

Instructional Strategies for Integrating Faith and Learning

How does a teacher actually integrate faith in the teaching/learning experience?

As Christian educators, we recognize that in Seventh-day Adventist schools, an authentic integration of faith and learning must occur throughout the academic enterprise. But how do we go from theory to practice, from belief to action? How does a teacher actually integrate faith in the teaching/learning experience?

Rather than starting from scratch, we can benefit from knowing what strategies other teachers have used successfully. These approaches fall into four broad categories: Contextual, Illustrative, Conceptual, and Experiential (see Figure 1). All four are necessary to the integration of faith and

scriptive. The name of the school, for example, may include the word *Christian* or identify the institution as belonging to a particular denomination. Official statements may define the mission of the school as "wholistic" and "redemptive," or as "preparing

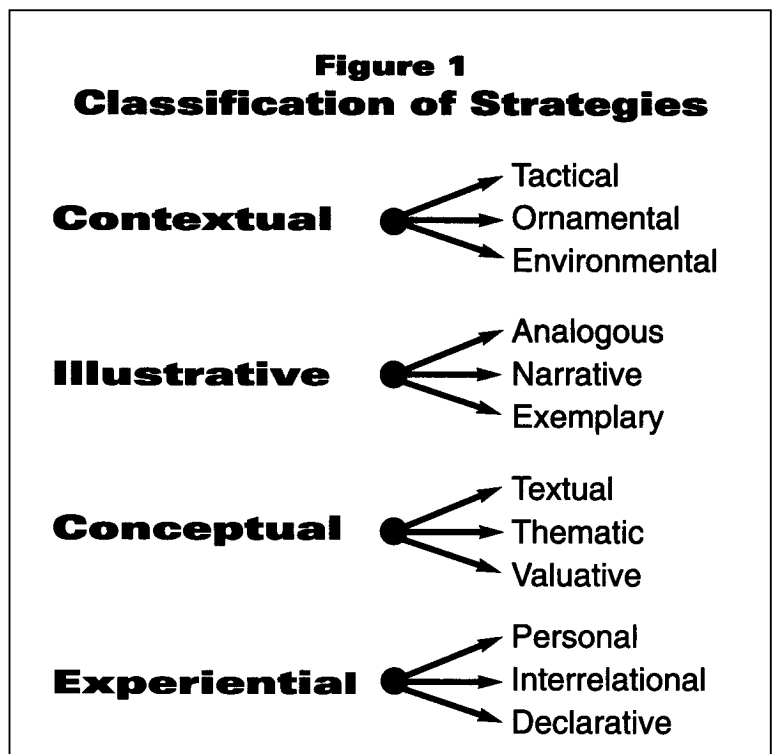
students for eternal life." Institutional policies may stipulate the hiring of only church members, who must adhere to a prescribed code of conduct. Course descriptions may include such terms as "character-building," "ethical," "moral," and "biblical" in an at-

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learning, with no hierarchy implied. Within each grouping, however, certain strategies are more effective and powerful than others.

Contextual Strategies

Tactical methods are primarily de-



achieve an effective integration of faith and learning.

Illustrative Strategies

In His teaching, Christ frequently utilized parables to convey spiritual truth.¹ Similarly, the apostles employed metaphors of mirrors, waves, and thieves, among others. Analogous² strategies seek to replicate this approach in Christian education.

While some similes, such as “God is like a circle—He has no end” or “Two and two are always four—God never changes” border on the trivial and superficial, others, such as a comparison of the Trinity to the three states of water,³ the components of a computer to the various functions of the church, or the immune system to divine agencies that repel attacks of the enemy, call for deeper thought processes and may help concrete thinkers to grasp spiritual truth. Allegories that contain a spiritual moral, such as *Pilgrim’s Progress*, *Hinds’ Feet on High Places*,⁴ *Flatland*,⁵ or *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis, can serve a similar purpose.

