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Randy J. Siebold

Andrews University, rjs@andrews.edu

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DON'T JUST TEACH: FACILITATE LEARNING

Randy J. Siebold, PhD

Throughout the world important learning is happening in Sabbath Schools, and this is an important part of the work of the Seventh-day Adventist church. In fact, certainly it is a most important work in equipping of the church. Thoughtful Sabbath School teachers plan lessons, they show up, and as they enlighten their classes with what they've learned in their study, they engage them in a bit of discussion; from my experience in much of the world, this seems to be a typical routine.

But what if **what** people learn during Sabbath School is not as memorable, not as interesting, and not as powerful in shaping their lives as it could be? What if some people have attended Sabbath School, just to find that the whole experience seemed more like church members just talking about the same things, week after week?

It seems that if many found this crucially important time of the week less than engaging, we would find the attendance at Sabbath School shrinking. People just wouldn't take the time to come. And what would motivate them to come? If they take the time to attend and find that little in the whole experience speaks to their soul, we can see why they would, eventually, cease to attend and find something more productive to do with their time.

While many factors impact the overall Sabbath School experience and each of these, of course, should be addressed, this paper focuses on a framework for understanding the learning process addressed in Sabbath School, as well as suggesting practical help for Sabbath School teachers. Specifically, I will address, briefly, some of the challenges with the traditional model of teaching—lecture with discussion—that appears to be a common model used by many Sabbath School teachers use to lead their weekly classes. Then, I will share a framework for creating effective learning experiences with features similar to mentoring, coaching and discipleship. Using this framework to develop Sabbath School experiences potentially promises a significant return on investment for those willing to learn from the school of Christ. Finally, I will give a few examples of how this framework could be applied in Sabbath School settings. In short, giving an alternative to the traditional teaching approach, I will show how to facilitate true, deep learning in the Sabbath School.

Before I begin, however, it seems important to make a crucial point: “It is not the capabilities you now possess or ever will have that will give you success. It is that which the Lord can do for you. We need to have far less confidence in what man can do and far more confidence in what God can do for every believing soul” (White, 146). It is our personal connection with and trust in God that is the fundamental qualification of any good Sabbath School program. Thus, while learning principles and methods are clearly important and, in fact, the

primary purpose of this paper, it must be clear that a spiritual personal preparation is an essential prerequisite.

Problems With Teaching

The act of teaching, especially in schools, has been well researched over past decades. It seems clear that much of that research has focused particularly on highlighting the improvement of teaching as a way to improve schools. Yet, the results from decades of focus from many brilliant researchers with abundant financial support, the new methods and suggested practices end up merely tweaking the system and finding little overall improvement. In fact, around the world, school reform is a hot topic and the calls for change are not getting quieter. Somehow, it appears that the fundamental organization of schools, or perhaps the way we conceive of the role of a teacher may be at odds with the best way to facilitate learning.

More and more, however, the idea of learning is becoming increasingly relevant outside of schools. With disruptive innovations in the workplace and our ever-changing technologies permeating nearly every aspect of our lives, learning has become more than just something for school—it has become our very way of life. The days of learning what you need to know, and applying that same knowledge to the same task, day after day, are gone. We need to understand how people learn and then, how to facilitate learning. The focus on teaching, especially traditional teaching, is the wrong approach altogether.

When we focus on the task of teaching instead of the task of learning, we focus on the wrong outcome. While it could be argued that the purpose of teaching is for others to learn, it is, unfortunately, not always the case. As suggested previously, studies on teaching and learning have been proponents of change in the way schools operate for decades. Sadly, there has been little significant change in the actual practice of teaching in schools. Too often teachers share what they know and expect that they are causing the students to learn. But, true teaching is far more than telling, learning is much more than hearing, and education is more than just telling and listening.

Helping Others Learn

Ellen White (1903) wrote about this same challenge in the first paragraph of her book *Education*. This one paragraph does an amazing job of packaging three key principles to understanding how one truly learns: through a life-long approach, a whole-being approach, and service approach.

Our ideas of education take too narrow and too low a range. There is need of a broader scope, a higher aim. True education means more than the pursuit of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being, and with the whole period of existence possible to man. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers. It prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come (*Education*, p 13).

