

CHANGE IT UP

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Sample

Change
it up

OVER 150
CATECHETICAL
IDEAS

TO ADD *variety* TO
YOUR LESSONS

Lee Danesco



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TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS

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Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
1 CHANGE IT UP FROM THE START	3
2 CHANGE YOU	11
3 CHANGE UP THE STUDENT'S ROLE	19
4 CHANGE UP THE ROOM	29
5 CHANGE UP THE TEACHING METHOD: MEMORIZATION	39
6 CHANGE UP THE TEACHING METHOD: EXPLANATION	47
7 CHANGE UP THE TEACHING METHOD: EXPERIENCE	55
8 CHANGE UP THE TEACHING METHOD: EXPRESSION	63
9 CHANGE UP THE HELP	73
10 CHANGE UP THE ENDING	83
11 CHANGE IT UP FOR THE BETTER	93

Introduction

PERHAPS YOU HAVE ALREADY BEEN A VICTIM OF THE CONFOUNDING TRUTH THAT A SOLID LESSON, offered by a well-prepared catechist, to a group of conscientious children, can still turn out to be a colossal flop. It's an experience that makes you question if it's really possible to consistently plan and present compelling lessons without the help of a brass band or a car full of clowns.

Change It Up addresses your concern by providing a categorized collection of teaching models that can empower you to occasionally bypass tired or overworked classroom approaches and replace them with innovative and productive adjustments.

Each chapter first pinpoints *the **Need for Change*** by identifying a classroom procedure or teaching routine that, when overused, chips away at student interest and enthusiasm. In response to each need, ***Elements of Change*** outlines and illustrates easy-to-implement alterations and improvements. To help you to convert ideas into action, *Change It Up* encourages you to ***Give It a Try*** by offering related lesson ideas for you to explore and adapt to suit your individual classroom circumstances.

At the end of each chapter of *Change It Up* you will find a set of discussion questions meant to promote the ***Development*** of fresh teaching concepts for use in your classroom or to share with other catechists.

Certainly, during any catechetical year, you will encounter many instances when following familiar textbook methods is both a reliable and convenient approach to a lesson. But for those times when “well-traveled” techniques begin to morph into “dull and boring” ones, *Change It Up* is standing by.

1 CHANGE IT UP FROM THE START

The Need for Change

“WILL THIS CLASS BE JUST MORE OF THE SAME, or is there a chance that today we’ll do something new and different?”

It’s a simple but pivotal question that might be asked silently by students before almost any class. You can provide an immediate answer by how you choose to begin the lesson.

You could rely on a familiar pattern: recite an opening prayer, check attendance, and read an introductory text or Scripture passage. That sequence does offer a reassuring and comfortable approach, but if repeated week after week, it eventually undercuts student interest and enthusiasm.

There is a second option. Recognize that praying, taking attendance, and introducing the lesson’s message all have the capacity to be much more than just standard teaching procedures. Release the full potential of these familiar routines by altering their look, sound, and feel. Say goodbye to “more of the same” and invite students to join you for “something new and different” by changing things up, right from the start.

Elements of Change

OPENING PRAYER

Beginning class with a prayer is always a good idea. Beginning each class with the *same* prayer said by the *same* people in the

same way can drain the life right out of the experience and put a damper on the lesson that follows.

There are so many lively replacements for worn-out opening prayers that you could find a new model for every class. But locating alternative prayers doesn't have to be a weekly chore. Instead explore a small pool of possibilities, including the samples below. Select several suitable matches for your class, and then rotate the use of those selections throughout the year.

The same prayer...but different

The least challenging prayer change is one that allows you to continue saying any prayer already well known to your students, like the Lord's Prayer, while switching up *how* that prayer is offered. Call a halt to sharing your favorite prayer aloud as a group at the beginning of every class. Instead organize children to experience the same prayer—in a different format.