Perhaps the most important form of analogy, however, is linking the curriculum with spiritual factors in one’s personal life. In discussing the implications of probability, for example, a mathematics teacher might relate this to personal decision-making, where one must carefully weigh the evidence while recognizing that only God can see the complete picture. In studying natural selection in a science course, the instructor can help students see that personal adaptability and flexibility may make them more effective in carrying out the gospel commission under diverse and often difficult circumstances.

Use of personal analogy can also enhance students’ understanding. The teacher can ask: “If you were a social worker, how would you react to evidence of child abuse?” or “How would you feel if you were a rundown church building where people met each Sabbath?” Such strategies not only encourage creative and analytical thinking, but also point to new dimensions of spiritual truth.

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Environmental strategies offer a powerful means of inseparably linking faith and learning in the instructional setting.

tempt to convey the spiritual dimension of the academic program.

These are, of course, important parts of an integrated approach. They seek to fulfill the divine injunction to be the “light of the world” (Matthew 5:14-16). However, they may be mere window-dressing if faith is not incorporated into the program in other ways.

Ornamental strategies can enhance the spiritual influence of the school environment. In some institutions, for example, biblical passages or quotations expressing moral principles are posted at various locations across campus. Attractive bulletin-board displays focus on Christian topics, and classrooms are decorated with pictures of Christ and other Bible heroes. Although helpful, such strategies, of themselves, cannot create a spiritual context for learning.

Environmental strategies offer a powerful means of inseparably linking faith and learning in the instructional setting. They deal with the “hidden

curriculum”: the school’s organization, classroom structure, student-teacher and student-student interactions, and co-curricular activities. Factors that shape the learning environment include leadership style, disciplinary methods, classroom management, and ambiance. Is the focus of discipline primarily punitive or redemptive? Is assessment carried out principally for the benefit of the teacher or of the student? Are students given an opportunity to voice personal opinions and to make choices? Do teachers treat students as mindless second-rate citizens or as fellow human beings? What is the overall ambiance of the school?

To effectively integrate faith and learning, Christian educators must bring the hidden curriculum to the surface. What subliminal messages are transmitted through the instructional setting? Do they enhance rather than deter spiritual growth? Only when the school combines a genuinely Christian instructional environment with tactical and ornamental strategies will it

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Narrative strategies are another illustrative approach. The teacher provides or requests students to find Christian examples of a particular topic under consideration. The illustration might be a story from the Bible that highlights a particular point, such as the story of the talents

(Matthew 25) when studying business investments, the case of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15) when studying cultural differences, or the contention between Paul and Peter (Galatians 2) when discussing conflict resolution. Stories from the lives of notable Christians can also be used, such as Mother

Teresa when studying about India or prominent Christians from the history of a particular discipline (e.g., Comenius, Pestalozzi, or Horace Mann in the development of modern education).

Even more effective, however, are personal narratives that provide a spiritual perspective on the topic under study. As teachers and students share their experiences, this will highlight the truths of the gospel in fresh and meaningful ways.

Modeling is probably the most powerful illustrative method. By using *exemplary* strategies, teachers seek to reveal through their lives what they want students to become.⁶ Students, for instance, must see in Christian teachers a thirst for knowledge and a commitment to finding and sharing spiritual perspectives on the subject area. Students need to perceive the teacher's trust in God, in His plan, and in His revelation. They must also sense the teacher's confidence in each student's potential, through the grace of God.

Students are often more impressed by what the teacher *does* than by what he or she *says*. The teacher's *ethics*—how he or she treats students, deals

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Figure 2
Sample Integrational Themes in Selected Disciplines

