

# BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF LEARNERS

BY SUSAN KARRER

It's 8:00 a.m. Monday morning, and everything is ready. Brightly colored posters and artifacts of distant lands grace the large sunny classroom. Music resonates from a corner of the room, and potted plants and vases of flowers add warmth to the decor. Six large worktables, marked with notebooks and boxes of supplies, nearly fill the room. The daily schedule posted by the chalkboard gives further evidence that class is about to begin.

Bill Green and Phil Bassett, the class instructors, greet the students as they enter the room. Some sit alone—uncertain, quietly thumbing through the notebooks before them, anxiously awaiting the beginning of class. Others, how-

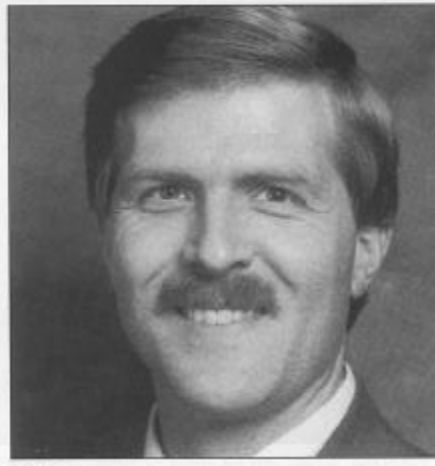
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ever, form groups as they enthusiastically greet friends and exchange news. A mixture of excitement and apprehension fills the air. This sounds like the typical first day of school, doesn't it? But this is actually the scene from the first day of a rather special class. Thirty-six educators from around the world have come together for four weeks of intensive professional training at the 1995 Summer Teachers' Institute at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.

The assembled group includes superintendents, principals, and teachers from both public and private schools. Some of the participants have come to work on advanced degrees. Others are updating their teaching certification.



Bill Green



Phil Bassett

Still others attend for their own professional development. Whatever their individual stories, they are all motivated by the joy that comes from learning and growing professionally.

Those who attend the institute quickly realize that this four-week session is neither a traditional graduate course nor a typical teachers' workshop. The fact that some of the participants return for a second and even third summer is a testimony to the unusually high sense of excitement and adventure that pervades this event.

### Structure of the Institute

On the first day of class, Bill Green introduces the Joyce and Showers Staff Training Model.<sup>1</sup> This model includes four elements: (1) exploration of the theory, (2) presentation and modeling of the skill, (3) practicing the skill, and (4) feedback and coaching. These elements serve as the organizational model for the institute. Throughout the institute, the instructors will apply the four steps of the training model to lead the participants through various models of teaching: cooperative learning, concept attainment, the Taba inductive method, simulations, mnemonic memory devices, advance organizers, synectics, and inquiry.<sup>2</sup>

The presentation of Dimensions of Learning<sup>3</sup> is perhaps the most impor-

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tant, because it provides the participants with a conceptual framework for the models of teaching and the other institute activities. The participants learn how the various teaching strategies support the five dimensions of learning, or five types of thinking: (1) positive attitudes about learning, (2) acquiring and integrating knowledge, (3) extending and refining knowledge, (4) using knowledge meaningfully, and (5) productive habits of mind. They later use the Dimensions of Learning framework to plan a unit of instruction. In addition to Dimensions of Learning and the models of teaching, other topics such as multiple intelligences, thematic instruction, learning styles, inclusion, and

study groups are explored.

Obviously, the instructors cover a large amount of material during the four weeks, but it is the diversity of material that appeals to the participants. Whatever their past experiences, they all gain something new to take with them. As one participant stated, "What I do know is that I'll have a broad springboard from which to jump off when I return to the classroom." The administrators leave with a wealth of new ideas to help them be more effective instructional leaders. The teachers leave with a variety of new skills to expand their teaching repertoires. By the end of the institute, everyone has developed a new conception of what classroom instruction should be like.

The sheer volume of material presented is not the only motivation for these teachers and administrators. Other features of the institute also make it effective. During the four weeks of the institute, the participants reflect upon their experiences in daily journals. By listening carefully to their words, one can begin to understand which aspects of the institute the participants believe have been most effective for them. It is not surprising that the elements they identify are consistent with the findings of research on staff development: a safe environment with supportive colleagues, modeling and active



One of the "family" groups at the Summer Teachers' Institute, "Many Faces," included educators from the U. S., India, and Taiwan.



participation, and practice in authentic settings.

