

# AN ACTIVE LEARNING STRATEGY MODEL IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION USING RELIGIOUS DRAMA

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## **Introduction**

To permeate learning upon the learners, teaching methodologies and strategies are essential in imparting knowledge to them and likewise develop their skills. Teaching and learning methods and strategies in education are immense. They are presented in many forms and are introduced in varied ways. A teacher can utilize one learning method/strategy or a mixture of them depending upon the learning targets or objectives of a particular lesson.

In Religious Education (RE), though God and everything related to Him is the fundamental content of the said course, the same principles in education are being applied, but differ in depth and value for Christian religious education is grounded in the living Word of God. Religious Education does consider appropriate educational philosophies and principles, methods and strategies “as long as these are useful and not harmful to the unity of the faith or contrary to the Gospel” (NCDP, 2007, p. 146).

Religious education develops or adopts approaches or strategies in order for the students to understand well the doctrine and interiorize these in their lives. Arts, drama, games, simulations, introspection, action-learning, mini-surveys and the like are among the various strategies available used in teaching religious education.

Today, with the availability of mass media, the richness of arts is compromised. Students nowadays prefer to be spectators rather than actors. The students are more satisfied to be in one place watching a movie or a show rather than be watched on stage performing. Ardal (2003) said that “most young people today watch television passively and play video games competitively. They have no more passion to [for] theatre and drama plays.”

While this is true of students’ interest and their preferred classroom experience today, the comparable importance and effectiveness of other learning tools and strategies like theatre or drama play are still relevant. The use of theatre and drama play in education particularly in religious education had been established by many religious dramatists and educators as a very useful tool in understanding religious concepts and promoting active learning among learners.

Therefore, the main concern of this paper is to warrant the above

hypothesis that (religious) drama play is really an effective learning tool for educating the students (Farmer, 2011; Fontichiaro, 2007; Frawley-Mangan, 2006; Ashton-Hay, 2005; Rue, 2005; Gallagher & Booth, 2003; Fleming, 1997; Ehrensperger, 1962) particularly, the students of Religious Education. Bert (2002) and Rue's (2005) exhortations incited the researcher to explore also the significance of theatre and education. The former called theatre theorists to seek models for dramatic theory in religion and should yield productive models for understanding the nature of dramatic art. The latter also incites curriculum designer in religious education to consider the needs of the students.

In Aquinas University of Legazpi, the Center for Religious Education Department considered and utilized drama as a learning process and activity in order to understand better the theological and religious concepts being taught and discussed, just like Jesus who used various methodologies like parable, story, metaphors, typologies, and analogies to explain the truth-mysteries well and be better understood by his listeners (Stauffer, 2004; Wostyn, 2004; Wezeman, 2001). This learning strategy (drama-play) was further transformed, established as a permanent activity and integrated in religious education curriculum known as the 'Sinagoga.' Sinagoga literally derived from the Greek word "sunagoge," means, "a gathering or an assembly." Aside from the temple worship, the Jews gather together in the synagogue (an alternative place) to learn the scripture. What is more interesting here is the other functions of the synagogue. Not only that it is a house of prayer and study but also serves as a town hall and social welfare agency, where money and other items are collected and dispensed to the aid the poor and needy within the community. In other words, the 'synagogue' is a school, where basic (religious) education is received. It is a church where prayer and bible studies are performed/ritualized. It is a charitable institution that attends to the needs of the "anawim"—the poor and needy. The richness of its meaning made the two departments, namely, the Center for Religious Education (CREED) and National Service Training Program (NSTP) to decide that the word "sinagoga" be used to mean the culminating activity of the RE and NSTP students after a year of religious education and community immersion. This activity became the venue for the RE students to translate the theologies and doctrines discussed in the classroom into artistic performances (as shown in the focus group discussion and students' reflections). The yearly themes and presentations are in the context of faith, morals, and worship. The entire preparation and conduct of the Sinagoga activity look forward on these three objectives: the integration of faith and culture (cultural transformation); valuing God's work in the light of Bicolano religious beliefs and practices; and students' appreciation and cultivation of God-given talents and skills to them.

## Objectives

To establish the assertion that religious drama as an active learning strategy is an effective tool in the understanding of religious concepts/items in Religious Education, the following objectives of this study were addressed: (1) To show 'Sinagoga' (Religious Drama) as a religious activity and a religious experience; (2) To justify or warrant active learning as an ideal and real mode of learning for religious education; and (3) To provide/construct a model on active learning in Religious Education using Religious Drama.

