

Can There Be Faith in the Language-Arts Classroom?

Valuegenesis has caused Seventh-day Adventist educators to once again examine their profession. Even though most

Adventist teachers are committed to imparting more than “book knowledge,” certain philosophical quandaries continue to challenge us. One important question is how to nurture faith through classroom instruction. How can we provide situations and learning experiences to help students discover, reinforce, and exemplify their faith?

What is this concept that we should be seeking to impart to and strengthen in our students? The author of Hebrews defines faith as “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1, NIV). Ellen G. White expands this definition to include “trusting God—believing that He loves us and knows best what is for our good.”¹ James Michael Lee, a Catholic professor of education at the University of Alabama, contends that faith is more than a mere concept. He labels it a “construct” because it is something that has been consciously adopted for a purpose. A construct can be defined in two ways: notionally, by using a traditional definition, and operationally, by activities associated with it.²

Lee asserts that the construct of faith is inexact and changeable. “A

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wide variety of perspectives, non-theological as well as theological, are necessary to come to a really adequate construct of faith.”³ Interestingly, the Gospel writer John does not use the noun usually interpreted “faith.” Instead, he uses “to believe” or other action verbs.⁴ So faith involves action, which implies interaction.

The behaviors we label “faith” never exist in isolation. “Faith always exists in a human being who is always and inextricably in a concrete here-and-now situation.”⁵ The apostle James stated plainly, “as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead” (James 2:26, NIV).

Thus faith must help our students make choices about their daily lives.

This has a direct bearing on classroom teaching. Education is concerned with the meaning of life, so Christian teachers must be willing to address important issues. Otherwise, our teaching will fail to provide students with the necessary skills to live in this complicated society, and will fail to provide a stimulating greenhouse in which to cultivate the seedlings of their faith.

As religious educators, we work with the “reality of faith behaviors from the nitty-gritty inside, from the inside of how faith is lived and how it is communicated.”⁶ In her

research on spirituality and young people, Brenda Lealman maintained that

BY REBECCA D. BECKER

everyone has the capacity for spiritual awareness, but it is best activated by stirring the imagination, not by gaining information.⁷ Michael Trainor further asserts that the faith educator is story teller, magician, connoisseur, bridge-builder, and midwife.⁸ What better place to find these attributes than in the language-arts classroom?

Where do we start? How do we teach faith alongside grammar, reading, literature, drama, speech, writing, and all the other aspects of language arts? As Lee says, if faith is holistic, then “simply standing in front of a classroom and talking [is] among the least effective of all pedagogical procedures.”⁹ He suggests three aspects of faith: the affective experience, the cognitive experience, and the life-style experience.

The affective experience can be developed through songs, artwork, partner-based activities, sharing dream material, and role playing. The cognitive aspects can be addressed by activities like memorizing Scripture, understanding ecclesiastical doctrine, reflecting on one’s personal faith journey, and reflecting on the relevance of the gospel to one’s own life. The life-style elements of faith are developed by projects such as prayer partners, adopt-a-grandparent, or reading to an invalid; field trips, simulation games, and community-service activities.¹⁰ Combining activities in several of these categories will make the teaching of faith a holistic experience.

Some specific activities might include the following:

Language-arts classes provide an excellent backdrop against which faith can be explored and nurtured.

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- Pairing high school students with a senior citizen or an elementary school child. High school students might write a children’s story and have their first-grade partners illustrate it. Teenagers might also benefit from corresponding

with a terminally ill person, either an adult or a child.

- Use the theory that it takes 21 days to break a habit as the basis for an assignment. Ask students to choose a habit to break, develop a plan to overcome it, then keep a journal during the 21 days. This could culminate in a paper, a speech, or some other project.

- Assign Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, which is rich with material to use in discussing expectations in a Christian community. An interesting project I recently heard about makes the story very personal. Ask students to design an “A” and wear it for a week, keeping a journal of their feelings. A variation of this requires students to choose a secret sin in their own lives. They are to design a letter to symbolize the sin and wear it for 24 hours. No one is to know what the sin is. Again, journaling is extremely important as a record of their thoughts and feelings during the day. Culmination exercises could include essays or letters.

