How sensitive should an Adventist teacher be about initiating faith-based discussions?

Curriculum *and*

Educational Models and Principles That May Ease Tension and Promote Understanding

With nearly 7,500 schools, 75,000 teachers, and 1.47 million students in 145 countries, the Seventh-day Adventist educational system is a global phenomenon with multifaceted challenges from varied cultures, religious backgrounds, and philosophic emphases. The challenge is particularly acute when the introduction of academic subject challenges a student's faith perspective or worldview.

The issue raises four basic questions:

1. How sensitive should an Adventist teacher be about initiating faith-based discussions, given the various religious and cultural views represented on many Adventist campuses? Are there issues he or she should avoid?

2. When the teacher learns that topics presented in class or in the reading assignments have unintentionally challenged a student's faith, how should this be handled?

3. Should the teacher ever intentionally choose curriculum content (e.g. science, theology, or philosophy) that challenges his or her students' faith convictions? If so, how should this material be presented?

4. What is a reasonable approach to use in studying and discussing topics where scientific data/perspectives differ significantly from the biblical perspective? How can the teacher maintain a comfort level for students holding conflicting views?

Offering students opportunities to explore different ways of obtaining knowledge in specialized fields of study, and in the varied social and religious contexts in which education is offered, has the potential for either creative or unproductive tension. In addition, the Seventh-day Adventist philosophy of education[1] has some unique elements, and therefore, it is not surprising that the application of this philosophy would create tension for those who embrace a secular worldview, as well as those from other faith traditions, and even those at varying points along the Adventist theological continuum. Such tensions may not necessarily be intentional, but rather the inevitable outcome of philosophical differences that form the bases for, and some of the content of, instruction.

This article discusses educational models and principles, provides a practical example, and includes some principles from Ellen White that may be useful in dealing with such tensions in the classroom.

Educational Models

Many educational models in-

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clude recommended techniques for introducing subject matter to students. Each has an underlying philosophy and a set of assumptions, and is designed to achieve a particular purpose. Let us briefly review five models that are relevant to our study.

1. Good Teacher Model. Early definitions depicted a good teacher as someone who met the community ideal for a good citizen, a good employee, or a good parent.[2] This model gave way to one that emphasized the psychological characteristics of a good teacher such as achievement, motivation, commitment, empathy, experience, flexibility, and so forth. More recently, the focus has shifted from good teaching to *effective* teaching. Researchers have focused on teacher-to-student and student-to-teacher interactions in the classroom, specifically looking at the effect teachers have upon students. More research is under-

cipline and skills students need to raise questions and search out answers.[4] This model begins by presenting students with a puzzling event, with the assumption that they will be naturally motivated to solve the puzzle, and thus engage in disciplined methods of research and discovery. The teacher focuses on training students to develop appropriate methods for problem solving.

4. Biological Science Inquiry Model. Propelled by the academic reform movement in American education during the 1950s and 1960s, this model sought to revise the conventional curriculum, which had been built around the major ideas and research methods of academic disciplines.[5] Instead, it advocated teaching science as inquiry—giving students assignments that enable them to replicate the reasoning that produced a cur-

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way on the patterns of effective teaching and how to achieve desired student outcomes.

2. Question Models. Concern about facilitating learning has prompted educators to review the methods of questioning that occur in classrooms. Some questions are intended to be answered, while others are rhetorical. Students often cannot distinguish between the two, and in some instances may not even be aware that a question has been asked. Thus, researchers felt the need to define the characteristics of effective questions—the questions that get students actively involved in composing a response and thereby engage them in the learning process.[3]

Questions that elicit a memorized factoid, multiple-choice exams, fill-in-the-blank questions, matching questions and the like and thus require a single, "correct" answer or a narrow range of responses are called convergent or closed questions. Questions that encourage a general or open response are referred to as divergent or indi-

rect questions and require higher-level thought and synthesis. An example of divergent question would be one that asks students to recognize and explain the differences between political systems, philosophical positions, peoples, and groups. The amount of critical thinking and depth of investigation into deeper cognitive areas required by the test questions should relate to the goals of the teacher, the desired outcomes of the course, and the grade level and maturity of students. Teachers should consider carefully their goals and objectives before employing a particular methodology.

