

The Tools of Change: Teaching Strategies that Challenge Students

BY WESLEY SCOTT

Purpose

In Christian education today, as a whole, we find ourselves at a crucial juncture in our existence as an educational movement. Throughout our short, yet rich, history as a formal, educational movement, we have defined ourselves as the outsiders, the rebels, the “fish” who swim against the tide of the humanistic and socialistic public education system. In doing so, we may have painted ourselves into a corner by deeming nearly every new idea, strategy, literature source, and curriculum outside of Christian educational circles to be unacceptable, and, as a result, have not moved outside our comfort and security zone. In the area of teaching strategies, many of our schools have become slaves to the Christian curriculum publishers and their recommended teaching methods. While methods suggested by these companies are very good and can be effective in the right setting, are these methods most effective in moving students from simply ingesting information to be regurgitated at a later date, to the place of truly challenging students and their thinking processes about truth?

The outcome of a thorough and intensive study into effective teaching strategies for the Christian school would take volumes to present. That is not the attempt of this article. Instead, the goal is to stretch one’s thinking in the area of teaching strategies. Simply, “Do I effectively reach every student in the classroom or school and take them to a level of genuine learning?” This involves moving students from Bloom’s (1964) lowest level of learning, knowledge (data recall) through comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and finally to evaluative cognition, all with a truly, biblical emphasis and worldview. If the answer is no, then open your mind to the potential that lies within the school walls to move students to a place of effective learning and ultimately to be effective servants of our Lord.

My garage is a pig sty. I mean that both literally and figuratively. You see, not only is it the scourge of my dwelling in attractiveness and order, but it is also the home to my father-in-law’s plethora of tools. He has toolbox after toolbox full of screwdrivers, pliers, wrenches, sockets, and drill bits. He has power tools, pneumatic tools, saws, plumbing fixtures, and every nut, bolt, and screw anyone could ever wish to use. On several occasions, we have had deep and meaningful conversations about getting rid of some of his junk. As I pick up a rusted, dusty, seemingly useless hand tool, he always replies the same way, “Well, we can’t get rid of that. That’s a special tool for (fill-in-the-blank) that you can’t get anymore.” Unfortunately, as much as I hate to admit it, he is right. All of those tools have a specific purpose and use. Although, I do wish we could get them narrowed down to just a couple of hundred necessary tools. By the way, not coincidentally, my father-in-law’s nickname, by which he is known to almost everyone, is Piggy!

Within the possession of each Christian school teacher is a toolbox of sorts. No, it is not full of hammers, screwdrivers, and wrenches, but teaching strategies and each strategy has a specific purpose and use. Some teachers have a well stocked toolbox. They have invested time researching the best and most effective teaching strategies for their students. Unfortunately, many teachers in our Christian schools have limited tools in their toolboxes. Rather than seek out effective strategies to reach their students, they are content to use the same tools they have always used, and to imply that a change is needed is like trying to chisel through that five-year old fruitcake you got last Christmas! Let us look at some of the effective teaching tools available to teachers with a view for improving the educational process in schools with an ultimate goal of reaching the hearts and minds of the young people God has placed within our care.

Characteristics

There are certain characteristics of teaching strategies that are necessary for effective teaching in a Christian school setting. First, teaching strategies must be *content-centered*. For the Christian teacher, no matter what subject is being taught and what textbook is being used, the content of classroom teaching should always be truth as it is revealed by God. He is the source of all truth (Deut. 32:4, Ps. 31:5), and reveals Himself, (1) generally through creation (Rom. 1:18-20), His providential control of human history, and moral law or man's conscience (Rom. 2:14-15); (2) specifically through Jesus (Jn.1:1), and His signs, and miracles; and 3) specially through His inerrant, inspired, written word—the Bible (Ps. 119:160, 2 Tim. 3:16-17). Teaching within the context of a biblical worldview is crucial in a Christian school setting, because students will not get a biblical worldview from society. Many will not even get it from their homes, although the Scripture is clear that it is the parents' responsibility to do so (Deut. 6:7). The Christian teacher, therefore, has the responsibility to guide students toward subject area truth within a biblical context. Subject matter and curricula are only methods to accomplish this goal.