One of the most common activities in English classrooms is the studying of stories, both short stories and longer ones in books, films, or personal compositions. Pamela Mitchell correctly asserts that “stories are a language of our lives.”¹¹ Reading books can lead us to look at ourselves and our lives in new ways, even though the stories may not be about us. Mitchell points out the passionate elements of stories, asserting that: “If Christianity is to be more than an object we know about, if it has passionate elements about it, if it is a life-view and not simply a phenomenon, then we have

need of the kind of communication that leads to self-reflection."¹²

Trainor uses an illustration from Mary Belenky to demonstrate the goal of education—the difference between banker-teachers and midwife-teachers: “While the bankers deposit knowledge in the learner’s head, the midwives draw it out. They assist the students in giving birth to their own ideas, in making their own tacit knowledge explicit and elaborating it.”¹³

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Mitchell claims that “narrative communication [a story] makes possible the understanding of a life-view or ethos.”¹⁴ Jesus used parables and figures of speech to convey lessons. Through these means He often avoided direct confrontation and giving offense to His listeners. He addressed current social issues to help His audience form their own ideas and draw their own conclusions. Trainor maintains that the faith educator must be a magician who can enable Christianity to relevantly “address contemporary perplexities.”¹⁵ “We must be engaged with a whole range of stories—in literature, film, television, and other arts. . . . Only then can Christianity be more than an object of knowledge for us; only then can we be shaped by it.”¹⁶

Using stories makes it easy for us to follow Christ’s example of teaching. As

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the basis of every discussion, apply the greatest commandments: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . . Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:38, NIV).

Some common themes found in literature include growing up, prejudice, relationships with parents, cultural differences, self-sacrifice, and service to others. Brief synopses of several books that can serve as springboards for discussing life and faith appear in the accompanying box.

In every discussion, teachers must respect the freedom and personal history of their students.¹⁷ Our words and actions must reflect an inner focus on our relationship with God.¹⁸ Ellen White emphasizes the importance of teachers having a “living faith or they will be separate from Christ.”¹⁹ Particularly in the context of a relatively conservative constituency, discussions of life’s values must remain open, yet guided.

What if you feel you need support in your faith experience? Lee reminds us that the teacher is only one component of faith instruction. The other components are the learner, the subject matter, and the environment. Each component is changed by the others. On the other hand, he cautions, “the teacher’s piety is no substitute for pedagogical skill.”²⁰

The religious educator is not a catalyst in the religious instruction act; on the contrary, the teacher grows and develops in the religious instruction act. This growth includes the teacher’s faith.

Growing Up

The *One-Eyed Cat* by Paula Fox can be particularly applicable if you have children of pastors or other denominational workers in your classroom. A minister’s son is faced with a difficult situation involving dishonesty and its effect on his life. Further discussion material comes from the boy’s friendship with a lonely old man and the fact that his mother is an invalid. Making collages of images from the story challenges students to find overriding themes. Role playing also forces them to consider the consequences of honesty and dishonesty.

The Contender by Robert Lipsyte deals with a young black boy who wants something better than the slums in which he lives. Connecting with a relentless coach, he begins training to become a boxer. Prejudice is not a major theme here, but the story could easily be partnered with another book more specifically addressing prejudice. More dominant themes include dealing with peer pressure and developing a healthy self-concept while forming lifetime values. While students, particularly boys, enjoy the action of the book, Lipsyte deftly challenges them to decide just who “The Contender” really is. The trust relationship between the boy and his coach also provides opportunities to discover new elements in our relationship with Christ as our coach.

Because few books commonly taught in the classroom have female protagonists, Katherine Paterson’s *Jacob Have I Loved* is an excellent avenue through which to address the feelings of girls as they are growing up. The title’s allusion to Jacob and Esau is particularly interesting and can become a bridge into a discussion of the faith of Old Testament characters. This story deals with self-concept—one twin feels inferior to the other.

The short story “Split Cherry Tree” by Jesse Stuart is a useful vehicle for discussing how times and opinions change. A young boy is the first of his family to attend high school, which his dad isn’t sure is necessary. Both the boy and his father change in the story, opening avenues to discuss differences between generations and between tradition and doctrine, as well as the need for tolerance and understanding at all age levels. The video version of the story is quite close to the original.