## Methodology

Since this research took experience as the primary data particularly in the first objective, phenomenology therefore was considered as the suitable method. Husserl's phenomenological approach (Dy, 1986) in particular was utilized in order to define the very essence of the 'Sinagoga' and to show that religious drama through this activity activates religious experiences among the student-performers and student-spectators. These experiences were analyzed and interpreted further to come up with an initial framework or model. Students who were involved in the drama play for the past three years were selected according to the nature of their involvement or the kind of role assumed during the pre and post production event. These individuals, purposively selected, were the participants in a series of focus group discussion. Students' reflection paper, evaluation responses, photo and video documentations, scripts, and post-production assessments are also considered as sources of data.

The second phase, which corresponds to the second objective of this study, focused on active learning and constructivism as an ideal and real mode of learning in religious education. But to establish this, the various notions and theories of active learning and constructivism were reviewed, expounded and synthesized. The same way with religious education, its development in the teaching-learning theory and method were also reviewed, expounded and synthesized. After the connection between active learning and constructivism was established, a framework or model was constructed. Since the course of work in the second phase was merely expounding, reviewing, and synthesizing the various related literature and studies, the method used was foundational research with meta-analysis as the approach for the interpretation.

Lastly, after the experiences of the students on religious drama were interpreted as religious experience (objective number one) and the theories of active learning and constructivism in relation to religious education were explored and established (objective number 2), an active learning strategy model in Religious Education using religious drama was developed

(objective number three), thus, making use of the grounded theory as the method; in coming up with a model, the constructivist approach was used.

## **Findings and Analysis**

### *The 'Sinagoga' as a Religious Experience*

The 3E's of Religious Experience. After a thorough analysis of the data gathered from the various sources such as recorded video, students' reflection, performers' evaluation and focus group discussion regarding students' experiences in the 'Sinagoga,' a descriptive presentation of the findings and implications were provided. In a macro level, four clusters were constructed to classify students' responses and experiences such as the students' notion of 'Sinagoga,' the identification of the elements necessary for (religious) drama-play, the values discovery and development, and religious experience. Since religious experience serves as the descriptor of 'Sinagoga' activity, the four clusters are further constricted into three main categories (micro-level) that will define or show 'Sinagoga' as religious experience namely: 'Encounter,' 'Experience,' and 'Exchange.' These terms are developed by the researcher himself after an exegesis of St. Luke's Gospel narrative, a post-resurrection story centered on the two disciples who experienced and encountered Jesus on their way to Emmaus. And after they experienced Jesus, a heart-burning sensation was felt by them and eager to replace their present feeling of desperation with hope. In other words, that experience made them to decide a change in their life orientation—a self-transformation. The researcher preferred this particular Gospel story as a perfect analogy to describe religious experience and its process. Aside from the Gospel reference of the terms, they are also adopted from the experiences of the students in the 'Sinagoga.'

To further explain the paradigm, the triangular shape was used to represent the process and aspect of religious experience. The purpose of the triangular shape became intelligible and operational when the theory (objective number two) and practice (objective number one) were interlinked. The triangle shape if used in theology as a concept, i.e., Trinity, would mean individuality, persona or characterization; but the other side would also mean relationship or commonality. The three equal sides forming one complete whole could mean an economy, a system, a scheme, and a process. Thus, the three E's are separate concepts but delineate a process of a single concept pertaining to 'Sinagoga' activity (Religious Drama) as a religious experience.

The first in the process of religious experience is 'Encounter.' There must be a meeting and upon meeting, a sense of wonder and awe takes place especially if the things being encountered are unusual or peculiar. In

this process, initial learning is likely to happen.

In relation to 'Sinagoga' experience, students when introduced to this activity, the same feeling of awe and wonder were found. Some were willing, others were inspired to join and explore the activity and still others were passive, indifferent, and timid. But of course, interested or not, they tried to build a concept for the activity and sought to establish a connection with the subject matter maybe because of the significant challenge or equal benefit of the said activity to them.

