

# Making Decisions About the Content of Staff-Development Programs

*Just as important as the processes—if not more so—is the content of in-service training.*

BY WILLIAM H. GREEN

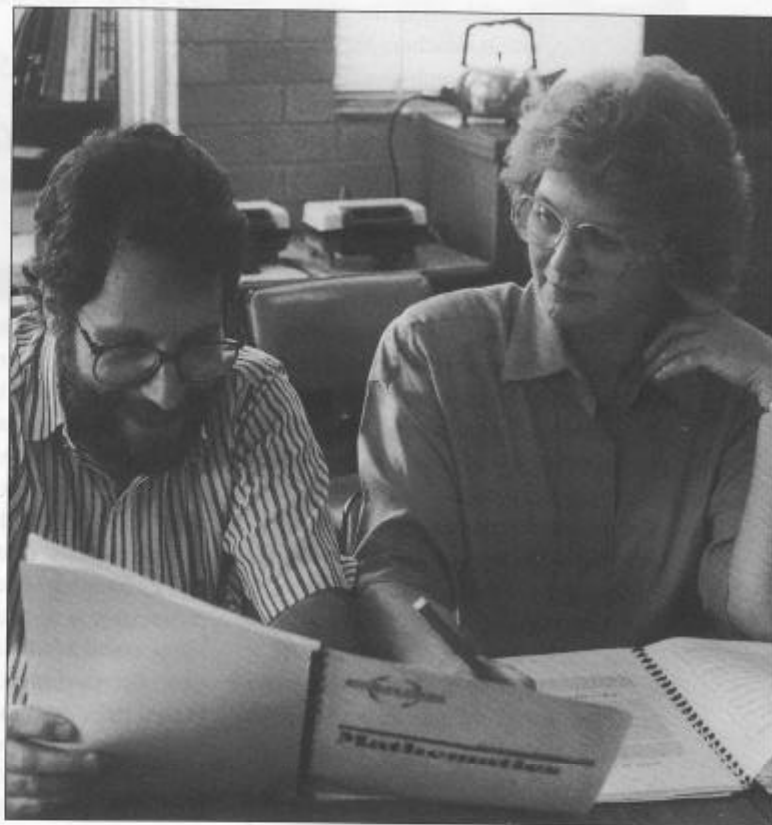
**H**ow do teachers learn to be more effective in the classroom? The processes involved in this transformation are usually the focus of attention. In fact, this issue of the JOURNAL deals with processes such

as teacher study groups, mentoring, and university courses that are intended to improve teachers' skills. Good training and follow-up can make the difference between implementing or losing valuable skills. But just as important as the processes—if not more so—is the *content* of such training.

On what should we base staff-development decisions? Perceived need? Common interest? Current fads? What criteria should we use? Suggestions from colleagues? Recommendations from superiors? State certification requirements?

Listed below are three criteria for making decisions about the content of staff-development programs. Although not exhaustive, they will help to direct the decision-making processes:

1. What does current research recommend?
2. Does the content fit our goals? and
3. Do the methods and content reflect our Christian values?





### Heading the Research

Decisions about staff development should be informed by research. Teachers should seek through various means to acquaint themselves with the findings of research that relates to their questions and problems in the classroom. In addition, teachers should design new action research around their own work and that of their students. Such research should deal primarily with student learning.

Recently, Dennis Sparks' review of research on staff development<sup>1</sup> revealed that three forces are dramatically changing this area. The first is results-driven education. The practice of basing staff-development programs on the courses students take or the grades they get, or even on appealing textbooks is not a valid one, according to Burton.<sup>2</sup> Experts now measure the effectiveness of staff-development programs by the improvements they produce in teaching skills and the resulting changes in student learning.

Currently, a major concern in staff development is its effect on what students know and are able to do. Teachers are asking, Do the methods help students to succeed? Do they promise a wide variety of positive outcomes? Do

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they have a research background indicating that they work? Joyce and Showers<sup>3</sup> maintain that it is possible to select staff-development programs with known effects upon student learning.

According to Sparks, a second element changing staff development is the shift to systems thinking. This means that a change in one part of an organization may precipitate significant—and often unintended—changes in another part. For example, if students are expected to be computer literate when they enter college, what effect does that have on subjects that are taught in academies? In grade schools? How does it

affect teacher training? Equipment needs? Obviously, making improvements in one level or area of education may have far-reaching implications for other areas.