Prejudice

Theodore Taylor’s *The Cay* allows students to view prejudice toward blacks around the time of World War II. A young boy is stranded on an island with a black man. Although he has been taught to be prejudiced, he does not understand it. When the boy goes blind, he learns to “see” in new ways.

Jane Austin’s *Pride and Prejudice*, a classic example of British literature, is an interesting examination of class prejudice. The teacher can use its themes to direct discussions that encourage students to see the value of each person as a child of God. Role playing key scenes is an excellent method of enforcing these concepts.

The movie *War Between the Classes* is the story of a history class whose members were randomly assigned social status as an experiment. Trying such an experiment in your classroom might make students more aware of the latent prejudices that lurk in themselves.

The story of the early Christian church provides numerous examples of class and racial prejudice. These stories can be easily incorporated into discussions of material such as the above, pointing out the Bible’s relevance to today’s issues.

Self-Sacrifice

Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* provides teachers with a wealth of material from which to direct discussion. Besides its historical setting, there is much to be learned about honesty, family loyalty, and friendship. When one character voluntarily takes the place of another at the guillotine, students naturally discuss his motives. This is an obvious bridge to a discussion of Christ’s death and sacrifice for us. Students can become quite involved in creating sequels to the story, exploring the long-range results of decisions.

Robert Peck’s *A Day No Pigs Would Die* is an emotional story that forces readers to think about family values, being different, unselfishness, and accepting decisions. A “what would you have done” springboard usually leads to intense discussion.

The biblical story of Isaac is an excellent example of self-sacrifice. Price calls the story “the quintessence of faith in the Old Testament.”²² Role-playing or imagining they were there affords students the opportunity of examining the faith of both Abraham and Isaac.

. . . By virtue of this dynamic interaction, faith changes in the act of teaching it.²¹

Sondra Higgins Matthaei says the Christian teacher is called to be a faith mentor, a “co-creator with God who, as a living representative of God’s grace, participates in the relational, vocational, and spiritual growth of other persons.”²³ She lists the following implications for the classroom:

1. Teachers and students are learners together.
2. There must be an environment of trust and acceptance.
3. There is a risk in recognizing the possibility that God works through all persons in the classroom.
4. The classroom is a sacred place where the study of sacred literature, prayer, stories, and spiritual disciplines can turn learning into worship.²⁴

How does a Christian teacher live up to these ideals? Trainor aptly makes the comparison with Houdini, the escape artist of the late 1800s and early 1900s.

*There are times when educators feel straitjacketed by people’s expectations, handcuffed by ecclesiastical traditions, or caught between the reality of the educational ministry and the dream of new possibilities. To extract themselves from such difficult confines requires of faith educators the skill of Houdini.*²⁵

As Matthaei points out, if you are willing to become a faith mentor, you must be willing to live under scrutiny.²⁶ We must not be afraid to face contemporary issues as they arise in our classrooms. Nor can we be apologetic about our faith or hesitant to apply it to the subjects we teach. Through the language arts, students can be drawn to a stronger faith in God and a better understanding of how He can transform their lives. ✍

Rebecca D. Becker teaches English at Gem State Adventist Academy in Caldwell, Idaho.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. *Ibid.*, p. 279.

In every discussion, teachers must respect the freedom and personal history of their students.

4. James L. Price, Jr., “The Biblical View of Faith: A Protestant Perspective,” in *ibid.*, p. 123.
5. Lee, p. 292.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 290.
7. Brenda Lealman, “Young People, Spirituality, and the Future,” *Religious Education* 86:2 (Spring 1991), p. 266.
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14. Mitchell, p. 35.
15. Trainor, p. 287.
16. Mitchell, p. 43.
17. Trainor, p. 290.
18. Sondra Higgins Matthaei, “Faith—Mentoring in the Classroom,” *Religious Education* 86:4 (Fall 1991), p. 545.
19. Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assoc., 1913), p. 235.
20. Lee, p. 294.
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22. Matthaei, p. 540.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 548.
24. Trainor, p. 288.
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26. Price, p. 125.