find innovative ways to attract and retain the interest of young adults becomes an important challenge for youth leaders, mentors and teachers in faith communities.

Studies show that almost 60% of children leave the church after age fifteen.² One supposition is that "three out of every five kids in church youth group will eventually shrug off the institution entirely"(Gregston). Research conducted within the Adventist church indicated that among those baptized in their mid-teens, "40 to 50% will drop out by the time they are halfway through their 20s" (Dudley). The question as to why young adults in this era struggle in their commitment to matters of faith may be attributed to several factors³ and calls for ministry with intention. This intention is to holistically address the needs of young adults in a way that eases their apprehensions and their apathy to issues of faith. Such response merits the need to understand the psychosocial developmental process⁴ that inevitably influence the lifestyles and choices of youth, and to some extent their posture on faith. It also summons the need to revisit the teaching and learning process that takes place within the church.

The Place of Developmental Theory

The notion of development is embedded in God's plan of redemption, which seeks to restore His image back in humanity. Christ's model of teaching engenders development. In His interaction with people His emphasis was on issues such as life, abundance, wellness and rest (John 17:3; 10:10; 3 John 1:2; Matt. 11:28). Subsequently, Christ's quintessential method of discipleship promoted wholeness of those He endeavored to draw to Him (Matt.11: 28; John 10:10).

Today a holistic view of the developmental process encapsulates the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual entities. It is essential that one understand these entities in the context of young adults' developing needs, not just their spiritual needs. Seeing and addressing the big picture of their entire world is necessary in attending to issues of faith. This can help youth leaders and mentors plan and implement ideas and activities that are beneficial and relevant to their needs.

One aspect of development that is integral throughout a lifespan is the psychosocial transitions that contribute to survival and identity needs of the individual. As proposed by Erikson (see table below), there are eight stages of life experiences that contribute to the ultimate self-actualization. Two of these eight

stages encompass the timeframe of the adolescents' years to that of young adulthood.

| Stage | Basic Conflict | Important Events | Outcome |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|---|
| Infancy (birth to 18 months) | Trust vs. Mistrust | Feeding | Children develop a sense of trust when caregivers provide reliability, care, and affection. A lack of this will lead to mistrust. |
| Early Childhood (2 to 3 years) | Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt | Toilet Training | Children need to develop a sense of personal control over physical skills and a sense of independence. Success leads to feelings of autonomy, failure results in feelings of shame and doubt. |
| Preschool (3 to 5 years) | Initiative vs. Guilt | Exploration | Children need to begin asserting control and power over the environment. Success in this stage leads to a sense of purpose. Children who try to exert too much power experience disapproval, resulting in a sense of guilt. |
| School Age (6 to 11 years) | Industry vs. Inferiority | School | Children need to cope with new social and academic demands. Success leads to a sense of competence, while failure results in feelings of inferiority. |
| Adolescence (12 to 18 years) | Identity vs. Role Confusion | Social Relationships | Teens need to develop a sense of self and personal identity. Success leads to an ability to stay true to yourself, while failure leads to role confusion and a weak sense of self. |
| Young Adulthood (19 to 40 years) | Intimacy vs. Isolation | Relationships | Young adults need to form intimate, loving relationships with other people. Success leads to strong relationships, while failure results in loneliness and isolation. |
| Middle Adulthood (40 to 65 years) | Generativity vs. Stagnation | Work and Parenthood | Adults need to create or nurture things that will outlast them, often by having children or creating a positive change that benefits other people. Success leads to feelings of usefulness and accomplishment, while failure results in shallow involvement in the world. |
| Maturity (65 to death) | Ego Integrity vs. Despair | Reflection on Life | Older adults need to look back on life and feel a sense of fulfillment. Success at this stage leads to feelings of wisdom, while failure results in regret, bitterness, and despair. |

TABLE 1
Erikson's Stages of Development⁵

The period of *identity versus role confusion* is that time when adolescents “form a philosophy of life, and learn to establish a coherent sense of self in relation to their desired ideological, moral, and sociocultural identities”⁶ Several entities including family and cultures within society influence this stage of an individual's life. However, it is important to note that the media has an indelible influence on the philosophy of teens.⁷ This issue challenges the church as it seeks to impact the teen population in matters of faith. As the need to assert their identity drives young adults to search for and find meaning in places such as the media, the church must find innovative ways to counter any negative implants.

The next phase, that of *intimacy versus isolation*, is defined as a period of early adulthood. It is a time when individuals assert their needs for independence, and establish “healthy and mutually satisfying relationships”. Based on research findings this phase seems to be the demarcation of young adults' waning interest in faith issues. Although all the stages of the psychosocial development are equally important to individuals' lives, the stages of adolescents and early adulthood require much attention especially from those involved in influencing youth in matters of faith.

