TAKING OFF THE TRAINING WHEELS

Parents of children learning to ride a two-wheeled bicycle often attach training wheels to help them avoid accidents. But to become an accomplished bicyclist, one must remove the training wheels. Adapting that analogy to Adventist education, some Seventh-day Adventist parents and educators insist that colleges and universities "keep the training wheels on" for students. They want, above all else, for higher education to keep students safe—emotionally, spiritually, and academically.

While training wheels do provide safety, they also give an inexperienced learner the illusion of actually riding a bicycle while only pedaling a quadricycle and of imagining that he or she is "just like the big kids."

A child can learn to pedal, brake, and shift gears on a bicycle with training wheels. That is why "training wheels" are perfectly appropriate for younger children. They provide a necessary and comforting security and stability.

Sooner or later, however, the "training wheels" must come off for older students, if college and university educators are committed to helping them grow wholistically. Secondary education can be an important time of transition as well, but that is a topic for another article. In postsecondary education, it is important to reinforce and stimulate students' moral development by promoting open academic inquiry and reassessing institutional policies of external control. Discussed below are some research findings that support a developmentally appropriate academic equivalent of removing the training wheels from a bike.

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Facilitating Moral Development

Those responsible for delivering college and university education must determine the best way to structure the institution's academic environment to fulfill the mission of Adventist higher education. According to Lawrence Kohlberg's later research,[1] the policies of an educational institution can facilitate or hinder the moral and personal development of its students and faculty. This research supports the broad principles and guidance offered by Ellen White in the book *Education*.[2]

Lawrence Kohlberg[3] and Carol Gilligan[4] offer insights that can help educators as they attempt to nurture students into morally and ethically mature individuals. Kohlberg's 20-year longitudinal studies of populations in Turkey, Israel, and the United States indicated that both males and females progress through an "invariant stage sequence, regardless of cross-cultural variation in moral norms and beliefs."[5] Kohlberg also cites the findings of other researchers

BY STEVE PAWLUK, RENÉ DRUMM, AND KATHERINE PAWLUK

who obtained similar results in India, Turkey, Taiwan, Zambia, and other non-Western societies to support his assertion that the development of moral reasoning abilities occurs in the same progression regardless of cultural differences.[6] While theorists differ somewhat in the ways they think these stages manifest themselves, they all agree that is desirable to aspire to more mature and nuanced levels of moral development.

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The mission statements of Seventh-day Adventist institutions of higher education commonly identify moral development as a primary goal. Ellen White identified moral and personal development as the central reason for investing in Seventh-day Adventist education.[7] She wrote that "Cultivated intellect is now needed in the cause of God, for novices cannot do the work acceptably. God has devised our college as an instrumentality for developing workers of whom He will not be ashamed."[8] "The great object of education is to enable us to use the powers which God has given us in such a manner as will best represent the religion of the Bible and promote the glory of God."[9]

Ellen White's guidance is well supported by research on the development of moral reasoning skills. Space limitations prevent a full discussion of Kohlberg's formulation. However, the following paragraphs outline the three basic phases of moral development as identified by Kohlberg and Gilligan, as well as research findings from others on how learning environments may help or hinder moral growth.

