

Susan Kovalik believes eight elements are necessary to create a brain-compatible environment in the classroom; absence of threat, meaningful content, choices, adequate time, enriched environment, collaboration, immediate feedback, and mastery (application).

The author talks to one of her students.

A CHARACTER-DRIVEN AND BRAIN-COMPATIBLE CLASSROOM

No parent likes to be told that his or her child is doing poorly in school. My 7-year-old was convinced that she was stupid. She felt unliked and faced school each day in tears.

I went through all the typical routes to help her—testing, tutoring, and finally counseling. Nothing seemed to help. I did not know at that time what an incredible journey we had started to understand how she learns and what an impact this would have on my own career as a teacher.

The Impact of Brain Research

My journey began with learning more about the brain and its impact on learning. Current research on the subject has begun to change how

educators think about learning and how they teach. Simply stated, the brain has three parts with specific functions and responsibilities: the brain stem (survival brain), limbic system (feeling or emotional brain), and cerebrum (home of academic learning). (See Figure 1 on page 39.)

Information from all of our senses goes directly into the limbic system, which decides what part of the brain needs to respond. “When strong feelings of anger, love, concern, fear, hate, excitement, jealousy, sadness, etc., are active, our abilities to problem solve and think critically are diminished.”¹ When a student feels threatened in any way, not even the most creative teaching will be stored in long- or short-term memory.

The third part of the brain, the cerebrum, is the “think-

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ing” brain. This is the home of higher-order thinking skills, where learning takes place.² Being harassed or made fun of and fearing failure all cause a downshifting out of the cerebral cortex (where information is stored) to the brain stem (where the fight or flight mechanism takes control).

Without the necessary environment for remaining “upshifted” into the cerebrum, no method of teaching or classroom management will be effective for all students. This is particularly relevant for Christian teachers who are interested in developing a climate where positive traits are modeled.

Creating a Brain-Compatible Environment

The phrase “brain-compatible learning” was coined almost two decades ago by Leslie Hart, a pioneer in translating the implications of brain research to school and classroom settings. Hart uses the term “to describe a classroom whose curriculum and instruction fits the way the human brain learns, i.e., allows the human brain to operate as it does naturally and thus most powerfully.”³

Susan Kovalik believes eight elements are necessary to create a brain-compatible environment in the classroom:⁴ absence of

Just as students need a safe environment for learning and character development, so does every teacher and staff member at our schools.

threat, meaningful content, choices, adequate time, enriched environment, collaboration, immediate feedback, and mastery (application).

I am part of a team of teachers at Tualatin Valley Junior Academy in Oregon who have committed themselves to creating the conditions essential for positive character growth. It was an incredible feeling to discover that what we as Christian educators have had all along is exactly what our students need in order to succeed in the classroom. Teaching character through Life Long Guidelines helps provide the safe environment that the brain requires to learn. (See Figure 2 on page 40.)

For learning to occur, all real and perceived threats between students and between teacher and student, in every environment in the school—halls, cafeteria,

library, gym, and playground, as well as in the classroom—must be eliminated and replaced with a sense of trust.