Senge<sup>4</sup> describes the steps it takes to become a "learning organization," one in which change is viewed as a system-wide process. The implication for the Seventh-day Adventist educational system is that we need to adopt division-wide, union-wide, and conference-wide staff-development programs.

Sparks' third element is constructivism, which assumes that learning results from interaction between student and environment—not because of a transmittal from teacher to student. According to this theory, students use new and past experiences and information to "build" knowledge in their minds. In terms of staff development, constructivism encourages interaction and generates collaboration among teachers, administrators, and researchers as it supplants traditional passive training methods. Constructivism also supports cooperative structures, such as study groups, in which educators complement one another's strengths and learn from each other. Accordingly, more emphasis should be placed on small-group practices like those used in the Carolina Conference and described elsewhere in this issue.

### Research-Based Staff-Development Practices

Several changes in staff development have been produced by results-driven education, systems thinking, and constructivism. Sparks identifies 11 that he believes are the most important. (In Figure 1, I have organized these into categories.)

If our decisions about staff development were informed by research, what would we see and hear? Based upon the findings reported above, what should our organizations promote in their staff-development programs? What are the implications for practice? Can we, for example, justify implementing a staff-development program if its content does not ensure a high level of student learning?

## Meeting Our Goals

What do we want our students to know and be able to do? I have asked

that question of groups of public- and private-school educators around the world. Everywhere, I have found that

the lists are similar. Indeed, with one exception, their goals fit nicely into the four categories suggested by research by Goodlad, Sirotnik, and their colleagues<sup>5</sup>: (1) academic, (2) social/civic, (3) personal, and (4) career. However, what is obviously missing here is the most important category for Christian educators, the spiritual/moral component. Since his original study, Goodlad has acknowledged this lack and has written about the moral dimensions of teaching.<sup>6</sup>

In general, teachers and parents believe that when students graduate, they should be able to do the following (some of the skills fit into more than one category):

### **Academic**

- Think critically
- Understand written material
- Think creatively
- Be self-directed learners
- Be lifelong learners
- Read and compute

### **Social/Civic**

- Interact constructively in groups of adults or peers
- Be lifelong learners
- Be productive citizens
- Be actively involved in their churches and communities
- Appreciate other cultures

### **Personal**

- Display healthy self-concepts

### **Career**

- Be lifelong learners
- Get and keep jobs

### **Spiritual**

- Know and understand God
- Love Jesus

The list is, of course, incomplete. Furthermore, it is difficult to satisfy these requirements in the traditional classroom. During 92 percent of the time that Goodlad, Sirotnik, and their colleagues spent observing K-12 classrooms across the United States,<sup>7</sup> they saw what they termed lecture/recitation/management. Which of the above goals are we achieving if lecture, recitation, and management consume most of our classroom time? Almost none.

## Figure 1 Changes in Staff Development Produced by Results-Driven Education, Systems Thinking, and Constructivism

### Learning Outcomes

*Old Focus*  
Adult needs

*New Focus*  
Student needs and learning

### Training Issues

*Old Focus*  
Staff-development training that one attends away from the job

*New Focus*  
Multiple forms of job-embedded learning

Experts transmit knowledge and skills to teachers

Teachers study instruction and learning processes

Generic instructional skills

A combination of generic and content-specific skills

Staff developers function primarily as trainers

Staff developers provide consultation, planning, and facilitation services, as well as training

### Systems/Organizational Issues

*Old Focus*  
Individual development

*New Focus*  
Individual development plus organizational development

Fragmented, piecemeal improvement efforts

Staff development driven by a clear, coherent strategic plan for the school district, each school, and the departments that serve schools

District-focused approaches to staff development

School-focused approaches to staff development

Staff development provided by one or two departments

Staff development as a critical function and major responsibility performed by all administrators and teacher leaders

Teachers as the primary recipients of staff development

Continuous improvement in performance for everyone who affects student learning

Staff development seen as a "frill" that can be cut during difficult financial times

Staff development seen as an essential and indispensable process without which schools cannot hope to prepare young people for citizenship and productive employment



Let's look at the problem from another angle, this time in terms of Bloom's levels of learning<sup>8</sup>: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. If 92 percent of their time is spent in lecture and recitation, then students are not moving past Bloom's first and second levels, which ask only that they be able to name, recall, summarize, or paraphrase information. As a result, they gain only a superficial understanding of the information. Certainly, the lecture-and-recitation method does not teach students to apply the new information to other situations or to analyze it, integrate it with previous knowledge, or evaluate it.