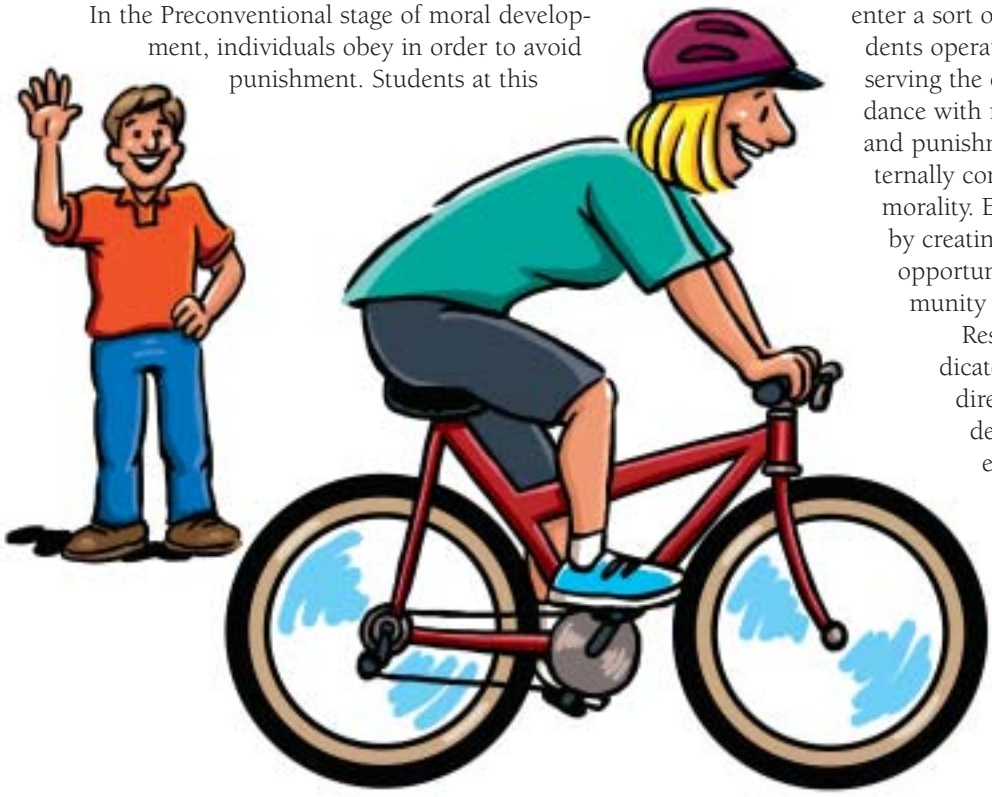
Preconventional Stage

In the Preconventional stage of moral development, individuals obey in order to avoid punishment. Students at this stage respond well to clear and comprehensive rules and consequences. Educational systems that are organized around rewards and punishments are efficient and orderly, but they tend to encourage students to remain at the Preconventional stage of development. This level provides a comfortable feeling of certainty for parents and educators, but it leaves students dependent on external validation in making moral decisions. This, in turn, makes it more likely that they will embrace inappropriate cultural norms, and decreases their ability to make value judgments for themselves.[10]

Administrators and educators seeking to foster higher levels of moral development must examine the learning activities assigned, as well as the external controls applied to students' lives. While external controls are helpful at some stages of human development, according to both White[11] and Kohlberg,[12] they are a retarding force at others.

Conventional Stage

People at the Conventional stage of moral development seek to meet accepted social expectations in the hope of reciprocity. They understand that rules and norms are necessary for the greater good of the institution and for the effective functioning of a diverse community, and choose to enter a sort of social contract with others. Students operating at this level see morality as serving the common good and act in accordance with rules, even without external rewards and punishments. They are moving from an externally controlled to an intrinsically adopted morality. Educators can facilitate this progress by creating environments that allow students opportunities to make choices within a community structure.



Research by Kohlberg and others[13] indicates that when educators are overly directive, it stunts some types of student learning. A minimally controlling environment will help students to incorporate important principles of morality into their personal value systems. Ellen White reminds us that "It is not God's purpose that any mind should be [controlled by one in authority]. Those who weaken or destroy individuality assume a responsibility that can result only in evil. While

under authority, the children may appear like well-drilled soldiers; but when the control ceases, the character will be found to lack strength and steadfastness."[14]

She also warned that "To the superficial observer [a nonauthoritarian approach] may not appear to the best advantage; it may not be valued so highly as that of the one who holds the mind and will of the child under absolute authority; but after years will show the result of the better method of training."[15]

By failing to challenge students' thinking about complex issues, neglecting to expose them to a diversity of thought, or failing to allow for a carefully calculated degree of ambiguity and uncertainty, educators permit students to remain contentedly stuck at the Conventional phase of development. To apply Ellen White's counsel that the true work of education is to produce thinking individuals,[16] we need to give serious consideration to how we can use our curriculum, policies, and teaching to help our students function at the Postconventional stage.

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Postconventional Stage

Individuals who have achieved the Postconventional (or Principled) stage, make, in Kolhberg's words, "a clear effort to define moral values and principles that have validity and application apart from the authority of the groups or persons holding these principles."[17] He adds: "Right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen *ethical principles* appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and constituency."[18] Persons who have achieved the Postconventional level apply the principles of justice and equality, and respect the dignity of every person, regardless of position, relationship, ethnicity, religion, or other characteristics. As Seventh-day Adventists, we might define Postconventional thinking and living as the consistent application of the Golden Rule to all persons under all circumstances, or as making choices on the basis of the *agape* love demonstrated by Jesus even toward those who were torturing and killing Him.

Stimulating Moral Development

We believe that the goals of Seventh-day Adventist Christian education are best achieved through directing energy, at least at the college and university levels, toward stimulating Postconventional moral development. This means helping students to develop self-chosen principles of justice, enjoy the richness of diversity, recognize and deal with moral nuances, and balance individual and social concerns. It also means aiding them in reasoning through issues using moral and religious principles derived from their experiences at earlier stages, and from an open consideration of truth.