Nancy Pearcey (2004) warns,

Christian education is likely to be an exercise in futility if it does not prepare our young people to confront and survive the worldview challenges that they will surely meet . . . training young people to develop a Christian mind is no longer an option; it is part of their necessary survival equipment.

Second, teaching strategies must be *student-oriented*. As each tool in a toolbox is meant for a specific purpose, each teaching strategy in the teacher's toolbox is meant for a specific student. A full, working knowledge of the learning styles of one's students can facilitate effective and appropriate teaching strategy utilization. Whether one follows the traditional, tripartite student learning styles: auditory, visual, and kinesthetic (or Fleming's (2002) VARK variation); or follows the learning style models of Gardner's (1993) Multiple Intelligences, McCarthy's (1981) 4-MAT model, Kolb's (1984)

experiential learning styles, or Myers-Briggs Type Inventory® (2004), the outcome is the same: the teacher becomes aware of the method whereby each student learns best. While this may sound like it “smacks” of Dewey’s principles of student-centered, progressive education, it does not. Proverbs 22:6 instructs parents and teachers to “Train” a child in the “way he should go.” This is a direct implication that children vary in the way they “should go” and each child is unique and special in this area. It is the Christian teacher’s responsibility to profile the learning styles of his or her students in order for truly effective teaching to take place. One of the most practical works I have come across on this topic is *The Way They Learn* (1998) by Cynthia Ulrich Tobias of AppLe St. It is also one of the few solid works that approaches the learning styles topic from a Christian perspective.

Third, teaching strategies must be *differentiated*. While the term “differentiated instruction” is a hot one in educational literature, implying a variety of means for student learning with a more qualitative than quantitative evaluative design, such is not the implication here. The point here is that the teaching strategies in a Christian teacher’s toolbox should be differentiated, or as numerous and varied in their applications as the students he or she has in the classroom. Not only should these strategies vary by students’ learning styles, but also by age/grade level of the students, cognitive functional level (gifted, standard, exceptional), and by subject and content areas being taught. The teacher who teaches all students using only his or her chosen teaching strategy is like a mechanic who is determined to use a hammer to fix every part on an automobile. Absurd? Yes, but every day in Christian schools across America, teachers are trying to “force” information into the minds of children, many of whom need only a gentle twist, turn, or tweak with the correct teaching strategy for the content to be received.

Fourth, teaching strategies must be *teacher-led*. The most crucial person in a Christian school for effective instruction and information transfer is the classroom teacher. If a teacher is not a qualified, dedicated, communicative leader in the classroom, then education will not happen effectively. It is the teacher who bears the responsibility to grow in his or her knowledge of learning styles, teaching strategies, communicative skills, technology integration, and classroom management. However, too often Christian schools are hiring “available” people to fill a space in a classroom, rather than securing trained, professional, pedagogical instructors who are prepared not only to be effective in the classroom now, but also are committed to continuing professional development that helps them be better teachers in the future. Unfortunately, when schools do hire these educational professionals, often administration does not see the need for, or provide the funds for, staff development, and teachers become stagnant. Teacher empowerment to implement cutting-edge, educational methods and the creation of a growing, learning community among faculty will foster growth and a desire to learn among students. I am glad that my automobile mechanic has been trained in the use of new, diagnosis technology that assists him in repairing my car. Otherwise he would have to guess at the problem and may, in the long run, not only fail to repair the vehicle, but also do more damage than originally existed.