Arts	Business	Geography	History	Language	Math
Beauty	Accountability	Association	Beginning/end	Balance	Assumption
Celebration	Authority	Change	Conflict	Collaboration	Constant/variable
Contrast	Control	Choice	Consequence	Communication	Equality
Creativity	Debt	Cooperation	Continuity	Curiosity	Infinity
Culture	Decision	Disaster	Evidence	Evidence	Limit
Emotion	Economy	Diversity	Greatness	Feeling	Logic
Excellence	Efficiency	Ecology	Heritage	Heroes	Measurement
Expression	Equity	Environment	Independence	Imagery	Opposite
Flexibility	Freedom	Extinction	Influence	Interaction	Order
Harmony/discord	Investment	Globalization	Interdependence	Metaphor	Precision
Meaning	Mission	Interaction	Liberty	Mood	Probability
Medium	Organization	Interdependence	Nation	Persuasion	Problem/solution
Pattern	Planning	Management	Pattern	Plot	Proof
Perspective	Product	Migration	Peace	Purpose	Proportion
Pleasure	Profit/loss	Nation	Progress	Reality	Quantity/quality
Reality	Quality	Pollution	Revolution	Sensitivity	Set/subset
Repetition	Service	Poverty	Slavery	Simplicity	Sign/symbol
Talent	Stewardship	Preservation	Time	Structure	System
Truth	Success	Resources	Triumph	Surprise	Transformation
Unity	Teamwork	Restoration	Viewpoint	Uniqueness	Whole/fraction

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with controversial issues, and enforces rules—can graphically illustrate the integration of faith and learning, or the lack thereof (1 Thessalonians 2:7-12).

Conceptual Strategies

Instructional methodologies lie at the heart of the integration process. Textual strategies identify scriptural

passages relating to a particular topic and then incorporate them into the teaching/learning experience. Some teachers begin their classes with a short devotional period—a verse from the Bible, followed by prayer. This can be meaningful if the passage relates to the concepts being discussed and the teacher helps students understand the relationship.

More important, however, is using Scripture at appropriate times throughout the semester. This can be done by identifying the core concepts to be taught and seeking out related biblical passages, perhaps with the aid of a topical concordance or computer software.

For example, a history course

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**Figure 2, Continued
Sample Integrational Themes in Selected Disciplines**

Physical Ed	Psychology	Church	Science	Sociology	Technology
Attitude	Behavior	Church	Adaptability	Allegiance	Accuracy
Competition	Commitment	Death	Cause/effect	Career	Artificial Intelligence
Confidence	Dependence	Faith	Conservation	Citizenship	Confidentiality
Coordination	Dignity	Forgiveness	Design	Community	Control
Defense	Disability	God	Energy	Corruption	Copyright
Development	Giftedness	Gospel	Future	Custom	Ethics
Endurance	Growth	Grace	Healing	Family	Information
Enjoyment	Human nature	Heaven	Heredity	Free choice	Initiative
Fairness	Individuality	Inspiration	Instrument	Freedom	Integrity
Fitness	Intelligence	Judgment	Life	Government	Invention
Health	Marriage	Law	Nature	Institution	Limitation
Injury	Mind	Love	Origin	Justice/injustice	Perseverance
Lifestyle	Morality	Persecution	Research	Minority	Piracy
Recreation	Motive	Praise	Resources	Neighbor	Power
Rest	Need	Prayer	Survival	Prejudice	Privacy
Self-esteem	Personality	Prophecy	Symbiosis	Privilege	Process
Sportsmanship	Relationship	Salvation	System	Responsibility	Reliability
Strategy	Self-worth	Sin	Theory/fact	Role	Security
Team	Sexuality	Witness	Universe	Society	Skills
Winning/losing	Violence	Worship	Validity	Tradition	Tools

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could discuss relevant topics such as nationalism (Acts 22:25; Philippians 3:20), justice (Micah 6:8), equality (Galatians 3:28), freedom (John 8:32) integrity (Proverbs 20:7), respect (Matthew 7:12), and historical periods (Daniel 12:4). In the same manner, pertinent portions of Scripture can be identified in any discipline.

Entire class periods can be devoted to establishing a Christian perspective for a particular unit or subject area. The teacher can thus illustrate how the Word of God speaks with relevance to all aspects of life. If a subject or topic is significant enough to study in school, surely there are portions of Scripture that relate to its themes.