Direct children to close their eyes and pray their customary prayer silently and slowly against a background of soft, recorded music. Stop the music when sufficient prayer time has elapsed. Add more variety by selecting a different musical piece each time you decide to use this silent approach.

Or: Divide the familiar prayer into short phrases written on a whiteboard. Say the prayer aloud alternating phrases between you and your students. You might also alternate praying by rows, gender, birth date, or other workable class divisions.

Hands only prayer

In advance, prepare a simple prayer built around petitions that connect with the age, interests, and needs of your students. Explain that you will say a prayer asking for God's help. Ask students to *close their eyes* and listen carefully to the prayer. When they hear you pray for the kind of help they want or need, with *eyes still closed*, they can include themselves in this part of the prayer by raising a hand. Read each petition slowly

allowing time for the meaning to sink in and students to respond. After each petition, indicate when students should put their hands down.

Example:

Because of your love for us, heavenly Father,
please hear and answer our prayers:

Help me to be kind and loving to my family.
(*pause for hands to go up*)

Lead me to give good examples to my friends
by what I say and do. (*pause*)

Remind me to treat everyone I meet with respect. (*pause*)

Let me share generously with others who need my help.
(*pause*)

Teach me to forgive those who are unkind. (*pause*)

Encourage me to control my temper and my choice of words.
(*pause*)

Thank you, Father, for listening to our prayers and petitions.
Amen.

Prayer on the way to the lesson

Prayer need not be an exercise separate and distinct from the lesson that follows. By incorporating words in your prayer that directly relate to the lesson's message you succeed at changing up your opening prayer and stirring up interest in the lesson.

Example:

Be with us today, Almighty Father, as we recall how Jesus taught his Apostles. Help us to listen to his words in the gospel, especially when he says, "Love one another." Then at home and at school help us to live the lesson we have learned today. Amen.

Before class, prepare for this prayer by listing these key words from the prayer on a whiteboard:

Almighty Father • Apostles • Gospel

“Love One Another” • Live the Lesson • Amen

Ask students to join in as you pray. Whenever you pause and point to a word on the board, they should say that word out loud as part of the prayer. For younger children you may want to try a practice round first.

(Note: Leave the words on the board as a handy review aid for the end of the lesson.)

TAKING ATTENDANCE

Keeping accurate attendance records is a common classroom chore often assigned to catechists, but how you complete that task is probably left up to you. Calling out the names on your class roster is only one possibility. With a few adjustments you can turn the taking of attendance into the more versatile tool it is waiting to become.

Who else is here?

Randomly select one name from your class list and ask: “Mary Jones, are you here?” After Mary responds positively, you say, “Mary, I’m glad you’re here. Can you tell me the names of two other classmates who are here?” Mary replies: “Sarah Smith and Jimmy Brown are here.” You locate those students, check them off as “present,” and continue the process by asking the newly identified students, “Who else is here?” until all students on your roster are accounted for.

Pay attention to children who are not identified, and call them into the process by name: “Sally Johnson, I see you are here, who else is here?”

While an especially good match for younger children, this

attendance-taking method can be used at any age level to welcome all students into the classroom, encourage students to use their voice in class, and, of course, establish who is present.

Doubling up

Tucking the attendance-taking task within another classroom chore can help move the lesson along and offer a small but recognizable change in routine. Note the possibilities as you plan your lesson; when using small groups, divide up the class, start the activity, and then quietly take attendance as you visit each small group during class.

Or: Start class by calling out short, prepared lists of names to fill lesson-related tasks like moving tables, leading closing prayers, reading from the text, distributing supplies, cleaning up at the end of class. As you call the names for each assignment, ask those called to raise their hands. This approach establishes responsibilities, forms groups to carry out those jobs, and allows you to record who is present.

