



THE LEARNING FACTORY:

Making Your
Classroom Run
Like a

WELL-OILED MACHINE



The black-and-white ceramic plaque (illustrated below)¹ caught my eye as I waited in the checkout line at the discount store. Chuckling, I picked it up, adding it to the stack of classroom supplies. If given the opportunity, how would the parents at your school fill in those blanks?

Marzano's words came back to me, "We live in an era when research tells us that the teacher is probably the single most important factor affecting student achievement—at least the single most important factor that we can do much about."² What can teachers do to provide the best possible school year or term?

At the beginning of each term, bulletin boards sport fresh ideas, desks glisten from cleaning during the semester break, but will students entering the classroom have their enthusiastic expectations met? Will they be engaged in the learning? Will it be a time of soaring or of just enduring? What needs to be in place before the semester begins? What makes a positive impact on the learning experience? As a teacher, how can you utilize resources and enlist others to provide an even stronger and more effective learning environment?

Each day, through dozens of interactions with students, we make a difference in the experiences of children. How does everything come together to produce first-rate Adventist education? First, well-thought-out practices, habits, and traits ensure effective classroom management. Second, the teaching-learning experience is enhanced through the integration of curricular planning and brain-compatible learning techniques. Thirdly, by enlisting the help of others, the teacher creates a richer and more successful learning environment.

Practices and Procedures

Harry and Rosemary Wong's tremendously popular book, *The First Days of School*,³ a must-read for every teacher, offers tips for organizing the classroom during those very important beginnings. Spanning the spectrum from teacher responsibilities to captivating students to dealing with parents, his tips on organizational methods leave no stone unturned. Any teacher with questions on how to begin the school year in a positive way can find suggestions and ideas here.

The school term begins long before students arrive. Procedures, set in place and displayed on the wall so students can see them, prevent many problems from occurring. Practicing those procedures during the first few days of a new year or semester helps students learn acceptable methods of dealing with daily routines, from entering the classroom, to forming lines, turning in assignments, dealing with materials, and getting ready for dismissal. Many cultures have a variety of adages that describe

the advantages of preparing early. Never is this more true, or more important, than in the classroom.

Physical Surroundings

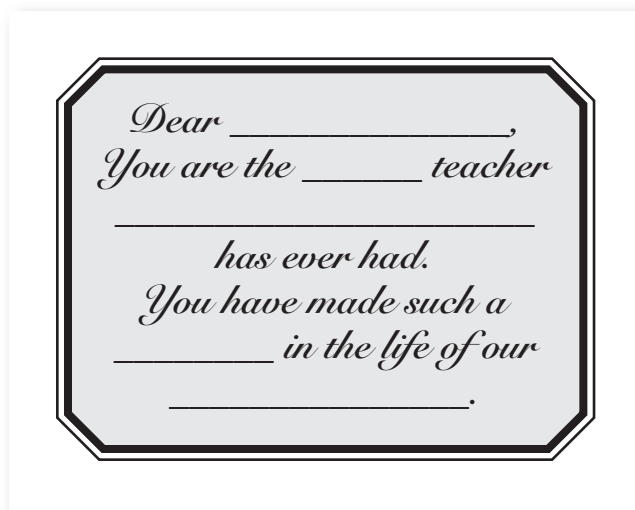
If the classroom reflects the character of the learning that occurs within its walls, what message does yours send to students, parents, and visitors? You can design the décor so that students entering on the first day of school will get a glimpse of what they will be learning throughout the year.

As the year progresses, give regular attention to the ambience of the classroom. Is it tidy and clean or disorganized and cluttered? Is it filled with interesting artifacts, posters, bulletin boards, science projects, children's artwork, learning centers, computer work stations, and tables for group work? Does it indicate that thought has gone into classroom management and organization? As you walk into the classroom, look around and

consider how other people will react when they enter the room. The classroom can be both a showcase of the learning going on there as well as a way to reinforce the concepts being taught, as students *see* what they are studying.

Nine Bodybrain-Compatible Elements described by Susan Kovalik explain basic fundamentals for the classroom. Among those is "a learning environment that reflects what is being taught."⁴ After adding plants, framed art, realia, and adequate lighting to

create a pleasant environment in which students can learn and have fun, it is time to select curricular elements that help ensure that they achieve higher levels of learning such as interpretation



Resources for Organizing and Managing Classrooms

Nine Bodybrain-Compatible Elements of the HET Model are the primary ways of translating the research of neuroscience into action within the classroom. These nine elements are:

- **Absence of Threat / Nurturing Reflective Thinking**
- **Meaningful Content**
- **Enriched Environment**
- **Movement to Enhance Learning**
- **Choices**
- **Adequate Time**
- **Collaboration**
- **Immediate Feedback**
- **Mastery (Application)**

<http://www.thecenter4learning.com/html/resources/9elements.htm>

B Y J O Y B R U N T V E V E R K A

and synthesis, and that the concepts being taught are reinforced to ensure retention.