What is going on in Adventist classrooms? New teaching methods? New ways of organizing information? New approaches to problem solving and making decisions? Attention given to developing life skills as well as to accumulating facts?

What we are likely to see is teachers and students relying on textbooks and other textual materials.<sup>9</sup> One study concluded that more than 90 percent of the questions asked in economics textbooks deal with Bloom's two lowest levels—knowledge and comprehension.<sup>10</sup> This is often true of other textbooks as well. As a result, how many of our stated



goals are being met? Not many. Our methods and materials do not match our goals. We need strong staff-development programs, combined with supporting materials that enable us to teach differently.

What materials are needed to support this kind of teaching? Price Pritchett, in his little book *The Employee Handbook of New Work Habits for a Radically Changing World: Thirteen Ground Rules for Job Success in the Information Age*<sup>11</sup> makes several points that we need to heed:

Work is going global as we enter the Information Age. Industrial countries' economies are shifting more toward services and knowledge transformation. Consider, for example, just a few facts from Pritchett's book that illustrate the

impact of the Information Age on American society:

- More information has been produced in the past 30 years than during the previous 5,000.
- A weekday edition of the *New York Times* contains more information than the average person was likely to come across in a lifetime in 17th century England.
- The supply of information available to us doubles at least every five years.

The picture is clear. So how should we teach? What should go on in schools? What goals do we need to adopt? What staff-development practices will help us to achieve those goals? The answers should also be clear.

### Christian Values

Our young people are our greatest resource and the only reason our church schools exist. Therefore, we constantly need to ask ourselves the following questions: How would Christ have taught this concept? What would it look and sound like in His "classroom"? What do my teaching methods reveal about God to my students?

When we look at Christ's teaching methods, we find that He frequently used metaphoric methods such as parables and stories. Keeping this in mind, do we emphasize metaphoric thought in our curricula? In our teaching? In our staff-development programs? Can we discover specific methods that enable us to do this kind of teaching?

Perhaps we can learn to teach metaphorically if we study Christ's teaching from a methodological viewpoint. Let's take the episode of the lawyer who tried to trap Jesus by asking two questions: "What shall I do to gain eternal life?" and "Who is my neighbor?" In answering him, Jesus used a number of teaching methods that we think of as modern inventions. For example, He employed effective questioning techniques, an advance organizer, and inductive thought processes.

Learning to use Christ's techniques can be enjoyable and productive for teachers. But these approaches do not

necessarily come naturally. We often need training and practice before we can teach in powerful new ways such as those that Jesus used.

### Conclusion

The topic of professional imperatives is covered in detail in "The Promise Is in the Practice: Professional Imperatives" in an earlier issue of the JOURNAL.<sup>12</sup> At a minimum, Adventist teachers should know and use the following teaching methods:

- Dimensions of learning (Marzano, et al)<sup>13</sup>
- Models of teaching (Joyce, et al)<sup>14</sup>
- Cooperative learning (Kagan and others,<sup>15</sup> see also the April/May 1995 issue of the JOURNAL)
- Integrated thematic instruction (Kovalik,<sup>16</sup> see also Tom and Kathy Roosma<sup>17</sup> in an earlier issue of the JOURNAL)
- Use of multiple intelligences (Gardner and others,<sup>18</sup> see also Oliver<sup>19</sup> and Michaelis<sup>20</sup> in earlier issues of the JOURNAL)
- Use of learning styles (McCarthy and others)<sup>21</sup>
- Use of technology
- Distance learning (see Pittman<sup>22</sup>)
- Biblical values and character development

Have we left anything important off our list? Probably. I think immediately of three topics that are currently being hotly debated. One is home schooling. How should we relate to this growing practice? Another is special education. Do we provide inclusive education in our schools?<sup>23</sup> The third is multicultural education. How can we meet the educational needs of a multicultural student body and prepare students to live in a world of diversity?<sup>24</sup>

Two more ideas must be considered. How do we train ourselves to think and behave in widely different ways from the ones we have used in the past? What methods should we use? Several articles in this issue address these questions.

The second idea is a key one. We need to commit ourselves to creating a learning community. Research supports the idea of learning in a group.

## We need to adopt division-wide, union-wide, and conference-wide staff-development programs.

Doing so relates directly to our goals, and follows Christ's methods.

The future is incredibly exciting. We know that God will be with us if we ask Him for guidance, remembering the way in which we have been led in the past. ☞

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