Thematic strategies offer an effective way to integrate faith and learning. Integrational themes appear in every discipline (see Figure 2) and may be identified by examining course goals and objectives, unit titles, and a list of core concepts and terms. Or faculty members can work through the major topics of systematic theology, asking how each concept touches the foundations of their discipline and how they can use these themes as points of integration.

Either way, once the teacher has identified specific themes embedded in the course content, he or she can look for ways to candidly examine these concepts from a distinctively Christian perspective. This means viewing each theme in the light of the great controversy between good and evil and the gospel commission. It means relating the theme to the character of God and His plan for humanity and the universe. This will help students discover spiritual insights and develop Christian attitudes and convictions. Thematic strategies can help students form a Christian worldview that encompasses all topics and subject areas.

Valuative strategies focus on the relevant issues and ethical implications of each subject. Plagiarism, for example, has relevance in the arts, business, literature, technology, and even mathematics (e.g., the Newton-Leibniz controversy or Cardan's "theft" of the cubic solution method from Tartaglia). The ethical implications of a right to privacy could be studied in business, psychology, technology, and research. The issue of vegetarianism

could be examined in geography (overpopulation and food production), science (health concerns), philosophy (animal rights), and religion courses (original diet and Levitical laws).

- Business subjects can include topics relating to equitable taxation, fair profit, monopolization, unionization and worker strikes, declaration of bankruptcy, sexual harassment, and deception in advertising.

- Issues in geography include immigration policies, squatter settlements, foreign aid and national debt, the exploitation of natural resources, and waste disposal.

- Physical-education courses might discuss competition, deception, sponsors, contracts, and hormone enhancement.

- In psychology, issues include hypnosis, IQ testing, sexual expression, codependency, dealing with a counselee's threat of harm to self or others, and securing informed consent from persons with psychological impairments.

- Scientific issues include global warming, cloning, animal experimentation, abortion, euthanasia, nuclear energy, and waste recycling.

- A social studies class could

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study issues such as sexism, racism, and nationalism; AIDS, birth control, the recreational use of drugs; pressure groups, conflicts of interest, public welfare, and compulsory voting.

- Issues in technology include piracy, hacking, computer fraud, encryption, viruses, net etiquette, robotization, artificial intelligence, intellectual property rights, and privacy at the work site.

How should Christian teachers present controversial topics? The most effective strategy is to frankly describe or ask students to research the various perspectives on the issue, then discuss the rationale for each, in terms of biblical principles. As they prepare their reports, students should be encouraged to engage in ethical reasoning and develop a personal position based on a Christian perspective. They should ask: "What are the facts in the case, including contributing causes and possible consequences? What are the purposes God intended for this area of human activity? What Christian response is called for in this kind of case or situation?"⁷ Answering these questions helps students embrace Christian values and ethical conduct.

Teachers should also share their own Bible-based, faith-oriented perspective with the students while being open to questions, comments, and even objections. The teacher's role is that of a knowledgeable guide, rather than arbiter. This, of course, carries a precondition—teachers must know for themselves why they believe. They must think deeply and Christianly about the subjects they will discuss with students.

Experiential Strategies

Students need to not only learn about God, but also to have a personal relationship with Him. Faith must be experienced. *Personal* strategies seek to help students experience faith and grow close to God.

To accomplish this goal, the teacher must take a personal interest in each student and seek out opportunities to discuss spiritual things. This dialogue may take the form of informal chats, interviews, or counseling

sessions. It may involve a discussion of some problem or decision the student is facing, or the celebration of a milestone or achievement. At times, it may also be appropriate to pray with and for the student.

As part of the academic program, students should be given the opportunity at strategic junctures to explore the great questions of life—Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? How do I know what is right? What is wrong around and within me? What is the solution? To do this, students may be asked to produce position papers, engage in group discussion, or keep a reflective journal. The effectiveness of

learning and service.