Practice Makes Sense

To influence and develop faith takes more than dogmas, behavior modification, or merely verbally defining its concepts. To do so requires practicing the tenets of faith in ways that are relevant to the time and needs of the young adults, and the society at large. Faith⁸ in this context is embedded not just in belief in doctrines, but in the God highlighted in the doctrines. Faith also means to trust in God, to explore His character, and ultimately to understand and be able to personally express what it means to be in the following relationships: Relationship with God, with others, with self, and with the environment. It is important to note that the mandates of relationship are dynamic encounters that become the situation for faith development and demonstration. It is incumbent on leaders, mentors and teachers within the church to “effectively use conceptual material in an experientially learning” environment (particularly in group settings). Doing so invites participation in a context that integrates cognitive and emotional experiences⁹ that creates meaning and leads to change.

The relational encounters that come through participation are relevant in meeting certain needs, and addressing some of the issues young adults face regarding issues of faith. Participation is also a way of engendering active life-long commitment to God, and to the church. Evidently, “groups in which teen and adults experience life and explore faith together go a long way toward enhancing the lives of today’s teen”.¹⁰ The basic assumption is that:

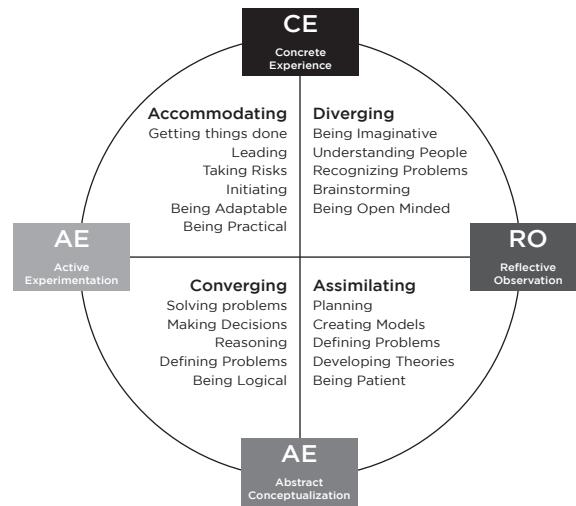
Teens who participate in religious youth groups are much more likely to enjoy their religion, value religious group involvement, believe in God, believe that God cares about them, experience God’s presence, and display high level of honesty, politeness, and compassion than either regular church attenders who do not belong to religious youth groups or non-religious attenders.¹¹

Because participation is essential in the process of faith development, it is necessary to find methods that yield to an environment where faith is not taught or coerced through persuasive methods. But through experience, reflection, and reason and the work of the Holy Spirit faith is illumined in the hearts of each individual. Such an environment can be created through the adaptation of an experiential learning model.

The Value of Experiential Learning

Education specialist Kolb (1984) discusses the process of experiential learning as a sequence involving four cyclical elements that engage individuals’ cognitive, interpretative and active response in the course of learning and development.: *1. Concrete experience; 2. Reflective observation; 3. Abstract conceptualization; and 4. Active experimentation.* (See table below) At the stage of *concrete experience* the individual instinctively engages in accomplishing a given task. The engagement is instinctive assuming that the initial encounter happens inevitably without much thought or reflection about the experience.

TABLE 2
Kolb Learning Style Model



The notion surrounding *reflective observation* is that it involves the act of mentally pausing and recounting the experience. Here the individual is able to outline a mental map or form a theory based on her or his perception of the experience. At the stage of *abstract conceptualization* the experience extends beyond recalling facts as the individual moves to the point of reason and analysis. It is assumed that at this point one is able to make associations, and the experience is seen in connection to a meaningful aspect of life. At this point the experience is not viewed as merely an isolated occurrence. Instead it is seen in relation to some personal phenomena that are likely connected with different phases of one's development.

The fourth stage active experimentation is significant in that it engenders active response that contributes to change. Change is vital in the outcome of learning and assessing where one is, and where one ought to be. This phase is important in that the response at this point creates a new experience that calls for further reflecting, conceptualizing and ultimately more active response, hence the cyclical nature of the model. In summary the experiential learning procedure can be simply described as the way in which individuals perceive (sense, and think about) and process (reflect/observe, and act in response to) life's encounters, prompting them to find meaning and make changes.

