

The FUN FACTOR

How Active Enjoyment Impacts Learning

BY BILL MORELAN

In today's prevailing culture of "success at any cost," we seem to have forgotten that learning should be an enjoyable thing to do.

"THE OTHER NIGHT, I HAD A DREAM my books were squishing me and pencils were stabbing me!"

Fifth-grader Edward Lynch recently shared this disturbing nightmare with *TIME* magazine's Wendy Cole on the eve of North Carolina's elementary promotion exams. Cole found similar testing anxieties in many of Edward's classmates. One student confided, "I have friends who throw up the night before tests."¹

In today's frenzied rush for "accountability" and ongoing obsession with standardized test scores, perhaps we've lost sight of a fundamental truth: Learning should be FUN!

Failure and Fear

Recognizing this growing problem, Roger Shank, professor emeritus and founding director of the Institute for the Learning Sciences, expressed concern about the growing academic anxiety in

schools. "The children of today dread going back to school in September, dread exams, dread receiving their grades, and are generally fearful. No wonder school is stressful!"²

Jim Tucker, former professor at Andrews University's School of Education in Berrien Springs, Michigan, and principal advisor of a work group for the California Department of Education examining preferred practices in teaching, shares Shank's concern. In a recent discussion of this topic, he strongly condemned methods that diminish a child's love for learning, referring to such practices as "pedagogical child abuse."³

In today's prevailing culture of "success at any cost," we seem to have forgotten that learning should be an enjoyable thing to do. Just look at any group of 4-year-olds. Watch as they joyfully explore their world—as they examine, build, and create.

And although they usually call it a "hobby," adults are no strangers to the joy of learning, either. Whether it's a gourmet cook,

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a rock hound, or a gardener, ask the enthusiast a simple question and you'll often set off an intellectual avalanche as the person excitedly attempts to share everything he or she has learned.

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Physiological Connections

It's important to understand that this problem appears to run much deeper than mere emotionalism. Some brain researchers see increasing evidence of physiological connections.

Based on discussions with other researchers, Arlene Taylor, a brain researcher from St. Helena Hospital in California, explains how the process might work. "In the Limbic system, the pair of amygdalae contain a 'switching mechanism' that helps us transfer information from short-term memory into long-term memory. When information comes to the brain with 'emotional amplitude,' the information actually bypasses the switching mechanism, and goes directly into long-term memory. This is how the stimulation of 'fun' appears to enhance memory retention."⁴

Pierce Howard, author of a massive synthesis of research and development in brain-based learning, recently predicted that such research could create several paradigm shifts with implications for teaching and learning. One important change is a major shift in emphasis from external to internal motivation.⁵ As many elementary teachers can testify, such a shift often occurs as a natural consequence when children actively enjoy the learning process.

Arthur Ellis, a respected reviewer of educational innovations, notes that "researchers at the UCLA Medical Center have discovered that children below the age of 10 have brain activity that is unusually rich in the secretion of theta waves, thought to be associated with creativity. Whether in the future this knowledge will stop teachers from handing out worksheet after worksheet to these naturally creative little characters remains a matter for speculation."⁶

Taking this concept even farther, Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer suggests that emergent findings in brain-mind research simply do not support many widely accepted teaching methods.⁷ She

concludes that concepts such as "basic facts must be thoroughly memorized," "focusing on one thing at a time is most productive," "rote memorization ought to be a staple of learning," "intelligence means knowing a lot of information," and "all questions have simple right and wrong answers" are myths with no solid foundation in educational research.

Langer's studies suggest that this type of "overlearning" tends to stifle insight and individuality, and she encourages educators to look for ways to make learning more fun and therefore more meaningful.

While much of Langer's work is controversial, and some researchers see her conclusions as simplistic over-generalizations, her concern about the prevailing emphasis on rote memorization over critical thinking skills is shared by many researchers and educators.