3. Inquiry Model. Designed to capitalize on student curiosity, the inquiry model seeks to develop the intellectual dis-

rent invention or discovery, and as their skills increase, moving them closer to the frontiers of knowledge. All laboratory and classroom work focus on enabling students to investigate problems.

5. Discomfort Model. Joyce and Weil[6] suggest that there is a relationship between styles of learning and models of teaching. As students are exposed to unfamiliar content and forced to use learning styles that are new to them, they will experience varying degrees of discomfort. Real growth often requires making learners uncomfortable, and teachers must both create situations where this occurs, and help students deal with the results.

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The role of discomfort appears not only in the literature involving the need for teachers to venture and take risks, but also in studies of developmental stage theorists that address the best means for learners to achieve higher levels of development.[7] The "discomfort factor" has been shown to prod teachers into acquiring new skills and repertoires of teaching strategies. But the literature has also shown that most teachers are uncomfortable about using new strategies, even after receiving careful training.[8]

Social psychologists use the term *cognitive dissonance* to describe how people attempt to resolve the dilemma of two competing ideas that simultaneously demand attention. The student seeks to reduce the tension resulting from this dissonance as soon as possible in order to achieve consonance.[9]

Instructional Principles

With all the different teaching models, what should a teacher do? Stephen Yelon[10] lists 10 powerful principles involved in effective teaching: meaningfulness, prerequisites, open communication, organized essential ideas, learning aids, novelty, modeling, active appropriate practice, pleasant conditions and consequences, and consistency. If teachers apply these principles, Yelon believes, students:

• will be motivated to connect topics with their past, present, and future;
• will be ready to learn;
• will discover what concepts and skills they need to know so that they can focus on acquiring them;
• will be able to focus on the most important ideas,
• will be able to use devices that help them learn quickly;
• will be motivated to pay attention;
• will learn to recall information;
• will be able to think about and act on what they have learned, and to solve problems;
• will perfect their learning through thinking, performing, and solving problems through practice;
• will come to associate learning with a pleasurable experience and thus be more likely to apply what they learned; and
• will learn what they need to know and will use what they have learned.

Thus, teachers must find ways to integrate the models of teaching with appropriate instructional principles. This be-

comes an even greater challenge when a teacher encounters students with various faith perspectives and must attempt to provide an environment of support while seeking to broaden their cognitive horizons.

A Personal Example

Conflicts may arise as teachers encounter students with other faith traditions and/or students within the same faith tradition but who have markedly different views on specific topics.

While teaching sociology at an Adventist college, I encouraged students to examine critically their views regarding a series of potentially controversial topics. This approach was incorporated into a capstone course for junior and senior sociology majors. Students were to develop a justification for choosing a perspective on specific issues based on their personal research, using secular and biblical sources.

Three basic assumptions informed my philosophy of teaching sociology courses in Adventist institutions:

First, one needs to understand how to operate successfully within societal groups.

Second, the Christian perspective, that all that we know has become available through God's revelation and must be understood in the context of relative and absolute truth, provides a meaningful context for the teaching of sociological concepts. Ellen White writes that to "learn science through human interpretation alone is to obtain a false education, but to learn of God and Christ is to learn the science of heaven."[11] To acquire a true perspective on human behavior, societal views should be examined in light of revealed truth.

Third, studying human behavior leads unavoidably to an examination of one's ethical and personal responsibility for his or her own behavior. When considering the reasons for human behavior, one must grapple with the issues of nature versus nurture. This raises questions regarding one's choices and thus, his or her responsibility for the ensuing consequences.

The content and approach of the capstone course required students to explain the interrelationship between their discipline and their Christian life, and the implications of each for the other. Students had to compare, juxtapose, or reconcile their personal beliefs/position, society's perspectives, and biblical perspectives to other social issues as well. The requirement that students come to grips with how their personal belief system and biblical faith coincided or diverged, and how this con-

sonance or divergence affected their concept of what is appropriate, ethical, or justifiable in the experiences of life, constituted the essence of the course.