### Friends and Families

*"The way the groups were organized was very supportive and I feel I learned so much more than if I had had to plug along at this by myself."*

The theme for the 1995 Summer Teachers Institute, "Building Communities of Learners," reveals the importance that the institute developers place on creating a cooperative environment in which teachers can learn and practice their skills. To that end, everyone becomes part of a permanent "family" group that lasts throughout the four weeks. Encouraging the groups to be called families leads to greater togetherness, willingness to share, and in general more unity. Although initially some individuals express anxiety about being placed in these groups, the camaraderie that develops soon alleviates these concerns. Within days, the "family" provides a non-threatening environment that encourages even the most timid members to participate freely.

The instructors know that building strong group bonds is too important to be left to chance. Choosing a family name and greeting one another is only the first of many activities planned to facilitate the bonding process. The names they choose such as "Many

## *The participants learn the cooperative structures by actually using them.*

Faces," "Positive Exemplars," or "Sneetches" give a clue to each group's unique identity. Their individual group styles quickly become evident in the way they approach the activities.

Every group has at least one resident "expert." This person has either attended the institute before, or has had previous training in the models of teaching. Most of the participants agreed that "it was very beneficial to have 'mini-experts' who had already taken the class to . . . help those of us who were just starting out." These mentors help supply many services to their "families": answering questions when the instructors are not available, offering advice on when and how to apply a strategy, coaching teachers during their first attempts with the models, and providing encouragement and support.

The first experience with peer-teaching probably has the most powerful effect on the bonding process. Practicing newly learned skills is very awkward at first, but it is far less intimidating once the teachers discover how encouraging their "family" members can be. Comments such as "I'm a little nervous about teaching my peers," soon turn into, "My group was so supportive," or "Their critiques were so helpful and always tactful."

Within the relative safety of the "family" groups, the participants learn and practice peer-coaching. Phil and Bill first model coaching techniques during their classroom instruction. During peer teaching, the "family" mentors serve as the peer coaches. After each lesson, they guide the teacher through a series of questions that facilitate his or her self-evaluation of the lesson.

By the end of the institute, the participants have experienced firsthand what a group of focused, supportive colleagues can accomplish. "I have come to the conclusion that cooperative effort among teachers in improving instruction is an activity that must occupy more of my own professional development," said one participant.

Unfortunately, most of the teachers must now return to schools that are devoid of the level of support that they have grown to appreciate. Many of them express the wish that they could take their groups back to their own schools to provide ideas and support as they attempt to implement the newly learned strategies. Few administrators understand the importance of allowing teachers regular opportunities to meet in small groups to exchange ideas, and foster professional development. Even fewer have changed the school structure to allow these study groups to function.

### Modeling

*"His [the instructor's] passion for instruction is obvious, and he transfers that feeling to us."*

It is said that teachers teach in the same way they were taught. Bill and Phil take this claim very seriously;



Samuel Gaikwad, academic vice president of Spicer College, India, talks to Warren Minder, dean of the Andrews University School of Education, at the Summer Teachers' Institute.





One of the cooperative "family" groups at the Summer Teachers' Institute prepares for a Hawaiian luau in their "Around the World" simulation.

therefore, from the very first day they get the participants actively involved in every lesson. No one just sits and passively listens and observes.

An example of this active involvement is the presentation of the Taba inductive method. Bill Green begins with a brief introduction, then gives the groups their first data set—large handfuls of jigsaw puzzle pieces. Their instructions are to group the pieces into at least three categories, then name the groups and list the attributes. Over the next hour, the participants learn the three main elements of a Taba lesson (concept formation, interpretation of data, and application of principles) by actually experiencing one. The participants will be involved in two more lessons before they have to micro-teach their own Taba lessons.

Phil Bassett teaches cooperative learning in the same way. The participants learn the cooperative structures by actually using them. Once a new structure is introduced, it is often used to teach other material. For example, the groups use Kagan's Within-Team Jigsaw<sup>4</sup> to cover the material in a classroom reading assignment. Each team member is responsible for mastering a portion of the material, then teaching it to the other team members. Later, that same reading assignment is "tested" using a form of Slavin's Teams-Games Tournament.<sup>5</sup> Both Phil and Bill use

numerous cooperative techniques to keep the participants actively engaged, and to allow them time for personal reflection.

The participants' understanding of the various models is enhanced by their involvement. One teacher commented that she had previously come to the conclusion that cooperative learning did not work. But after she saw it modeled and used correctly, and then became involved in the structures herself, she changed her mind and was eager to try it again.

The participants learn simulations immersion. Almost from the moment they walk into the room, they became engaged in an "Around the World" simulation. Everyone receives a passport and earns frequent-flyer mileage by arriving at class on time or turning in his or her journal. The "family" members must cooperate and pool their resources to earn enough miles to reach each week's destination. The class celebrates their arrival in various counties with a Hawaiian luau or an authentic Indian meal. The "families" then browse the classroom's duty-free shop using their hard-earned "dollars."