Last, teaching strategies must be *evaluation-driven*. If my mechanic makes adjustments to my automobile steering, I trust that he also will test-drive the car to make sure it was the appropriate adjustment. While there is much debate in educational circles today concerning the value of measurement and evaluation in the Christian school setting, it is imperative that testing, measurement, and evaluation be utilized to the fullest extent. First, teachers ought to seek out teaching strategies and methods that have been evaluated and proven successful in other, similar settings. This information is available through educational periodicals, journals, and professional educational organizations. Second, before, during, and after the instruction of new content, formative and summative evaluative methods should be employed to measure the knowledge and mastery level of students in the content taught. Following Bloom's (1964) Taxonomy as a guide for testing has its advantages in this area. Third, curriculum planning should include a period of content remediation and re-evaluation if deemed necessary by the results of the measurements.

Educational literature, conferences, workshops and seminars, professional development, internet web sites, and university courses abound with the "newest and most effective" teaching strategies to help teachers in this endeavor to improve classroom instruction. Most can be used in virtually any classroom, however many are meant for a specific subject area, age/grade level, or cognitive ability. Teaching strategies can be generally categorized into five basic categories: (1) direct instruction, (2) inquiry-based instruction, (3) cooperative instruction, (4) information processing instruction, and (5) experiential instruction. Direct instructional strategies include: lecture, storytelling, and demonstration—anything that places the teacher as the primary and only output of information. Inquiry-based teaching strategies include any type of teaching where there is a dialogue between teacher and students or among students in which students are challenged to think through a topic and present an answer or response based on their thought processes. These include: discussions, simulations, journaling, debates, comparing/contrasting, Socratic dialoging, etc.

Cooperative instruction is making use of student groups who work together to accomplish shared goals, each group member with an assigned responsibility. Along with the content area, cooperative instruction teaches positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual and group accountability, interpersonal and small group skills, and group processing (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1993). More popular cooperative instructional strategies include Jigsaw II, STAD Student Teams, or Group Investigation. Information processing instruction includes any type of inquiry-based strategy that moves the learner to a higher order of critical thinking. It attempts to achieve the highest of the cognitive levels in each student. Some of these strategies are: memorization, KWL, reciprocal teaching, graphic organizing, scaffolding, or webbing. Finally, experiential instructional strategies include learning environments in which the student gets actively involved in the learning process, beyond simple note taking or journaling. They are strategies that provide a hands-on experience, like: role-playing, experimentation, manipulative teaching, oral book reports, etc. Most teaching strategies can be utilized in a classroom setting, in one-on-one instruction (tutoring or

mentoring), or in cooperative efforts among groups of students working together under the guidance of the teacher.

In recent years, several books have been published which attempt to organize available effective teaching strategies. The one that stands out as the most widely accepted, because of its research-based approach to the topic, is Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock's *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement* (2001). In it, the authors summarize many of the available teaching strategies into nine essential teaching strategies for a teacher. They are: (1) identifying similarities and differences, (2) summarizing and note taking, (3) reinforcing effort and providing recognition, (4) homework and practice, (5) nonlinguistic representations, (6) cooperative learning, (7) setting objectives and providing feedback, (8) generating and testing hypotheses, and (9) cues, questions, and advance organizers. Some other recommended books on the topic would include: Rutherford's *Instruction for All Students* (2002); Stronge's *Qualities of Effective Teachers* (2002); and Zepeda's *Instructional Supervision: Applying Tools and Concepts* (2003).

Conclusion

There are as many teaching strategies available to teachers as there are tools in my garage. One can get caught up with trying everything new under the sun, only to find that Solomon was right—there really is nothing “new,” (Eccl. 1:9). When a Christian school teacher chooses to step out of his or her comfort zone of status quo teaching, to learn about the students in the classroom and how they learn best, to stock his or her toolbox with research-based and practically proven instructional strategies, what becomes “new” and exciting is the teaching/learning process. When that happens, student achievement and behavior improves, parental communication and involvement increase in both quantity and quality, and our schools can truly move through this critical juncture in Christian education to become quality, educational institutions that not only excel in the spiritual realm, but also excel in instructional practice within a loving, leading, and learning community.

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