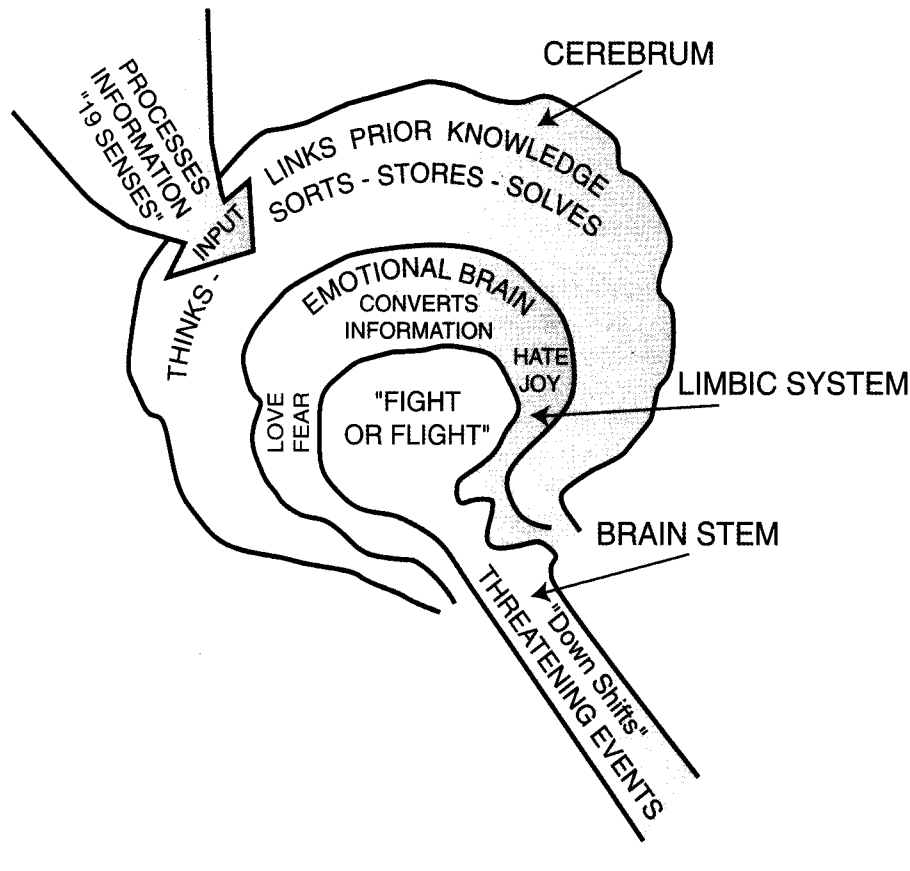
I don’t have a perfect classroom. Of my 28 students, some are younger or more active than others, and some have significant learning disabilities. I had to make a paradigm shift to begin teaching the way my students learned. *Every day had to count.* I began to see changes, small at first, then more significant. Students learned what put-downs were, and how they affected learning. They learned to assess their own work and would sometimes say, “This is not my personal best. Could I try again?” They wrote me notes about which *Lifelong Guideline* I was using and explained to their parents how they could use the *Life Skills* at home.

The children learned about the three parts of their brains. Each student learned to identify Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligences and decided what type of learner he or she was. They began to work as partners, and become committed to doing their best. They were thrilled to help someone by using “friendship and caring.” We were on our way to being a family of learners.

I felt empowered and awed by my students’ response. There were fewer behav-

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**Figure 1
Parts of the Brain**



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ioral problems, their math and reading improved, their writing skills showed that they took their personal best seriously, but most of all, they began to grow spiritually. They would say things like, "Mrs. B, do I talk like Jesus now?"

Teaching the Character of Christ: Life Skills

Life Skills help students evaluate their own performance. These are appropriate for all ages and skill levels. They "guide [students], individually and in groups to an understanding of which social behaviors will enhance their success."⁵ More

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A caring community of learners will not only provide our students with an environment for spiritual growth, but also ensure the “safe environment” that each child must have in order to learn.

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importantly, they become part of the students’ personalities—who they are and how they act in their daily lives with others and in their personal relationship with their heavenly Father.

Teaching Lifelong Guidelines

- Review Life Skills with the class and discuss one in-depth every day, role-playing what is and isn’t appropriate.
- Ask what Life Skills are needed to complete assignments or solve conflicts. If students met their goal, ask what worked and what they would change.
- Model the Life Skills using plays, video clips, literature, and Bible characters.
- Do workshops or skits in other classrooms.
- Make posters showing what each

Figure 2

Lifelong Guidelines

- Trustworthiness
- Truthfulness
- Active Listening
- Being Respectful
- No Put-Downs
- Doing My Personal Best

Life Skills

- Integrity:** Knowing what is right and wrong.
- Initiative:** Doing what needs to be done.
- Flexibility:** Changing plans when needed.
- Perseverance:** Keeping at it.
- Organization:** Planning, arranging, and keeping things orderly and ready to use.
- Problem-Solving:** Finding solutions for difficult problems.
- Responsibility:** Being accountable for your actions.
- Patience:** Waiting calmly for something or someone.
- Friendship:** Making and keeping friends through trust and caring.
- Common Sense:** Using good judgment.
- Effort:** Doing your best.
- Cooperation:** Working together well.
- Caring:** Feeling and showing concern.
- Courage:** Acting on your beliefs.
- Pride:** Taking pride in doing your best.