At the end of the day's activities, everyone is given time to stop and reflect on what has been learned and experienced and to put his or her thoughts in a journal. Although the participants may complain about being tired, they

never complain of boredom. One recurring comment in the journals is "another stimulating day!"

### School Time

*"Everything sounds great when it is being presented during training, but actually seeing how it works with the kids convinced me of the method's worth."*

By the end of the second week, the teachers and administrators have become comfortable with the structure and pace of the institute. They have had several opportunities to do peer teaching and coaching, and many of their anxieties have been alleviated.

On Monday morning of the third week, a new dimension is added to the institute's activities. At 9:00 a.m., approximately 70 children from grades one through 12 converge on the building for "school." Every morning for the next eight days, each "family" will be responsible for teaching a classroom of 10 to 15 students.

Much time and energy goes into preparing for the students' arrival, as class members decorate the rooms and establish a teaching schedule. Each team chooses a classroom theme that focuses on their instructional unit and has been planned around the Dimensions of Learning. Themes such as: "Around the World in Eight Days," "A Circle of Friends," or "No Fear in a Changing World" reflect the individuality of the various groups.

You might find one group of students in plastic hard hats "constructing" the meaning of words in a Taba lesson. Another group is drawing pictures to use as mnemonic memory devices. There are concept attainment lessons on nutrition or rectangles, Taba lessons with leaves and buttons, journaling activities involving a pair of traveling bears, and group activities investigating Gardner's seven intelligences.<sup>6</sup> The lessons are fun and wonderfully creative, yet the teachers find teaching these "real" students to be much more challenging than teaching their peers. The students are being asked to learn in ways that are unfamiliar to them. Many are uncomfortable working in coopera-

tive groups, or thinking inductively in a Taba or concept attainment lesson.

Despite these difficulties, the participants find this to be the best practice they could have. As one teacher observed, "Being able to practice this on the kids themselves was one of the most valuable experiences [of the institute]. It really helped me see and be aware of things that work well and others that don't work as well."

### The Spiritual Dimension

*"I'm very impressed by the Christ-centeredness of the education department at Andrews! May the light never dim."*

One dimension of the Summer Teachers' Institute will not be found in the research on staff development, yet it is important to both the instructors and the participants. The institute developers place great importance on nurturing a strong Christian environment. Each day begins with worship, including group singing and a short devotional message. Also, a specially planned Sabbath worship for the participants has become a highlight that many returnees fondly anticipate.

The Christian emphasis goes beyond these planned activities. It is evident in other more subtle ways, such as the personal interest the instructors and support staff show to the individual participants. When one out-of-state teacher at the 1995 institute was unexpectedly hospitalized, everyone faithfully held her up in prayer and some visited her in the hospital.

The strain of being separated from husbands, wives, children, and close friends is lessened by the joy of sharing with newfound friends within the family of Christ.

### The Revolution Begins

*"I have been stimulated in a great variety of ways to think about my responsibility as a teacher. The activities have forced me to ask myself very serious questions about how I teach."*

Bill Green has stated often that he would like to see a "quiet" revolution begin in schools, especially within the Seventh-day Adventist system. It is to this end that the Summer Teachers'

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Institute is dedicated. Those who attend come away from it changed and ready to do quiet battle.

Substantive change in teaching practice is not easy, however. In fact, it is a process that can be very uncomfortable. But this process need not be a solitary endeavor. The participants agree that by working together, the institute can "take us places in a painless way." It involves educators learning together, administrators supporting teachers, and teachers supporting fellow teachers in their efforts to make changes and to weave strong collegial bonds.

The collective spirit of the institute could best be summarized in the words of one enthusiastic graduate.

*"These are definitely classes to which vet-*

*eran teachers should come. We have been so set in our saber-toothed [old-fashioned] ways! With changing times and students changing before our very eyes, we must 'Build Learning Communities' and revolutionize education."* ☺

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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Bruce R. Joyce and Beverly Showers, *Student Achievement Through Staff Development* (New York: Longman, Inc., 1995).
2. For a full description of these models, see Bruce Joyce, Marsha Weil, and Beverly Showers, *Models of Teaching* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1992).
3. Robert J. Marzano, et al., *Dimensions of Learning* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1992).
4. Spencer Kagan, *Cooperative Learning* (San Juan Capistrano, Calif.: Kagan Cooperative Learning, 1992).
5. Robert E. Slavin, *Using Student Team Learning* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins Team Learning Project, 1988).
6. See Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).



*The Eagles "family" poses on Hat Day.*