Students were led to reflect on issues they may have regarded as already settled in their minds. However, when forced to reflect on these topics, they often found that these issues were not as clear as they once thought. I found it healthy to discuss students' "reflections" in the corporate setting of the classroom, in a non-threatening environment, where their peers could participate with them as they grappled with important issues. We did not settle many questions, but I was able to provide guidance into how students might continue thinking about their personal responses to life's issues in terms of their discipline and biblical principles. The sidebar below describes a typical assignment in the course.

The students were further required to provide societal perspective(s), biblical perspectives, and their personal perspective on the issue, with research support from the library, the Inter-

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net, news and media sources, and the Bible.

The above approach worked well and stimulated open discussion of the various topics presented in the course. In some instances, students gave their personal views on a topic, then were asked to research the justification for the opposite point of view. Over time, students were able to broaden their perspectives on a variety of issues and to adjust their preconceptions where necessary.

Ellen White's Perspective

One significant source of help in dealing with tension between curriculum and faith is the writings of Ellen G. White. Her emphasis on some key educational principles provides teachers with useful strategies for handling tension between conflicting views.

The purpose of Adventist colleges. "Our college," wrote Ellen White in 1895, "was designed of God to accomplish the great and good work of saving souls. . . .The precepts and principles of religion are the first steps in the acquisition of knowledge, and lie at the very foundation of true education. Knowledge and science must be vitalized by the Spirit of God in order to serve the noblest purposes."[12]

When tension arises. Ellen White did not directly address the possibility of conflict between faith and learning. Most of her admonition on education relates to the teacher's character, the context of teaching, the definition of proper education, and appropriate teacher-student relationships. It can be inferred from her writings, however, that where conflict does occur between faith and curriculum, the teacher must use the spirit of Christ in addressing these issues. For instance, Ellen White writes that "Teachers and students are to come close together in Christian fellowship. . . . The greatest of teachers are those who are most patient, most kind. By their simplicity and their willingness to learn they encourage their students to climb higher and still higher."[13]

The ultimate concern of teachers. "Eternal interest," says Ellen White, "should be the great theme of teachers and students. Conformity to the world should be strictly guarded against. The teachers need to be sanctified through the truth, and the all-important thing should be the conversion of their students, that they may have a new heart and life."[14]

On planning and settling goals. "Every teacher should see to it that his work tends to definite results. Before attempting to teach a subject, he should have a distinct plan in mind, and should know just what he desires to accomplish. He should not rest satisfied with the presentation of any subject until the student understands the principle involved, perceives its truth, and is able to state clearly what he has learned."[15]

Training to be thinkers. "Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator—individuality, power to think and to do. . . . It is the work of true education to develop this power, to train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's

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Topic: Crime and Delinquency
Issue: Capital Punishment

Capital punishment may be defined as an act of punishment, imposed by society, by which an individual is put to death for some presumed intentional heinous act or series of acts the person has committed in violation of law.

Your assignment is to answer the following questions regarding capital punishment. Give your own perspective, but also provide biblical or other support for your position where requested or appropriate.

1. Does a society have the right to impose capital punishment? Why or why not?
2. What conclusions have scientists reached with regarding to the effect of the death penalty as a deterrent to crime?
3. If you were asked to serve on a jury in a capital case, would you be willing to serve? Why or why not?
4. What do you feel is the most reasonable punishment for a crime in which a person intentionally takes the life of another?
5. Does God have the right to impose capital punishment upon individuals? Why or why not?
6. Are there instances in Scripture in which capital punishment was not used/was used? If not used, why do you think so? If used, describe under what circumstances it was used, and give at least three examples with circumstances surrounding such use.
7. Discuss how your personal view of the reasonable consequences of taking the life of another fits with your understanding of the biblical perspective regarding punishment?
8. What do you think are the best personal deterrents to crime? Why?

