

## HONORS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROJECT PROPOSAL FORM

### Basic Information

Full Name: Alexander M. Muir  
 UC Email: muiram@mail.uc.edu  
 College: College of Engineering and Applied Science  
 Major: Chemical Engineering  
 Title of Project: Parish School of Religion Catechist  
 Thematic Area (choose only one): Leadership  
 Expected Project Start Date: August 2014  
 Expected Project End Date: April 2015

### Project Information

#### 1. Abstract

Throughout my junior and senior years of high school, I maintained an active role in the Parish School of Religion (PSR) program at Saint Ambrose Parish in Brunswick, Ohio. My role in the PSR Program afforded me the opportunity to learn about the catechesis of the Catholic Church. In order to teach PSR, I had to be certified by the diocese, and as a result I took two courses, one entitled Faith Formations, and another called Catechetical Methods. Faith Formations focused on diving deeper into individual faith. The course emphasized that, in order to effectively teach faith, one must come to better terms with their own beliefs and principles. Catechetical Methods, as the name suggests, focused on methods of teaching about the Catholic Faith. One portion of the class highlighted the different levels of faith that different age groups are at, and another portion gave me tools to help better present lessons. All this said, I have spent a considerable amount of time developing my faith and methods of sharing this faith with the youth in the community. In this project, I will once again put these skills to use, and sharpen and refine them in any way possible.

A Parish School of Religion gives children who do not attend Catholic school the opportunity to learn more about the Catholic faith. It involves no homework, instead relying solely classroom instruction and reflection. Due to this fact, catechists are of vital importance to the PSR program. A catechist is similar to a teacher, with only one important difference. A teacher presents information to the students, whereas a catechist walks *with* students on a voyage of discovery. The goal of catechism is not to simply present information and test over it. While knowing prayers and other religious facts is important, this material is substandard to students understanding their personal relationship with God. A catechist helps students develop their faith while at the same time enriching their own faith.

Walking on this type of journey takes a considerable amount of preparation. Each week, in general, involves about three hours of planning and then a 1.5 to two hour lesson. This time fluctuates, and is largely dependent on the material for each week. With regards to planning a lesson, the largest challenge is transforming the words of the Gospel into a language that children can understand. Throughout this project, my lessons will be tailored to a specific age group while still reflecting the general message of the Gospel each week. In 12<sup>th</sup> grade, I taught a class of fourth graders. From Catechetical Methods, I learned that fourth graders are on the cusp of beginning to understand their own faith and form their own opinions. While planning lessons, I simplified the Gospel, but focused more upon group thinking in order to allow the class time to develop their own opinions before I gave my interpretation. Also, this age group cannot sit in one place for long and listen to somebody speak, so I had to make my lessons interactive and hands on.

In this experiential learning project, the same rules will apply. When planning lessons each week, I will take into account the age group and learning styles of the class. I will also add a creative twist to my lessons in order to engage the class. In all, each week I must read the Gospel readings well in advance, reflect throughout the week, and then prepare a lesson based upon my conclusions.

In addition to the time required to plan and teach each lesson, there will also be training workshops and other catechist events that I will attend. These events will help me to further develop my teaching skills, obtain new methods of presentation, connect with the PSR community, and develop my own faith. The time commitment expected for this part of the project is around 10-20 hours. The bulk of the time commitment comes from planning and teaching lessons each Sunday. The time commitment from reflecting upon the bible readings for each week will not be listed under the formal time commitments of this project, but is nevertheless one of the most important parts of the position.

As a result of reflection and classroom teaching, there are a few goals that the experience will be centered on. First, my goal is to further deepen and explore my faith. This will be accomplished through my weekly reflections and through catechist workshops and retreats. A second goal is to improve my teaching skills. This will enrich my life, and the lives of children in the class. Finally, my goal is to learn more about the Catholic faith. By bringing interesting and educational material into my weekly lessons, I will expand my knowledge and the knowledge of the students.

## 2. Connection to Learning Outcomes

### 1. *Identifies the various characteristics of a leader in a given situation/role*

This project will result in a substantial amount of experience that comes from teaching about the Catholic faith in a classroom setting. There are times when the students may need clarification or direct guidance, and during those times it will be my job to inform them of my interpretation of that week's Gospel. This will give them a jump start to understanding the week's lesson in their own personal, unique way. There will also be times when it will be best to step back and let the class conduct itself. Given that I have taught a PSR class before, I know that this is one of the most powerful methods of instruction. Not only do the students accomplish the primary goal of PSR, which is to develop their own faith, but they are also able to give me a different viewpoint that enriches my faith as well. Finally, there will be times when the class needs guidance, but not direct guidance as expressed previously. When this time is recognized, asking the right questions is pivotal. This experience will allow me to sharpen my skills in recognizing all three of these unique moments, which will allow me to refine and sharpen my leadership characteristics for a variety of different situations.