'Sinagoga' provided not only an encounter of the activity itself but an encounter of the self and of others too. Many of those who experienced 'Sinagoga' as a religious drama activity said that it was an eye-opener, an opportunity for them to discover themselves and their talents. It was also an avenue for them to build trust and confidence. And in relation to others, it gave them an opportunity to make dialogue, collaborate, and build camaraderie, unity and friendship particularly during group dynamics, conceptualization phase, preparations, and practices. But what seems so impressive was the long-term friendship developed among the student-performers. Lastly, 'Sinagoga' is a good opportunity for religious knowing, deepening of faith and exploration of spirituality. Most of them would understand religious concepts such as the divine meaning of love and forgiveness, reconciliation, blessings, gifts and graces, faith, moral demands and the forms of worship.

Next in the process of religious experience is the 'Experience' itself. After the encounter, students have to immerse with the situation or with the context so that along the way in the process of discoveries and explorations, they may find the values necessary in forming themselves. It is on this process that the formal and practical learning takes place. As mentioned in the previous chapter, experience here may mean two things, either the experience of the students gained from the activity or the real experience set on the play. As regards students' experiences from the drama-play, the recognition of the sacred became more obvious. Values were also clarified. Students' learn how to negotiate with others, permeate viable solutions to conflicts, and allow the spirit to move in. They have also developed a sound and well-defined concept of life, truth, justice, joy, beauty, and freedom and further translate this into a drama form or experience. The latter, in the language of active learning is called transfer learning. Social relation was also apparent because students became sensitive to the needs of others. But what is more important in this stage is that the learners are left with the desire for self-transformation.

The last stage in religious experience is disclosed under the pretext and concept of 'Exchange'. It is also in this stage that the real and ideal learning must be developed. Norman Bert's (2003) notion of drama serves as a perfect background for this concept. He states, 'the quality of the best

theatre play is not on the script but on the religious purpose. The best theatre is a tool for introspection, for relating the audience member to a community, for clarifying for audiences their relationship to God, the world, the way things are. And the best critic doesn't just ask if the script was well constructed, the directorial concept inventive, the acting believable, or the design coordinated but rather did the play serve its proper religious purpose of relating human beings to themselves, their community, their culture, and the forces beyond their control' (p. 9).

Therefore, the term 'Exchange' would not merely mean a give-to-receive-from pattern or situation but instead it should be understood in the framework of change and relation. Moral goodness, self-transformation, or re-created human being is not only the purpose and aim of religious drama but it is also a characteristic and proximate effect of religious experience. The experiences of the students in the 'Sinagoga' would strengthen this notion. However, in the sharing, no student explicitly expressed his or her intention for immediate self-transformation or promised to live a moral life after the show but instead students remained in the plane of introspection, awareness, prompting, realization of values, of good and evil and the desire to live with the good. This is exactly the very essence of religious drama and religious experience.

#### *Active Learning: Learning Mode in Religious Education*

The IFT Model of Active Learning in Religious Education. Active learning as oppose to passive learning characterize learners' engagement in an activity, analyzing and creating solutions to problems in a more dynamic, experiential and fun-filled fashion. A learner engaged in active learning developed him into a successful learner, confident individual, responsible citizen, and effective contributor. The umbrella philosophy of active learning is constructivism. It is a theory at the same time a learning approach. Constructivism is developed from the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky. Synthetically, constructivism is a meaning making theory or a learning theory wherein individuals create their own new understandings on the basis of an interaction between what they already know and believe and ideas and knowledge with which they came into contact.

After getting immersed with the theory together with its educational aim and benefits, it is also the objective of this paper to look into the possibility or applicability of the theory to religious education. The Congregation for Catholic Education instructed the Catholic Education Institutions to upgrade religious instructions and explore pedagogies "as long as these are useful and not harmful to the unity of the faith or contrary to the Gospel." "It is necessary, therefore, that religious instruction in schools appear as a scholastic discipline with the same systematic demands

and the same rigour as other disciplines. It must present the Christian message and the Christian event with the same seriousness and the same depth with which other disciplines present their knowledge.' With this call indeed, there was a great effort among the Fathers of the church, evangelizers, and religious educators to improve religious instructions in the course of history; exploring pedagogies, strategies, and techniques with the aim of moulding individual to a life of faith, morals and worship were the main occupation of religious educators. Burgess (2001) classified this pedagogical development into Historic, Liberal, Mainline, Kerygmatic, and Social Science models.