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thought. . . . Instead of educated weaklings, institutions of learning may send forth men strong to think and to act, men who are masters and not slaves of circumstances, men who possess breadth of mind, clearness of thought, and the courage of their convictions."[16]

On books in the classroom. "It is a mistake to put into the hands of the youth books that perplex and confuse them. . . . [Teachers] would measure the relative importance of the things to be learned in school. The common, essential branches of education would be more thoroughly taught, and the word of God would be esteemed as the bread sent down from heaven, which sustains all spiritual life."[17]

Education and character development. True education, according to Ellen White, "provides more than mental discipline; it provides more than physical training. It strengthens the character, so that truth and uprightness are not sacrificed to selfish desire or worldly ambition. It fortifies the mind against evil. . . . As the perfection of His character is dwelt upon, the mind is renewed, and the soul is re-created in the image of God."[18]

Thus, Ellen White's perspectives on education suggest that teachers should attempt to develop within students the higher-order and processing skills necessary to differentiate between knowledge that is useful only in this world, and the knowledge and character education designed to prepare one for both this world and the world to come. Such a view requires students to focus not only on clearness of thought but also on the courage of their convictions.

These characteristics, however, do not develop in isolation. They are nurtured and fostered within the context of Spirit-filled teachers who are committed to develop students in the admonition of God.

Dealing With the Tension

We have looked at various teaching models, essential instructional principles, a personal example, and Ellen White's views on classroom dynamics. But how do these help teachers resolve the potential tensions between curriculum and faith? Let us now return to our original four questions:

1. *Given the various religions and cultures represented on Adventist campuses, teachers must be sensitive to the differing views of students. Are there topics they should avoid?* Certainly. To open class discussions to all kinds of topics is unwise, because there will be topics about which the teacher lacks sufficient information to ensure appropriate discussion. Topics about which a teacher is biased or uninformed, if opened for discussion, may only create unresolved tension, and may even spark open hostility between teacher and student. Classroom instruction should not

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deliberately open wounds within students that are left for others to heal.

2. *How should teachers address situations where tension occurs when they unintentionally present curriculum content that challenges a student's religious beliefs?* One can infer from Ellen White's writings that where conflict does occur, the spirit of Christ must permeate the discussion in order to ensure that the topic is handled with tenderness and sensitivity. In my experience, the approach used is often even more important than the resolution of the conflict.

The Good Teacher Model discussed above is important here. When a teacher treats dissenting viewpoints respectfully, students are more likely to retain openness toward and respect for the teacher, even though they may not be won over to the professor's position. This often provides an opening for further discussion at a later date.

3. *Should teachers ever intentionally introduce curriculum content (e.g. science, theology, or philosophy issues) in order to challenge their students' beliefs?* The Question and Inquiry models may be useful to prod students toward resolving problems and to help them develop the intellectual discipline and skills necessary to raise questions and search out answers.

I believe it is sometimes legitimate to introduce content that challenges students' religious beliefs. The critical issue is whether the real intent is to challenge or to *undermine* the student's faith convictions. In an educational system designed to bring students to a thorough knowledge of Jesus Christ and the meaning of His sacrifice for our sins, Ellen White's comments are helpful. She wrote that if "the precepts and principles of religion are the first steps in the acquisition of knowledge, and lie at the very foundation of true education,"[19] then the teacher who is attempting to expose students to true education should

not shrink from raising issues that may challenge students' beliefs just because are a variety of perspectives within the class. The Discomfort Model may be useful here, but again, the approach should be carefully considered along with the expected outcome(s). Thus, if the approach proves non-productive or divisive, it should be replaced by more effective models.

4. *What is a reasonable approach to use in studying and discussing topics where the scientific data/perspectives differ significantly from the biblical perspective?* How can the teacher maintain a comfort level for students holding conflicting views?

Here, the professor should consider the "big picture" in addressing divisive topics. Within the context of the great controversy between Christ and Satan, we have only limited knowledge of any aspect of reality. As knowledge increases, old ideas are discarded and new ones take their place. This is one reason why there are multiple editions of the same book. With regard to the Bible, centuries passed before some of its contents were supported by evidence obtained through scientific investigation. Thus, I would strongly argue for accepting the biblical perspective as reality and presenting alternative views, where appropriate, as having been constructed using the best data humans have been able to discover. We can never afford to treat the relative truth of scientific investigation as if it were equal to the absolute truth we believe is expressed in the Bible. However, we should not fear to present to students instances where scientific investigation differs with biblical understanding. These may be fruitful areas for students to investigate.