The critique given in the first half of this paragraph clarifies that our understanding of education, of learning, of teaching, is flawed and mistaken. She contrasts the view we too often take. We see education as the taking a class

or a course in a fixed time period in preparation for some great activity in the future; it should be seen as a life-long pursuit with the great actives as part of the educational process. We see education as primarily a mental activity; it should be seen as effecting our whole being—body, mind and spirit. We see education as a way to make us more knowledgeable, to help develop ourselves into being the best we can be; it should be seen as a process as a way to help us help others, to serve them more completely.

I believe we must start to see the role of the Sabbath School teacher in a broader light than just the 30–50 minutes on Sabbath. We must think about how our members learn, how they become truly educated. For this, we have a Divine model—the training of the disciples by Jesus.

The Teaching Process of Jesus

When one reviews the far-reaching and earth- encompassing results from a dozen so-called followers, it would be hard to argue with the statement that indeed, Jesus “is the greatest teacher the world has ever known” (Fundamentals of Christian Education, p 450). So just what are these practices and what implications might they have for our Sabbath Schools today?

Not surprisingly, Jesus also modeled the same principles found in the first paragraph of the book Education. Further, Jesus used an approach that is exactly opposite from our traditional approach to learning. Rather than starting with lecture, theory building and the like –as we find so commonly in our current system of education– He began His “teaching” by modeling the behavior and thinking that He wished His learners to use and have. After a time, He sent them out for them to have a personal experience. Upon returning, He called them apart to receive their report, and then He expanded on teaching. This brief overview (to be expanded below) reveals a different kind of educational process.

“And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men’” (Mark 1:17). These words of Jesus, used when calling His disciples, are not only a description of their outcome—to become fishers of men—but also included an description of His method—“Follow me.” Here, at the beginning of their educational journey, He does not call them to sit and listen to Him lecture, He does not give them assessments, nor does He at this point explain the life-giving principles of the kingdom of God. No! He knows better. He bids them to follow Him, walk along side of Him, and work along side of Him. In short, He bids them to observe—listen and take part as they are able. In effect, He starts by helping them experience what He wants them to be.

At the beginning of the training of His disciples, Jesus was active in ministry—walking from place to place, teaching, preaching and healing. His efforts in the process of training and educating His disciples was to expose them to His example—to the ultimate Exemplar of service and sacrifice. Looking at His activities from the perspective of instructional theory and believing that everything He did was by design—to achieve the best results—He clearly recognized His disciples first needed a demonstration of the goal to be achieved; they required the “fishers of men” theme to be modeled; they needed a behavioral example to follow. And, while the lecture was a tool He used to teach the disciples (i.e., Sermon on the Mount), it was not His first, nor was it the tool He used most often. This should cause us to consider our use (or overuse) of lecture when we teach Sabbath School, or we should see the teaching of Sabbath School as a small part of the process of becoming more like Jesus.

After following Jesus for some time, being active with Him in His ministry—watching Him heal, listening to Him teach, seeing the hearts of the listeners touched with the Divine call of the Good News—the disciples now needed another phase of their learning process. So, He sent His disciples out to do what they saw Him do. In giving some preparation for this phase of their training, Jesus gave to His disciples assurance that they could do what He did. From an instructional perspective, He gave them a chance to practice what they saw demonstrated. But they were not sent alone. They were sent two-by-two, and more importantly, they were given a Helper (Mark 6:7–8, 12–13).

In this process of letting the disciples out on their own, they shared what they had learned. This, again, is a principle of learning. “We can impart only that which we receive from Christ; and we can receive **only as we impart to others**. As we continue imparting, we continue to receive; and the more we impart, the more we shall receive.” (*Desire of Ages*, 370, emphasis supplied). This experience helped them to learn in a new way and opened their minds for additional learning to come.

Upon returning from their mission, Jesus gathered the disciples together. Here, He appeared to use an instructional technique called debriefing. Debriefing, in its many forms, is often an effective way of facilitating reflection and thus helping grow from the learning experience. “The apostles gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught” (Mark 6:30). This is often the first step in debriefing, to discuss what happened, stating in a descriptive way what had just transpired. Then, Jesus said, “Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while” (v31). Looking at this experience from the lens of an instructional theorist, this appears to be a call to continue the debriefing process and gain valuable time for bonding, reflection and peer learning.