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The Fun Factor

Adventist educators were warned of the dangers of overemphasizing lower-level cognitive skills as early as 1903. "For ages education has had to do chiefly with the memory. This faculty has been taxed to the utmost, while the other mental powers have not been correspondingly developed. Students have spent their time laboriously crowding the mind with knowledge, very little of which could be utilized."⁸

On a similar note, Ellen White reminded church leaders that "It is a wise educator who seeks to call out the ability and powers of the student, instead of constantly endeavoring to impart instruction."⁹

Learning should be both fun and meaningful. That does not, of course, mean teachers should become stand-up comedians or that every class must resemble a game of *Hollywood Squares*. Instead, educators must learn to continually look for practical ways to make learning as much fun within the classroom as it is outside school.

For example, a friend of mine who teaches high school math was dissatisfied with his students' superficial grasp of basic concepts. He decided to teach the Pythagorean theorem ($A^2 + B^2 = C^2$) by having students lay out an imaginary structure on the playground. Armed with theory, stakes, and string, they had to figure out how to make all the corners square. According to the teacher, this new approach resulted in 100 percent mastery of the concept by virtually every student.

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Expanding the Joy of Learning

But what if you're not the "creative type"? What steps can you take to expand the joy of learning your classroom?

First, take note of your resources. Co-workers are a fantastic source for stimulating new ideas. In my workshops, I have teachers share ideas in small groups. It's amazing how often they're surprised by the creativity of someone they've worked with for years.

It's even more amazing how often they surprise themselves! The problem is that busy schedules allow teachers little time to talk with other educators about learning. To remedy this problem, it's a good idea to schedule a specific time each week for sharing positive ideas and brainstorming new concepts with fellow teachers. It's critical to treat this "appointment" as seriously as you would any other meeting, and not let the urgent crowd out the important.

If you're in a one-teacher school, take advantage of E-mail to share ideas with teaching friends around the globe. Blackboard and WebCT technology are also great tools for interacting within a flexible schedule. I've had long "discussions" on learning theory with a friend in Norway even though we're several time zones apart (and he's probably asleep as I write).

And don't forget online forums and educational Web sites. The CIRCLE Web site and the Adventist Education Forum are two emerging resources with material of specific interest to Adventist educators.¹⁰ Another educational site well worth a visit is New

Horizons for Learning.¹¹ There are hundreds of others.

Second, don't reinvent the wheel. As you adopt new curricula, look for products that incorporate proven teaching methods and have a built-in "fun factor." A well-designed curriculum product allows students to spend more time on task and frees teachers to concentrate on facilitating learning—instead of just endlessly re-explaining the instructions. This makes the learning process more meaningful for everyone involved.

And finally, try only one step at a time. Set achievable goals. Adding just one new idea a month yields nine or 10 great new lessons each year. Very soon, you should have a lot more fun teaching, and your students will rediscover the joy of learning.

Conclusion

While there are few empirical studies on this topic that focus on elementary and secondary education, there seems to be a steady increase in grass-roots support based on anecdotal research and emerging public opinion.

For example, when *TIME* magazine recently chose the Schools of the Year, they were "not the nation's best as measured by test scores. They are instead the schools we judged to have found the most promising approaches to the most pressing problems in education."¹² High on *TIME*'s list of requirements were "gifted teachers and inspiring principals"—in short, the kind of educators who instinctively understand that learning must be fun!

In addition, there's a growing body of supporting documentation from other fields. The medical community, for example, has long recognized the benefits of laughter, humor, and fun in the healing process. There are also numerous studies suggesting links between active enjoyment in nursing classrooms and enhanced student learning. As of this writing, the Rx Laughter Web site contained more than 200 references to research studies dealing with such topics.¹³

In the words of Roger Shank: "There is no reason we can't make school fun . . . and every reason we should! Children, even so-called learning disabled children, are quite apt learners when they really want to know something. Learning is best accomplished when the thing children are learning interests them, relates to their goals, and is fun!"¹⁴

And why should we be surprised by this? After all, is it really

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any wonder that a loving, joyful Creator would design creatures that learn best when they're having fun? ☞

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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