Conclusion

There is a great need for teachers to educate students for evaluation of ideas, problem solving, cultural sensitivity, and interpersonal skills so that they can function effectively in a global culture. This educative process will introduce challenging issues and perspectives, some of which may clash with certain students' personal beliefs. If teachers use appropriate teaching methodologies, these challenges should not be too troublesome, for they will have helped their students to understand why there are different perspectives and have equipped them with the tools to use in evaluating them.

There is an important difference between raising issues for discussion that are at odds with a student's faith perspective and attempting to undermine his or her religious beliefs. A central question should be: What is the teacher attempting to accomplish? The intended outcome should be the basis for choosing a teaching method. The maturity level of students must also be considered. In an educational setting, the presenting of alternate views should not be seen as undermining another's beliefs, but as providing a different perspective. The approach chosen must also take into account the context in which the instruction takes place.

Perhaps the only way to avoid this sort of tension in the classroom would be for the professor to suppress the specific and unique beliefs of the Adventist Church in favor of teaching a set of universal or generic beliefs (if indeed such even exist), designed to provide a comfort zone for students from varied belief systems and cultures. From a biblical and denominational perspective, I believe this would be untenable and would,

in fact, subvert the entire purpose for operating our educational system.

Christ, the Master Teacher, is our example. He provided many opportunities for the Jewish leaders of His day to re-examine their views of life.[20] In some instances, He gently urged them to embrace a more accurate perspective on life; while on other occasions, He directly challenged their blatant disregard for the poor, the sick, and the downtrodden. The Bible gives us many examples of His taking both the direct and indirect approaches to confrontation. We can learn much from His example. ✐

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1."FE 05 Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of Education. The Seventh-day Adventist philosophy of education is Christ-centered. Adventists believe that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, God's character and purposes can be understood as revealed in the Bible, in Jesus Christ, and in nature. The distinctive characteristics of Adventist education—derived from the Bible and the writings of Ellen G White—point to the redemptive aim of true education: to restore human beings into the image of their Maker" (*General Conference Working Policy*, 2002-2003), p. 221.

2. Gary D. Borich, *Effective Teaching Methods* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Merrill/Prentice Hall, 1996), pp. 2-9.

3. Ibid., pp. 340, 341.

4. Bruce Joyce and Marsha Weil, *Models of Teaching* (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, Inc.; 1986), p. 57. See also J. Suchman, "Studies in Inquiry Training," in *Piaget Reconsidered*, R. Ripple and V. Bookcastle., eds. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1964).

5. Ibid., p. 127.

6. Ibid., p. 435.

7. Carl Rogers, *Freedom to Learn* (Columbus: Merrill, 1969); Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1962); and Jean Piaget, *The Origins of Intelligence in Children* (New York: International University Press, 1952).

8. Joyce and Weil, *Models of Teaching*, op cit., p. 439.

9. There are other models of learning too numerous to be discussed here—inductive and deductive thinking, presentation, memorization, non-directive teaching, synetics (aimed at generating fresh ideas), cooperative learning, role-playing, jurisprudential inquiry, laboratory training, social science, mastery learning and direct instruction, learning self-control, learning from simulations, assertive training, and so forth.

10. Stephen L. Yelon, *Powerful Principles of Instruction* (White Plains, N.Y.: Longman Publishers, 1996), p. 3.

11. Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publ. Assn., 1954), p. 293.

12. _____, *Counsels on Education* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1953), p. 33.

13. _____, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, Publ. Assn., 1913), p. 269.

14. _____, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville: Southern Publ. Assn., 1923), p. 436.

15. _____, *Education* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), pp. 233, 234.

16. Ibid., p. 18.

17. _____, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, pp. 389, 390.

18. _____, *Education*, pp. 17, 18.

19. _____, *Christian Education*, p. 32.

20. For example, Jesus' dialogue with those who wanted Him to judge the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-9); Jesus' counsel regarding how to treat others that oppress you (Matthew 5:38-41); Jesus' list of woes to the Scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23); and Jesus' views on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-27).