INTRODUCING THE LESSON

Many catechists begin class by reading a passage from the student text or Scripture, hoping to draw children into the lesson. And it works—sometimes. Children certainly need to be focused at the start of each lesson, but not always by the same focusing device. Why not change up your method of introduction with one of these approaches:

One-word wonder

A surprisingly effective focus is a single word written boldly across a centrally located board. As part of your lesson planning, hunt for a word likely to promote student curiosity and connect children to the lesson's central message. The huge word on the board acts immediately to attract student attention and triggers student questions and discussion.

There's no reason to limit the use of this technique to a

whiteboard. You can write the key word on a cardboard sign and place it on your desk, at the back of the room, on the door, or any place where it is visible. By changing up the location of your focus word from week to week, you can keep this method of introducing a lesson new each time you use it.

Objects only

Common items you have around your home, attic, or garage can also serve as a lesson focus. Before class, consider what object might suggest the meaning of a lesson to the minds of your students. Display that object on a central table, at your desk, along a counter, or wherever it will be noticed by students. Start your lesson by discussing the focus item and how it is related to the lesson.

Examples:

If the lesson theme is about	A possible focus object might be
the universal church	<i>a globe or large, colorful map</i>
growing in our faith	<i>three plants at different stages of growth</i>
meeting the needs of others	<i>a blanket, cup of water, or picture of a smile</i>

Let's go to the book

If you teach a group of students who enjoy a good word search, here's an option they might enjoy. In advance, write on the whiteboard in random order, six to ten key words found in the lesson. Instruct students to check lesson pages and write down the first three of the listed words they find and the page and paragraph where they can be located. Or compete in pairs or alone to find *all* listed words. Before starting the lesson briefly

discuss how important these words will be to understanding the lesson's message.

Give It a Try

Forgiveness is a lesson theme typically visited at every grade level. When it is your turn to take on this familiar topic, you can choose to put aside the standard opening prayer, roll call, and lesson introduction. Instead, welcome students into the lesson about forgiveness using a fresh prayer format, a novel approach to the taking of attendance, and/or an energizing lesson introduction. Change it up right from the start and reap the rewards of a more alert and alive classroom.

OPENING PRAYER

Before class, list on the whiteboard in a single column the words in bold italic from the prayer below. Explain to students that you will be saying the opening prayer together. You will begin to pray and they will join in each time you point to words on the board, by saying those words together, out loud, prayerfully.

Sample Prayer:

*Be with us today, **Almighty Father**, as we learn about forgiveness. **Open our hearts** to receive the loving forgiveness you offer to us all. **Help us** to offer that same kind of **forgiveness to others**. Remind us, too, of things we have **said or done** this week for which **we are truly sorry**. Give us the courage to **ask others to forgive us** when we are unkind. Amen.*

After the prayer, discuss how one or more of the key words/phrases helps to frame or introduce the lesson on forgiveness they are about to begin.

TAKING ATTENDANCE

When possible, complete part of the text lesson on

“Forgiveness” in small groups. As the lesson proceeds take attendance as you visit each group.

INTRODUCING THE LESSON

The importance of being able to both give and seek out forgiveness is an important part of most lessons about forgiveness. Vital to that exchange is the word “sorry.”

Make that word your focus, and display it according to your available space and personal taste.

Ask students for ideas about how that single word might be connected to the specific lesson they are about to share.

Suggestion: *Bring in that board game you have at home. You know, the one that says in big letters on the box top “SORRY,” and place it centrally. Don’t have that game? Use cardboard to create a similarly sized sign on which you can print the word “SORRY” in large letters. Start from there and refer to it throughout the lesson.*

Development

Would your students describe the way in which you begin class as “more of the same” or “something new and different”? What proof would they offer?

Of the methods for changing up opening prayer (“Same prayer, only different,” “Hands only prayer,” or “Prayer on the way to the lesson”), which would you be willing to try? Which would you avoid? Explain the reasons for your choices.

When using a focus, what “word” focus might you choose to display if the day’s lesson was about

- The commandments?
- Love of neighbor?
- Feeding the hungry?

What “object” might you use as a focus for the teaching topics above?