The possible link between the theory of constructivism and the models of religious education can be scrutinized in these aspects: theory, method, and practice. Apparently, Michael Grimmitt (2000), an educator in Great Britain, applied constructivist approach in teaching an item in religious education. He developed three-stage pedagogy to help students explore new ideas and concepts by inquiring and reflecting on their experiences. And when confronted with the item in religious education, knowing some objective knowledge, they were still encouraged to continue to be constructivist in their response to such new information. They were encouraged to engage in an interpretative process in which new knowledge was considered critically and may or may not be accommodated within their own understanding.

Nevertheless, after drawing the core and essential features of constructivism and the models of Religious Education, a three-level process or aspect commonly used in education was espoused to establish the connection namely: 'Informative,' 'Formative,' and 'Transformative,' or IFT Model. This was conceived in order to visualize the process.

'Informative' pertains to the transmission and acquisition of knowledge and skills. It is considered as the preparatory or the pre-conventional stage in the process of learning. It is because on this level that the content is implicitly impose to the learners as something to be known and acquired but open for any critical analysis and interpretation. The instructional aspect of religious education is also important because it deals about doctrine. Lee (as cited in Rott, 2005) argued that the primary proximate aim of religious instruction is the intellectual development of the learner in the matters pertaining to religion. The Apologetic and catechetical approach in religious instruction suggests this process. The 'learning about' of Grimmitt can be a governing principle for this aspect where pupils assimilate and accommodate the content as understood within its faith context. Though it sounds traditional, as long as the learners are engaged in an activity, they can explore new ideas, construct new knowledge either on their own or with others; it suggests active learning.

The term 'Formative' connotes norms, standards or values as measures

of learning. The first aspect focused on the knowledge while this aspect is on values. In the moral stages of Kohlberg, this aspect would be similar to his conventional stage. After getting informed, the learner grasps the values as something worthwhile, something they can hold dear, something that speak about their life or something that adds meaning to their life. Value selection or clarification is a harmonious and integrated operation of the cognitive, affective and behavioural faculties of the person that produces genuine human learning and growth (Bauzon, 2005, p. 101). Furthermore, the person perceives what is right and desirable, actually desires and cherishes what is perceived, and then decides to act accordingly and repeatedly. This process takes place within the context of the various institutions in the society. As one grows in self-awareness, he also becomes aware of his social responsibility.

The last aspect is 'Transformative.' In the series, this is the highest. In education, this is topmost goal to be achieved. In religious education, this is the ultimate aim. The learner after getting immersed with the content of faith (informative) confronts this faith and selects the values as standards (formative) for moral living (transformative). It is on this level that the students with the help of teachers are challenged about Jesus, of the faith, and of vocation and commitment. According to John Dirkx (1998), seeking transformative learning is attending the process of change. "It is a way of being rather than a process of becoming" (p. 11). According to Sario (2012), "Self actualization is a difficult task. It invites to construct new ways of thinking, demands deeper sense of experience, and values creative dynamics of living life. But at the end, it is never a task; it is a way of life" (Sario, 2012).

Transformative learning therefore is directed towards the total development of the person. In this aspect, the students are expected to be principled human beings already, totally developed human persons, who internalized the values and channelized the virtues. In other words, a student should be intellectually sound, morally upright, and emotionally mature. These values are actually the present thrusts of Aquinas University of Legazpi. In the article "Assured Quality Education through Transformation," Bernaldez (2005) pointed out that "Constructivism emphasizes the individual in his cultural context. The result of contextual education is creativity, insight and imagination. The 'product' of this process is an integral person who is capable of doing with his hands, what his heart wills, through imagining with his head" (p. 21). The head, hands, and heart dimensions are analogous to the informative, formative, transformative process of education or the Creed, Code and Cult dimension of religious education.