Gilligan points out that, for women in particular, morality requires the preservation of valuable human relationships and an integration of one's own and others' needs.[19] Kohlberg and his associates[20] held that males and females reasoned similarly about moral issues, but that, in their initial responses, females tended to think in terms of the "special obligations" of close relationships, whereas males focused on a more general duty to do justice.

Professors who want to guide students toward the Postconventional levels of moral reasoning will more often conceive of their roles as informed facilitators of discussions, rather than disseminators of "The Answers." They will provide their students with opportunities to analyze the applications of moral principles. These professors will also invite students to observe them thinking aloud in class about complex issues and help them consider alternative views, while explaining why they prefer a particular viewpoint.

At this stage, the training wheels have come off, increasing the risk that students will make poor choices and engage in risky behavior. But that is how they achieve skill and confidence in arriving at their own conclusions, which may well differ from those of the society in which they live.

If the primary concern of the church and parents is safety rather than growth, administrators will avoid giving students the necessary freedom to construct internal value systems. But this increases the risk that they will make poor choices when they leave the supportive college environment, either feeling content to go through life at the Conventional stage or having to function at the Postconventional stage without any help from the supportive environment of a Christian institution.

Studies cited below identify at least two factors that impede construction of internal controls, and another that seems to facilitate it. The negative variables are (1) the presence of controlling surveillance and (2) placing superfluous external controls on behavior. Conversely, schools can facilitate student growth by engaging young people in a process that helps them evaluate various choices and voluntarily choose a moral response, while offering guidance and support. After all, it is not usually a good idea to take a novice mountain biker to the top of a steep mountain and send him or her down without coaching. Instead, the coach builds on the cyclist's prior ability to navigate paved and gravel roads, and provides guided practice and coaching while encouraging the cyclist to try increasingly more challenging trails. It takes time and practice to develop such abilities.

Researchers have noted that when students experience surveillance intended to control their actions, their intrinsic motivation decreases.[21] Coaching, however, does not undermine their intrinsic motivation. This corresponds with Ellen

White's assertion that our "youth are benefited by being trusted. . . . . They should not be led to feel that they cannot go out or come in without being watched. Suspicion demoralizes, producing the very evils it seeks to prevent."[22] Educators need to serve as mentors, sharing their faith journey.[23] They should not be enforcers but fellow learners who offer their experience and advice to aid young adults in decision making.

Research also suggests that excessive or unnecessary external constraint actually increases interest in forbidden activities. In an experiment with college students, Wilson and Lassiter[24] threatened sanctions for dishonesty in a situation in which the students had little motivation to cheat. No threats were made to the control group. Several days later, in a completely different setting, the group threatened with sanctions cheated significantly more than the control group on an intelligence test. The researchers concluded that when people are given extrinsic reasons to not engage in an activity about which they originally had little curiosity, their interest increases. It appears that when people have both an intrinsic motivation (I don't like it) and an extrinsic motivation (I'm not supposed to do it), they may discount the intrinsic starting point. This leads them to develop greater interest in the undesired activity. Interestingly, Ellen White suggested the same probability.[25]

Besides trust and freedom, young adults need educators to display an attitude of collaboration. Researchers have found that involving people in the decision to choose healthy behaviors (intrinsic motivation) increases the likelihood they will engage in the desired behavior. If the subjects feet coerced, however, the desired behaviors decrease. Ellen White advises us that "it is better to request than to command" because then "obedience is the result of choice rather than compulsion."[26]

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Discussion

Without training wheels, bicyclists will learn to ride more skillfully, but they will also fall occasionally. One cannot learn to race a mountain bike, or perform tricks without falling. As Ellen White warned us, an unfair or an uninformed evaluation of the educator's effectiveness at that moment might suggest that the student and the coach are a failure.[27] However, an insightful observer knows that leaning too far to the right or the left is part of the lesson, and that a scraped elbow is a normal, perhaps even necessary, part of the learning experience. The effective educator will encourage the young bicyclist to keep trying, while providing encouragement and a few suggestions based on experience.

We recognize that not all students arrive at college or university with the same riding skills. Some have never had the training wheels removed. Others have had them off a few times, while some are highly skilled riding a two wheeler, and a few have mastered the unicycle. Therefore, Seventh-day Adventist educators need to continually and thoughtfully evaluate the content and style of their teaching in order to adequately challenge and prompt students without facilitating recklessness. Senior courses should provide more opportunity for open consideration of controversial ideas and questions than freshman courses. Graduate study needs to be qualitatively different from undergraduate. In all cases, careful monitoring and Christian coaching will be necessary.