Organizing the Curriculum

Effective educators know the scope of the curriculum and teach in a manner that is continually moving forward because it has been planned with a vision of the spectrum to be covered. Assignments and textbooks are not the foundation of learning. For teachers in the North American Division (NAD), curricular overviews, or Key Learnings can be found on the NAD Website (<http://www.journeytoexcellence.org/product/keys.phtml>). This concise list, available in several different formats—a pamphlet, a few pages, or a grid—provides an overview of what learning should occur at each grade level. By utilizing these resources, which state learning targets, teachers can evaluate the available materials and make the best use of them.

A plethora of learning theories and techniques are available. One simple, but extremely helpful tool provides a brief explanation and how-to ideas for a number of philosophies and strategies. Smart Cards, produced by Kagan Publishing and Professional Development (<http://www.kaganonline.com>) are folders detailing structures to involve students, using cooperative learning techniques, and a variety of topics. They provide succinct ideas that the teacher can use to select instructional activities for a variety of intelligences and learning modalities. One might look at the Key Learnings as the *what* and the Smart Cards as the *how* of planning curriculum.

Curriculum is not just facts and tasks. Teachers must allow time for students to process and to relate. Engaged students feel safe and have the opportunity to give input and to value one another. As mentioned before, parents, too, need opportunities to be involved. Keeping them informed about what is happening, and how the semester is going to progress, enables them to plan ahead and to help their children review the study material.

Getting the Word Out

After planning is complete, organization and management techniques are in place, and the curriculum is outlined, how do you organize learning materials in a manner that will benefit students and parents? Useful information can be bundled together into Internet folders accessible to parents on the classroom Website or bound as hardcopy to form a parent handbook. Included in this booklet could be:

- A welcome/introductory letter
- Contact information
- School calendar (including vacations and field trips, due



Students learn the scientific process while performing experiments such as this one about The Bernoulli Principle.

dates for major assignments, test week)

- Daily schedule
- List of life skills or Christian virtues
- Science fair information
- Memory verses for the year
- Spelling words
- An outline or curriculum map for main topics
- Answers to frequently asked questions
- Information about homework policies
- Procedures for celebrating birthdays

Sharing classroom information with parents at the beginning of the school year or semester helps to assure those who have entrusted the school to provide a strong educational experience that they have made the best decision for their children. Additionally, parents will appreciate having the information available when they need it.

Setting the Stage

What happens in the classroom immediately prior to the lesson can have a tremendous impact on the amount of learning that takes place. In a study with ramifications for the classroom, Malcolm Gladwell describes the disparity in performance when students began a task with two different mindsets. In his book *Blink*, Gladwell tells about a priming experiment in which two Dutch researchers asked students to answer questions from the board game *Trivial Pursuit*. Half of the students were primed by being asked to write down what came to mind when they thought of professors. The others were asked to write what came to mind when they thought of soccer hooligans. These two groups of equal-ability students were answering questions of equal difficulty. The first group answered 55.6 percent of the questions correctly, while the second group scored only 42.6 percent.⁵

How does this relate to classroom organization and management? Students who have been primed for learning perform

better, are more motivated, and are quite possibly more cooperative in the classroom. Priming, or beginning the lesson with something that piques students' interest and causes them to think, makes the difference between their performing well or at a minimal or substandard level.

Lessons do not need to begin with great attention-getters. One may not be able to perform feats such as the "baking soda and vinegar volcano" experiment to pique student attention on every topic in the curriculum. What can be done throughout the day to keep students in an attitude of learning? The effective teacher can draw students into the lesson, or prime them by asking questions that show the relevance or importance of the material to be learned. Focusing on answers to current problems, looking beyond the status quo, and drawing on past experiences are effective methods of capturing student interest and attention. It is possible, when the planning has taken place in advance and the teacher has time to focus on details, to enhance learning.

Proverbs 18:15 says: "Intelligent people are always open to new ideas. In fact, they look for them" (NLT).⁶

Building a Team

When teachers think of recruiting people to assist in the classroom, their thoughts immediately turn to parents. And while parents are a tremendous resource, there may be other people who would like to be involved. By widening your search, you may find grandparents or even great-grandparents to be valuable resources. But don't stop there. Include retired church or community members who may be willing to donate time in their area of expertise or to help in general.

Marlene Johnson, a retired nurse who donates at least two hours per day as a math tutor at Rogers Adventist School in Walla Walla, Washington, says, "I like being a volunteer because it makes me feel good to see the children 'get it' when I help them. I'm not a grandma, but it makes me feel like I'm a grandma helping the kids. It gives me something to do other than



Top: Marlene Johnson, a long-time volunteer at Rogers Adventist School, explains math concepts to students.