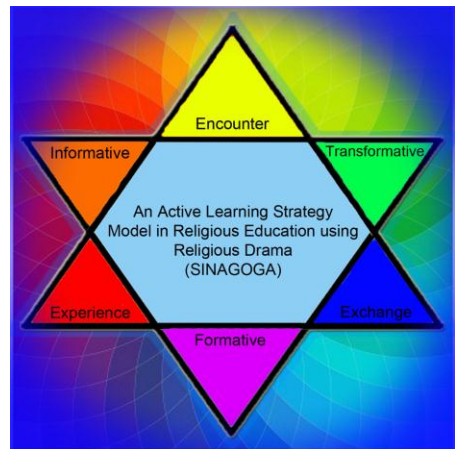
*The 3E's and IFT Models Converge*



The end product of this study is to come up with a strategy model in religious education. The possibility of having this is to come up with a synthesis of the theoretical and practical foundations of active learning particularly constructivism. In coming up with a model, the objective number one, which is the practical presentation of active learning in the form of religious drama through “Sinagoga” is combined with objective number two, which is the theoretical presentation of active learning.

The combination of the two models namely the ‘Sinagoga’ as religious experience and Active Learning as the ideal and real mode of learning in religious education came up with a very vivid symbol—the Star of David or the “Magen David” which means the “shield of David.” This symbol doesn’t have any religious significance in Judaism but it is one of the symbols most commonly associated with the Jewish people. This symbol is also the dominant symbol for the ancient synagogue. Among the other symbols associated with the synagogue, the Star of David was preferred because it symbolizes balance and knowledge, which are very significant in this study.

The merging of the two equilateral triangles is very symbolic. For some, it would mean the perfect union between heaven and earth, between the divine and the human, thus, incarnational. Incarnational is another term used in doing Theology or contextual theology. The term “Incarnation” in Theology means a perfect union of the divine and human natures in Jesus—the Word made flesh. It is on this pattern that a certain approach in theologizing was conceived. The Word of God to be understood should be situated or contextualized in the experiences of the people, the grassroots. Incarnation would also mean perfecting the human nature in Jesus. The Saint John Paul II quoted *Gaudium et Spes*: “It is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear.” The Church instructs Catholic schools that every stakeholder must have a clear understanding of who the human person is. Church’s documents repeatedly remind the Catholic Education Institutions the need for an educational philosophy built on the solid foundation of sound Christian anthropology.



With this, it is very clear that Catholic schools have a straightforward

goal: to foster the growth of good Catholic human beings who love God and neighbor and thus fulfil their destiny of becoming saints (Miller, 2005).

However, aside from the symbolic signification of the two triangles superimposed over each other, it should be noted that it is also a process—an active learning process in religious education. Focusing on the model, when religious drama is used as an active learning strategy, there are six individual yet relational concepts to be taken into consideration. Three of which namely “Encounter,” “Experience,” and “Exchange” are the real, actual or concrete processes. The other three namely “Informative,” “Formative,” and “Transformative” are the conceptual, ideal or theoretical processes. Each process is interwoven. It should be read counter clockwise, beginning from the tip most of the star with the word ‘Encounter’ until it goes back again to where the process started in order to complete the cycle. Though the ‘Transformative’ level is the apex of learning, it should not be forgotten that learning is a continuous process. Trammel Bristol (n.d.) found out and concluded that learning is cyclical after he examined the learning experiences of African-American adults in Sunday school class using the constructivist learning theory.

The interdependence between concepts was already explained earlier. However, putting religious drama in the limelight as a learning strategy will make these concepts operational. When religious drama is used as a strategy and then introduced to the students, the ‘Encounter’ is the initial phase of the entire experience. To ‘Encounter’ may not entail familiarity on the first glance but it could also mean strangeness or curiosity. Curiosity is the first step towards learning. Curiosity is also a step in religious experience. John Hick (1990) defined religious experience as a sense of awe and of wonder. There must be a sense of openness and eagerness among the students in order to let this activity be an avenue, an opportunity for them to discover new things and new learning together with others. And so, this level gives students the opportunity to encounter one’s belief and of other’s too in a form of dialogue. Nonetheless, these discoveries should be backed up with necessary information facilitated by the teacher (scaffolding). Here, the concept of Michael Grimmitt’s Preparatory Pedagogical Constructivism is contributory. In this stage according to him, pupils are engaged in an enquiry into and reflection upon their own experience in order to prepare them conceptually and linguistically for an encounter with the item of religious content. The teacher contributes to the pupils’ enquiries and reflections through questions and interventions which may include practical, group focused activities.

All the necessary information must be provided including the mechanics, the theme, the concept and the religious items. When confronted with religious items, students are getting aware of the sacred. Along the conceptualization phase, students are also provided with

necessary knowledge and skills. The script writing, the activity programming, the concept making are cognitive features and products. Most of the contributions here are experience-based or application of the prior knowledge or learning.