After this, the disciples returned to following Jesus as His ministry continued. Later, there was a repetition of the sending out. This time, Jesus sent out a larger group, the 70. When they returned, they are recorded as sharing with Jesus some of their activities (starting in Luke 10:17). After this, the disciples are once again following Jesus. He continues in His active ministry in different places, still healing, still preaching, still teaching.

In essence, looking at the overall educational approach used by Jesus we find a striking contrast. Rather than starting with bringing His disciples apart (into a classroom) and sharing the principles of His kingdom in lecture, it seems He left this part for the end of their training. And, while it seems the long-term goal of most educational endeavors is to allow you to have practical experiences some day, Jesus used practical experience as His primary method of instruction.

Principles and Practices for Sabbath School Teachers

The implementation of a biblical perspective of teaching—of facilitating learning—may prove to be difficult when the world’s most common approach is quite the opposite. As we seek to better understand and implement these principles, we may find much failure before finding much success. Yet believing that the ways of God are higher than the ways of men is an essential starting point for achieving the results God designed for us.

To simplify attempts at following Jesus’ instructional approach, I have distilled the teaching strategies of Jesus into a set of principles—a framework for

facilitating learning in Sabbath School and beyond. After presenting an overview of the framework, I will give a brief overview of each of the principles and then provide some practices that may be consistent with the principles.

The Framework

1. Personal Preparation
2. Active Ministry
3. Debriefing & Reflection
4. Lecture & Discussion

Overview of Principles and Recommendations for Practice

1. Personal Preparation.

The first principle in teaching—or in guiding others to learn—(in fact in any worthwhile pursuit) must be Personal Preparation. While the preparation of the lesson materials, the location, etc. are all important, clearly the preparation of one’s self for the service of God must be paramount; a connection with Christ through His Holy Spirit is the only means by which we can be successful. This lesson becomes crystal clear in the life of Jesus. Not only did He spend His first 30 years in preparation, once He started His active ministry and became a Teacher in Israel (The Teacher), He was still, often found in prayer. Only when the teacher meets The Divine Teacher, can any learning experience, hope to facilitate learning that will prove to be a “savor of life unto life” (White, 5T, p 716).

Recommendations for Practice

- *Prayer.* Fervent supplications with a clear recognition of the teacher’s inability to complete anything by themselves will be heard and answered. The teacher needs to follow the model of Jesus’ prayers, as well as His recognition that without the Father, He could do nothing (John 8:28).
- *Bible Study.* Of course, studying the messages and stories of the Bible is a cornerstone of a relationship with God.
- *Personal ministry to others.* Personal, sacrificial service to others is a balancing activity. Too often we can think ourselves being “godly” when we have studied Scripture and prayed intently. Active ministry to others keeps us from getting too disconnected from the reality of those we wish to serve. And, recognizing that Jesus’ personal service for others did not start with His public ministry, it is clear that for us, experience in personal service is a non-negotiable to help train others to do the very same thing.

2. Active Ministry.

After calling the disciples to follow Him, Jesus’ first task was to take them into active ministry. This is how the disciples spent most of their time with Jesus, in active ministry. Today, it is clear that active ministry brings more than just demonstration to those learning; it creates situations of bonding. Within these times of challenge and success of active ministry, members build trust in the teacher, as well as in God and among themselves.

When looking at the methods that Jesus used with His disciples, it becomes clear that His first request for them was to follow. But then, later in the ministry,

He sent them out to be active, two-by-two. This “follow then lead” approach gives an opportunity for the learner to observe the culture and learn much tacit knowledge about the ministry. However, observation is not enough for truly deep learning. The process of leading and working outside of direct oversight brings one into a new understanding. The sense of responsibility is heightened and learning is taken to a new level.