### 2. *Has the ability to relate, communicate and work effectively with peers*

This learning outcome will be addressed by attending regular meetings and training update sessions that will be offered through the parish. It is vital to not only remain up to date on the Diocese standards and teachings, but also remain connected to other catechists in order to ensure that all catechists are working towards the same goals. It is also likely that certain grade level events or program wide events will take place, and I will work with other catechists to assist in the planning and implementation of such events. Examples of such events are Christmas plays and retreat days. In order to plan these activities smoothly, it will be necessary to work with other teachers in the program, understand what their ideas are and how they will contribute to the overall event, and to compound these ideas in order to create a single plan. By doing this, I will be developing the ability to work with peers by relating and communicating with them on a regular basis.

## 3. Goals & Academic Theories

- A. This project contributes to my personal goals in two ways. First, due to the fact that I will be teaching about the Catholic faith, it will allow me to dig more deeply into my faith and further define my beliefs. Second, one of my passions is sharing information with others and, in general, helping people to understand things. While I would not like a career in education, tutoring others and helping them to understand why something is the way it is one of my core values, and this project will satisfy this personal need.
- B. As aforementioned, asking the correct questions at the correct times is one of the most effective methods for allowing children to discover their faith. Faith First is one of the principal organizations in the catechetical process, and their catechist handbook contains a number of invaluable resources that allow for one to improve catechetical methods. One of their documents, entitled *Strategies for Asking Questions*<sup>1</sup>, outlines general methods for effectively asking questions and will be useful throughout the project. For example, it suggests giving students time to reflect on the question instead of demanding an answer immediately, and it discusses asking open ended questions, as opposed to loaded and one word answer questions. Another resource from Faith First, named *Eight Kinds of Smart*<sup>2</sup>, discusses the different learning styles of children, such as those who are good with words, those who are better with images, and others who learn best through numbers. Consulting this worksheet during the project to evaluate the class throughout the project will help me to shape each lesson in the best way for the class.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.faithfirst.com/html/catechist/cat\\_resources/pdf/StrategiesforAskingQuestions.pdf](http://www.faithfirst.com/html/catechist/cat_resources/pdf/StrategiesforAskingQuestions.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.faithfirst.com/html/catechist/cat\\_resources/pdf/EightKindsofSmart.pdf](http://www.faithfirst.com/html/catechist/cat_resources/pdf/EightKindsofSmart.pdf)

#### **4. Initiative, Independence, and/or Creativity**

With regards to initiative and independence, each lesson will be self-initiated, and it will be my own responsibility to plan each week's lesson. Also, each lesson must be creative and engaging, because a dull lesson will quickly bore the students and cause them to lose focus. Also, as mentioned in the abstract, my previous training will allow me to bring a considerable amount of experience to the PSR classroom. I will be able to draw upon experiences that worked in the past, and avoid those lessons that did not go well. My prior experience ensures that my contribution will be unique and as effective as possible. Also, I will take initiative to maintain weekly email communications with parents in order to inform them of class activities and events. This has worked particularly well in the past, and I will implement this practice to give families the best experience possible.

#### **5. Reflection**

Given all previous discussion, reflection is one of the core principals of being a PSR teacher. Throughout this experience, I will reflect in a variety of ways. First, in order to plan each week's lesson, I must read the week's Gospels and reflect upon their meaning. This reflection is an ongoing process that will be shaped by my life experiences. In order to document this reflection, I will create weekly lesson plans, and summarize what I have concluded for the week. These lesson plans will be uploaded to a PSR section of my learning portfolio, and will exemplify the reflective aspect of catechism. Secondly, at the end of each week, I will record thoughts about the lesson in a journal or digital file. These thoughts will document what went well in the lesson, what could have been improved on, and any realizations that the class helped me come to.

#### **6. Dissemination**

Information about my PSR class will be maintained on a separate blog page in my learning portfolio. This page will serve two purposes. First, it allows my friends and family to view what I am doing in PSR week by week, and it will also allow parents to stay up to date about what is happening in class. Each week's blog will contain a few vital pieces. The first section will contain a discussion based upon the week's Gospel, in which my reflection and interpretation will be shared. This section will also allow me to keep families who do not attend church up to date on the Gospels. The next section will contain information regarding class activities from the past week, and this again maintains a good level of parent communication and helps to show others the activities that I create. Finally, I will conclude each blog post with announcements and a weekly bible quote. This quote will serve to accentuate and emphasize the message of the Gospel and my weekly conclusions.

#### **7. Project Advisor**

Ann Boltz

St. Monica / St. George Religious Education Director

[annboltz@fuse.net](mailto:annboltz@fuse.net)