Figure 3

EXAMPLE OF A PROCEDURE

Procedures on the Playground

1. Always use the Lifelong Guidelines and Life Skills when on break or recess.
2. Be responsible for your own safety and that of others.
3. When the bell rings, stop playing and line up.

WHY USE PROCEDURES?

- They ensure understanding, consistency, and personal responsibility.
- They allow students to feel assured of a safe environment in all areas of the school by letting them know what is expected.

one looks and sounds like.

- Point out others' use of them.
- Use appropriate vocabulary to praise students who are using that particular guideline.

The students will thus see what the guidelines sound like and look like, and will notice how these behaviors help make the classroom a better place to learn. With the guidelines in place, every student will remain "upshifted" for learning.

Classroom Management

While we worked on building a safe environment with the use of Life Skills and Lifelong Guidelines, we began to write procedures to provide general and specific ground rules.⁶

In each classroom, all expectations were written, posted, practiced, and discussed. We discussed together the expectations for each procedure. They helped write each one, giving them a sense of ownership. I put the procedures on a flip chart for easy access and review. (The charts can also be used for conflict management—students can be asked to find the procedure that will help them focus in class or solve a problem.) This provides consistency in class discipline. With the procedures in place, we could focus on learning.

Absence of Threat for Teachers

Just as students need a safe environment for learning and character development, so does every teacher and staff member at our schools. For change in our classrooms and schools to happen, the "absence of threat"⁷ must be a top priority. In order for teachers to provide a safe environment, they must first experience it themselves.

Do you work in a trust-filled environment, where everyone is free from put-downs and competition, where collaboration provides mutual support, and where planning and decision-making are done as a team? Teachers need the training in how the brain learns, and how to teach for character development. They need a commitment of support, training, tools, and time to be the very best example to their students.

Stages of Change

I attended a three-day seminar on

brain-compatible education presented by Susan Kovalik and Associates and continued with a week-long intensive training that emphasized the development of character-driven curriculum, incorporating Life Skills and Lifelong Guidelines. The training gave me the information and the desire to meet not only my child's needs, but also those of every child in my classroom. This has led to two years of change, growth, and a continuing commitment to teach in a way that my students will learn.

I discovered that I had to progress slowly and follow a rubric of changes—otherwise, I found myself trying to incorporate new ideas without mastering the ones already implemented. Here is an initial rubric to help you incorporate changes in a classroom.

1. Attend a seminar on brain-compatible education.
2. Begin with incorporating the character-education elements such as the Lifelong Guidelines and Life Skills, as part of classroom management and discipline.
3. Make sure the classroom environment is pleasant and conducive to learning.
4. Use written procedures to provide consistency and security for students.
5. Seat students in groups. Use collaborative learning, as well as Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences curriculum.

Training and practice will enable you to fully incorporate all the elements of brain-compatible education.

Character Education Will Change the Way We Teach

A caring community of learners will not only provide our students with an environment for spiritual growth, but also ensure the "safe environment" that each child must have in order to learn. It is amazing that what we have always wanted to emphasize as Christian educators is the essential ingredient that makes our children successful in school.

Make a commitment today to create an environment that is more safe and secure for your students—a classroom that not only promotes academic growth, but also helps them become more like Jesus. ☞

Life Skills help students evaluate their own performance. These are appropriate for all ages and skill levels.

Learning and Being Together (Santa Rosa, Calif.: CenterSource Systems, 1995), p. 66.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

3. Leslie A. Hart, *Human Brain and Human Learning* (New York: Longman, 1983), p. 57.

4. Susan J. Kovalik, with Karen D. Olsen, *Integrated Thematic Instruction: The Model* (Kent, Washington: Books for Educators, 1994), p. 25.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

SUGGESTED READING

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Perkins, David N. *Outsmarting I.Q.: The Emerging Science of Learnable Intelligence*. New York: Free Press, 1995.

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For More Information

www.kovalik.com—Information on brain-compatible education.

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REFERENCES

1. Jeanne Gibbs, *Tribes: A New Way of*