Bottom: Community is built as students share ideas.

sit home and do puzzles or watch TV. It just makes me feel good.” Johnson continues, “When we first moved here, the church announced they needed volunteers for the church school. My daughter, who is in a wheelchair, wanted to volunteer. I took her and stayed so I wouldn’t have to come back to pick her up. That was 14 years ago.” She concludes by saying, “Being a teacher was at the bottom of my list growing up. Since I’ve been volunteering, I’ve realized how much I enjoy it and how hard teachers work.”

Students have immediate feedback on math each day because Mrs. Johnson grades papers as they are turned in. Students and teachers appreciate her enthusiasm and friendship.

Sometimes people just need an invitation to become involved. The teacher must publicize the opportunities for people to help. This can be done in the school newsletter, church bulletins, or through personal contact with retired members of the community.

When you know what is needed and where the current school term is going, you are ready to involve others. Then, no longer are you working alone. Parents, grandparents, and other volunteers may be willing to bring in learning experiences or artifacts that enhance the curriculum. This is evidenced by the following comment made by a parent whose child had been immersed in an integrated curriculum, based around a year-long theme: “If you tell me what you will be studying next year, I will look for materials as we travel across the United States this summer.” Planning in advance and sharing information with parents and students means that you don’t have to do everything alone.

Innovative curricular opportunities are continually available to the Adventist educator. Through the Adventist Robotics League,⁷ teachers can bring technology, problem solving, planning, writing, and teamwork into the classroom or an after-school program. Robotics enriches the curriculum and meets the needs of a variety of intelligences. Rather than looking at the inclusion of robotics as one more item to add to an already packed schedule, why not look for resource personnel that might be able to take the program farther than the teacher can imagine?

Walla Walla University is reaching out to educators and students of elementary and secondary schools through involvement in Lego Robotics. Doug Logan, dean of the Edward F. Cross School of Engineering, articulates this connection: “Walla Walla University’s rich engineering tradition is rooted in enthusiasm for discovery. Our engineers come to us eager to learn, and leave us eager to share what they’ve learned. We’re building on this enthusiasm by developing a network of WWU



The Lego Robotics Challenge helps students learn the principles of physics and engineering and enhances their communication skills.

alumni willing to mentor young people in classrooms and on projects. For example, WWU alums are helping to prepare teams for the Adventist Robotics League’s North Pacific Regional Robotics Challenge (<http://enr.wallawalla.edu/lego>), offering advice, resources, and problem-solving ideas for the young participants and their adult leaders. By facilitating these connections between our engineering graduates and the youth in their communities, we’re inspiring tomorrow’s engineers to follow a path of discovery that can be shared for generations to come.” Today, when technology is such an integral part of education, their experience is enriched through mentoring with individuals who are stellar in their field.

Many schools need assistance both inside the classroom and out. In small schools, volunteers can make repairs, do upkeep, or perform cleaning tasks. Church members, and even neighbors, may be willing to invest time to help at the school. Once again, be sure to communicate your needs to the church and community.

In some instances, the community that provides help may be miles away. Volunteers do not have to live nearby. If you need help teaching writing, consider making connections with the English or communications teacher at your local Adventist college or academy. Students can send attached files to a writing mentor who can help them with editing and ideas to improve their writing. This adds 21st century meaning to the term “pen pal.”

Once volunteers have agreed to become members of your

classroom team, conduct criminal background checks, and be sure to have potential volunteers complete appropriate conference forms⁸ asking for references and background information. Keep these on file in the school office. Ask your conference educational personnel to provide in-service training to help volunteers understand their roles and obligations, and the importance of confidentiality.

More Help

When all is in place, when the planning is complete, when the volunteers are ready, there is still more help for those who teach God's children. You can rest assured that you are never alone. Spending time with your loving heavenly Father each day will reaffirm your conviction that this classroom, this school, is His. He will lead. "Our heavenly Father has a thousand ways to provide for us, of which we know nothing." Pray for guidance and for each student in the classroom every day. Remember that the Holy Spirit is working in the hearts and lives of each student. To become a partner in that endeavor through prayer gives you an opportunity with eternal implications. ✍

This article has been peer reviewed.



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Lego Robotics

Adventist Robotics League: <http://www.adventistroboticsleague.net>

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3. Harry K. Wong; and Rosemary T. Wong, *The First Days of School: How to Be an Effective Teacher* (Mountain View, Calif.: Harry Wong Publications, 2009).
4. See <http://www.thecenter4learning.com/html/resources/9elements.htm>.
5. Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink* (New York: Back Bay Books, Little, Brown, and Company, 2005), pp. 55, 56.
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