When a bicyclist has learned to enjoy the freedom of cycling, he or she will have the motivation and courage to explore. His or her successes and failures provide the necessary foundation for continuing to investigate, but not ignore, the limits of the bicycle. Little learning will occur if safety is the only, or even primary, concern.

Should we not challenge our students to try out new thoughts, read uncomfortable essays and books, confront controversial ideas, consider new evidences, and try on new perspectives? Ellen White proposes that "The education that consists in the training of the memory, tending to discourage independent thought, has a moral bearing which is too little appreciated. As the student sacrifices the power to reason and judge for himself, he becomes incapable of discriminating between truth and error, and falls an easy prey to deception. He is easily led to follow tradition and custom."[28]

So, committed professors must steady the seat, give young college students a push in the right direction on the proper bike trail, and then stand by, breathless, as the young bikers navigate new ideas at unfamiliar speeds. Sometimes they wobble to a stop, only to be challenged again. Other times they miscalculate their speed and fall. Sometimes they find an excuse not to try. But educators and administrators need to resist the temptation to reinstall the training wheels. Their job is to create significant, genuine, and appropriate challenges for the new rider that test and expand his or her academic, social, and spiritual abilities.

Critics of Adventist higher education will notice skinned attitudes, broken curfews, pierced ears, and other evidences of apparent failure. These things are not signs of educational failure any more than falling off a bicycle is a sign of one's inability to ride. Nor are they any more an indicator of youthful rebellion than is the occasional wobbling of a bicycle. It is normal and necessary.[29]

To be sure, there will not often be unanimous or easy agreement regarding what constitutes the proper balance between risk and safety. There are constituents, administrators, and faculty who will see this as nothing more than a "weakening of the standards." They will express concern that our students don't look or sound right. They will be concerned that constituents will withhold their financial support from the institution. They will argue that obedience

is the sign of a faithful Christian. And they will be both right and wrong.

Thinking, sounding, and looking "right" are, indeed, indicators for faithfulness, if the obedience comes from within and *if* it is principle-based. College students who believe or act the "right" way because their grades will suffer or because they will be fined can only be commended for being compliant followers who behave well *because* of external limitations imposed by the training wheels. On the other hand, college students who are encouraged to consider alternatives as well as conventional answers, but not coerced to believe or act in the "right" way, will make some poor choices from time to time. But these students will also enjoy the deep satisfaction of making sincere, life-affirming choices. That personal response to the gospel is what Seventh-day Adventist institutions of higher education are striving for. "All true obedience comes from the heart. It was heart work with Christ."[30]

Educators who "remove the training wheels" need to be prepared for questions and misunderstandings, even unfair criticism, from colleagues, constituents, and church administrators. The pressures of financial and enrollment trends strongly tempt us to excessive pragmatism. While there is no simple response, it is vital for us as educators to keep our attention clearly focused on what developmental psychology and the principles of inspiration say is best for our students.

An honest and ongoing conversation needs to take place between, and among, all who are engaged in the educational enterprise.

- Professors enjoy academic freedom and a good degree of autonomy regarding the content and policies of their courses. They can also significantly shape institutional policies through faculty governance and participation on campus committees.
- College and university administrators lead in the development of institutional vision, goals, and benchmarks.
- Students have a voice through course evaluations, senior exit surveys, the student association, and the student senate.

Schools can facilitate student growth by engaging young people in a process that helps them evaluate various choices and voluntarily choose a moral response, while offering guidance and support.

- The board of trustees establishes the direction and fundamental policies of the college or university.
- The Adventist Accrediting Association sets standards and regulations that directly affect the work of colleges and universities.

It is important that all of these parties engage in an informed and principle-based discussion of the goals of our institutions of higher education in order to meet the developmental needs of our students, serve the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and protect the particular character of each institution while strengthening its milieu and effectiveness.

If we encourage our students to infiltrate society with the gospel of grace and to be courageous enough to "stand for the right though the heavens fall,"[31] we must also enable them to develop the image of God in their characters—"individuality, power to think and to do."[32] Such power cannot be fully developed at the Preconventional or Conventional stages. Two statements made by a founder of the Seventh-day Adventist educational system encourage us in this regard:

"[Our youth] have not been thrown upon their own judgment as fast and as far as practicable, and therefore their minds have not been properly developed and strengthened. . .

"Those who make it their object to so educate their pupils that they may see and feel that the power lies in themselves to make men and women of firm principle, qualified for any position in life, are the most useful and permanently successful teachers."[33]


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