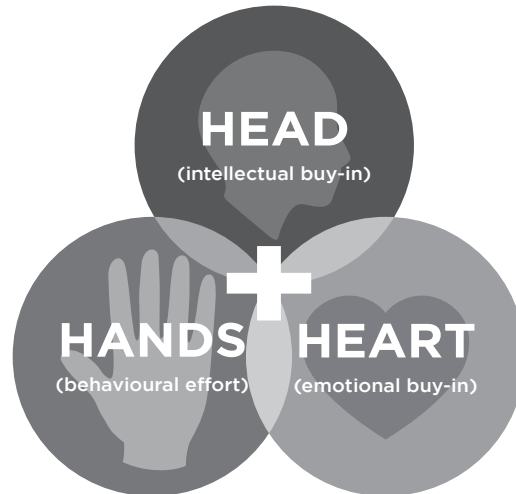
In collaboration with the method of experiential learning, Osmer¹² proposes a simplified understanding by interjecting four inevitable questions:

- What is going on
- Why is this going on
- What ought to be going on
- How might one respond?

In every ministry encounter these are questions leaders, mentors and teachers need to help young adults answer for themselves. Each leader, mentor or teacher is called to facilitate climates that challenge individuals' critical thinking skills. It is within these contexts that learning and change (transformation) happens.

Interestingly, the tenets of the experiential learning model tie in with the Sabbath School's discipleship goal¹³ : that of influencing the head, heart and hand (see diagram below). The Sabbath school, as the major system of non-formal religious education within the church is designed to be the lab in which individuals through trial, error, and conquest develop faith. Encounters and evidence of faith come through meaningful relationships with self, God and others. Such relationships happen through the study of God's Word, fellowship with others in, and outside the community of faith, and ultimately feed one's desire to serve the world in the cause of Christ.

TABLE 3
Head, Heart, Hand



Conclusion

This article has proposed that Sabbath School classes have to move beyond a knowledge-base learning model, to a participatory and experiential one. According to Erickson's stages of development, both for adolescents and young adults, healthy relationships are key as these age groups seek their self-identity realization. This implies that Sabbath School leaders should make an extra effort to focus intentionally in facilitating meaningful relationships, both inside and outside of the Sabbath School meetings, if they want to be relevant.

Similarly, Kolb's model can be used as a catalyst to purposely design a Sabbath School format that facilitates experiential and participatory learning, where every aspect of life is involved: head (intellect), heart (emotions), and hands (behavior). The challenge now to everyone who influences the life and ministry of the youth is to find effective and creative ways of redesigning ministry events and activities to reflect the experiential learning model.

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Endnotes

- 1 George Barna research proposes varied reasons other than faith-related experience, as to why teens attend church. One key factor is that they are there because their friends are there. Barna concludes that "in order to keep them coming, the church is challenged to give them something that they are not getting elsewhere" *Real Teen: A Contemporary Snapshot of Youth Culture* (2001)
- 2 Barna Report (see Mark Gregston article on "Why Teens are leaving the Church")
- 3 (Dudley) 2000, *Why Our Teens Leave the Church: Personal Stories from a 10-Year Study*, (Gregston) 2012, "Why Teens are leaving the Church", and (Paulsen) (2013) *Let's Talk: Conversations with Young Adventists about Their Church*, discuss several reasons young adults are frustrated with faith

issues. In summary the church seems irrelevant, uncaring and oblivious to their needs. The church seems to practice double talks/double standards/

4 Erikson proposes eight stages of human psychosocial development, from infancy to late adulthood (*trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame/doubt, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, identity vs. role confusion, intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. stagnation, integrity vs. despair*). Each stage describes individuals' adaptation to life and their environment, and how they gain understanding of self as a unique being "Childhood and Society" (1963) pp. 247-274. The 'identity vs. role confusion' and 'intimacy vs. isolation' phases are integral in adolescents/young adults development and merits the attention of teachers, mentors and youth leaders, as they create and implement ministry ideas.

5 Taken from, <http://www.counsellingconnection.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/erikson1.jpg> (Accessed January 19, 2018)

6 Erikson, 18.

7 Barna, 198.

8 (Osmer *Teaching for Faith: A Guide for Teachers of Adult Classes*) (1992) proposes that there are many sides of faith. "Each side represents an important aspect of a relationship of trust in God". "At any given time, one dimension of our relationship of trust in God can be described, but other aspects of this relationship need to be kept in mind". p.17, 16

9 The concept of faith requires an environment where through practical relational encounters it is transformed into experience. (Steele and Burke) (1970) explores the problem of "how most effectively to use conceptual material in experientially-oriented learning programs", proposing that conceptualizing about experience can make a difference in the way a person learn; that the integration of ideas, concepts and emotions is essential in experiential learning. "Integrating Theory with Experiential Learning in a Training of Trainers Seminar" Religious Education Vol.65.1 pp.30-35.

10 Overholt and Penner, 8.

11 Ibid.

12 (Osmer *Practical Theology: An Introduction*) 2008 proposes a practical theological model that is parallel to the four elements of experiential learning: descriptive empirical, interpretive, normative and pragmatic. In these elements simply calls attention to four basic questions (based on the "what" "why" and "how" concept) that aids the learning experience.

13 GC Sabbath School, 3.