Cooperative learning has not only been thoroughly researched and widely promoted,⁸ it also corresponds to a scriptural principle: "Everyone helped his neighbor, and said to his brother, 'Be of good courage!'" (Isaiah 41:6, NKJV).⁹ "We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak" (Romans 15:1). "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2, NIV).¹⁰

Christian teachers should seek to eliminate or de-emphasize activities that foster rivalry,¹¹ replacing them with collaborative projects, small group discussions, student mentoring, fieldwork dyads, role-play, and group investigation. This will help students to better understand others' circumstances and to actively contribute to

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these activities will be enhanced if the school provides a prayer garden, prayer chapel, or quiet spots of beauty on campus, as well as weekend retreats, class sessions held in natural settings, and wilderness survival programs.

Interrelational methods help students to interact with others in ways that enhance faith and learning. Two interrelational strategies that have been proved effective are cooperative

their well-being while working toward a shared goal.

Service is similarly a Christian mandate. Christ told His disciples, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35), and the Apostle Paul exhorted the Christian believers, "Through love serve one another" (Galatians 5:13). Each course should incorporate a variety of subject-related service activities, both within and out-

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side the institution. These may include projects relating to campus beautification and community conservation, outreach to the poor and homeless, alcohol and drug prevention programs, and mission trips, as well as adopt-a-school or adopt-a-grandparent projects.

Declarative strategies focus on Christian witness. "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The primary purpose of a Christian school is not to insulate students from the world but to prepare them to effectively represent Jesus Christ in every setting (John 17:15-18).

Teachers must consciously include in their course requirements activities that will equip students to communicate God's truth. A variety of media can be used—mime, speeches, articles, radio spots, posters, songs, and works of art. The message itself can focus on health, conservation, interpersonal relationships, personal experiences, or specific moral values. Whatever the format or content, the goal is to help students to develop a worldview in which they see themselves as active witnesses for God.

A Concluding Thought

Some years ago, I encountered a question that goes to the heart of this topic: "How does being a Christian af-

fect how you teach your subject?" If I have learned anything, it is that the integration of faith and learning does not result from the application of some secret technique or magic formula. Rather, it requires a foundational understanding of Christian education, a personal commitment to think and teach Christianly, and a focused effort to develop and deploy effective integrational strategies.

The good news is that we are not alone in this endeavor. Christ has given us the Holy Spirit, who will guide us into all truth (John 16:13). He has promised us wisdom (Proverbs 15:2), if we will but ask in faith (James 1:5, 6). And He has given us power: "All things are possible to him who believes" (Mark 9:23). As we seek to follow in the footsteps of the Master Teacher, we may reach out and claim the promise, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). ✍

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See Matthew 11:16; 13:31, 33, 44, 47, 52; and Luke 6:47-49; 7:32.
2. See 2 Corinthians 3:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:2-4; and James 1:6.
3. Harold Heie and David L. Wolfe, *The Reality of Christian Learning* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1987).
4. Hannah Hurnard, *Hinds' Feet on High Places* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1977).
5. E. A. Abbott, *Flatland* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).
6. See John 13:15; 15:12-17; Luke

6:40; Philippians 3:17; and 2 Thessalonians 3:9.

7. Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans, 1987).

8. Arthur K. Ellis, and Jeffrey T. Fouts, *Research on Educational Innovations*. Larchmont, N.Y.: Eye on Education, 1997); David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson, *Learning Together and Alone: Cooperative, Competitive, and Individualistic Learning* (Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 1994); Robert E. Slavin, "Synthesis of Research on Cooperative Learning" in Allan C. Ornstein and Linda S. Behar-Horenstein, *Contemporary Issues in Curriculum* (Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, 1999), pp. 103-203.

9. Unless otherwise indicated, Bible texts quoted in this article are from The New King James Version, © 1979, 1980, 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc., Publishers. All rights reserved. Texts credited to NIV are from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*, © 1973, 1978, International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

10. See also Exodus 17:12; Nehemiah 2:17, 18; 4:16; Daniel 1:11-16; Mark 6:7-13; and 2 Corinthians 8:13, 14.

11. See Alfie Kohn, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992) and Matthew 20:25-28; 23:5-11; Romans 12:10; 2 Corinthians 10:12; and Galatians 6:4.

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