After getting informed, students have to engage with the activity and immerse themselves to the activity. They have to experience every bit of it. While in the state of experience, students start to realize something valuable. They start to compare, build norms, draw viable things, make shift, getting rid of biases, and replace pessimism with optimistic attitude. Mentioning about values, students in this level have to consider values that are worthwhile, something they can hold dear, something that speak about their life or something that adds meaning to their life. The drama itself is instrumental for the students to realize values. The values of camaraderie, friendship, unity, etc. that were built among the student-performers are clear manifestations of value-learning. That is why drama is considered to be social, not only because it depicts social realities, but it is also an activity of individual person grouped together. Students also experience pleasure or enjoyment or considered religious drama-play as a fun-filled activity despite the tough situations. The intermittent laughter of the participants during the Focus Group Discussion indicates a meaning concomitant to this. Therefore, this particular experience affirms one of the benefits of active learning and that is the learner learns at the same time enjoys when actively involved in a certain task. For Piaget, it is through one's experience that the learner learns. Thus, these experiences can be considered or deduced as 'Formative.'

It was previously established that experience is a source of learning. Once experience is understood, there should be learning and this should be further associated and identified with oneself. Education has always the purpose and aim of being an integrated human person. Formation is not the end; it is just a means towards self-transformation. Therefore, there should be a commitment. The 'Formative' to 'Transformative' stage or level is bridged by an experiential concept 'Exchange.' Earlier, the operational meaning of this was already discussed. Exchange is not merely a give-receive pattern. It is more on conversion, of change, of replacement, of shift, and eventually of transformation. Just as the old is replaced with a new one, self-transformation and change in life's orientation is the very aim and purpose of any of the following: education, including religious education; learning, including active learning; and drama, including religious drama. This is exactly the very meaning of the symbolic compounding of the two triangles. Self-transformation is an interaction and integration of the Head, Heart, and Hand; of Doctrine, Moral, and Worship; the mediation of intellect and moral, of the cognitive and affective; the integration of 'learning about' and 'learning from' theory of Grimmitt.

Doing religious drama motivates students for self-transformation as most of the drama educators theorized. Self-transformation should be a two-way movement: inward and outward. The outward movement refers to the lessons left by the drama performance or by the dramatists to the audience or the realization of the spectators for self-transformation after watching a religious drama-play presentation. The inward movement on the other hand refers to the lessons learned or the realization for self-transformation by the performers themselves. But among the aspects or dimensions, it is the self-transformation which is hard to assess, to follow or to determine the qualitative change happened to an individual learner. Self-transformation is not an overnight matter or a magical event. It is a process. It takes time for a full metamorphosis. In the Focus Group Discussion, no student would say or attest that he or she was a completely changed being after joining or watching a drama-play. Instead, students would realize, becoming cognizant and desirous of moral goodness and holistic transformation of the self and of the society as well. However, students may indicate or reactivate dormant behaviours during the course of preparation, group processes, actual performance, and after watching the drama-play. In this regard, the teacher plays an important role in assessing the students' performance. The teacher must first of all be a participant-observer. He must be a keen observer during instruction-giving and group processes. If possible, he has to document or write anecdotal reports of the day-to-day proceedings. He has to monitor the progress of the students' behavior and learning, their attitude and response to the activity, and the progress of the activity itself. The teacher must keep in touch with the students to check their values.

The terms used in this model indicating a process of learning are the same words and processes that can be found in active learning such as exploration, development, collaboration, activation, motivation, engagement, and transformation. Students when engage in active learning are given the opportunity to explore, discuss and deal with difficult issues resolved through critical thinking and problem solving skills. Students working in groups learn about leadership, negotiation, cooperation and respect. Students when situated in a religious drama activity learn how to deal socially, refine their emotions, argue on values, discern spiritual matters, and develop meta-learning skills.

## **Conclusion**

The newly developed model established that active learning is an effective tool, approach or method for/in religious education. It also establishes that religious drama as an active learning strategy would help students

understand religious concepts, have the desire for moral goodness or life transformation after going through such experience. This particular learning is delineated in the model itself, the actual process of Encounter, Experience and Exchange (3E's) and the conceptual process of Informative, Formative, and Transformative (IFT).

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