Recommendations for Practice

- *Lead your Sabbath School to be active.* Be active in ministry. For many Sabbath School levels this principle will be difficult to implement. Yet many youth leaders have already discovered the insatiable craving for action in those in the transition years between children and adulthood. Further, just because this practice will be difficult to implement, we should not be discouraged. Some may find more initial success in working with a sub-group of those with stronger interest and time. Also, Sabbath School groups may at some point be strong enough to sustain service activities outside of the regularly-scheduled Sabbath School meeting time and even come to the point where there are another set of leaders for these regularly scheduled service times.
- *Keep Sabbath School activities mission-focused.* While there can be a tendency, especially in youth divisions, to cater towards entertainment, activities that are focused on reaching people's needs are often deeply fulfilling and bring lasting happiness.
- *Partner with current church ministries.* Often para-church ministries or departments of the church are looking for volunteers to help with current projects. These collaborative efforts can bring quick “wins” to help encourage progress in implementing a more active Sabbath School approach.
- *Encourage individual ministries.* While Jesus worked much directly with His disciples, He also sent them out two-by-two to engage in active ministry by themselves. Because we have much to learn about how to engage in active ministry in each given situation, it seems essential for members to find ways to engage their gifts for the service of others.

3. Debriefing & Reflection.

In this principle, I combine the activities of debriefing (primarily with groups) and reflection (primarily an individual activity) as they are closely tied together both in practical function, as well as in Scripture. Remember what Jesus did after the two-by-two ministry of the disciples; Jesus listened to His disciples share what happened, and then brought them apart, “to rest awhile.” This approach seems to point to the activities involved in the instructional practices of both debriefing and reflection. Debriefing can be framed by following three questions.

- *What happened?* This first step focuses on answering the question with facts. When two or more are debriefing the same event, this question helps to get a more objective account of what happened and also helps to clear up misconceptions.
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- *What was your response to what happened?* Here the emotions have permission to come out and those being debriefed can have a chance to tell their experience or reaction to what happened. This gives each one an opportunity to describe how they have made sense of the experience(s).
- *How do you want to respond in the future?* This question deals with clarifying the learning and projecting it into future thoughts, emotions and actions. It helps bring the conversation of the experience towards a learning outcome.

Reflection is an important personal practice in self-learning. John Dewey, it has been claimed, made the statement, “We don’t learn by experience, we learn by reflecting on experience” (“John Dewey Quotes” n.d.). Regardless of who made the statement, it is important to recognize the power of reflecting on important learning experiences.

Recommendations for Practice.

- Facilitate a formal debriefing after ministry events. The power of a well-facilitated debriefing can be quite strong. Times of ministry are often filled with many conversations, interactions, and observations. Debriefing helps to expand ones’ own personal perspective as they hear other perspectives and also helps to hone in on the most important outcomes from the event. Use the above three-question process to facilitate the debriefing.
- Recommend journaling to your Sabbath School members. Journaling can be a powerful way of facilitating learning through reflection. With short class times and active ministry times, it may be difficult to facilitate a specific time for reflection. However, once learners experience the power of journaling to strengthen their learning as well as their intellectual and emotional growth, they are often excited to continue the practice.

4. Lecture & Discussion.

When used in support of active learning experiences, lecture is an essential component for teaching to facilitate learning. The benefits of lecture are obvious. Chief among these must certainly be the efficiency and effectiveness of communicating concepts and ideas. Further, when lecture is combined with discussion, it becomes even more powerful in individual and group learning.

Recommendations for Practice

- *Keep lectures relevant and short.* To be effective at all, lectures must be relevant to the listeners. Studying students in higher education, Middendorf and Kalish (1996) explain the importance of keeping lectures short (about 15 minutes or less). However, when members of a Sabbath School are coming with the intention to discuss the lesson, it seems any lecture should be much shorter.

Conclusion

The way Sabbath School is often done today is more about teaching rather than learning and teaching is too often a lecture with, perhaps, discussion. Yet the model that Jesus followed is an activity-first approach. He asked His new

disciples to “Follow Him.” In this command, He shared an important principle of learning—activity is the basis of understanding. Of course, His methods were more comprehensive than just activity. The framework proposed in this chapter included:(1) Personal Preparation, (2) Active Ministry, (3) Debriefing & Reflection, and (4) Lecture & Discussion. Following brief descriptions of each of these principles, suggested practices were recommended. I am confident that as we rely in Him who created heaven and earth, He will be faithful to support us in our work to “follow Him.” Because, “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6).
