

Preparing for the Trip



When our children were young, our family took many road trips. We traveled often from northern California to Missouri, Maine, and on shorter trips to southern California. It would have been easier and quicker to jump on a plane, but our family enjoyed the journey as much as the arrival at our destination.

Fun family trips don't just happen. My wife and I spent hours planning for each trip. We had to select the route, prepare travel packs to keep the kids entertained, and select the right clothing that would make us comfortable along the way, yet still fit in our car. When we planned well, the trip was enjoyable. When we didn't, frustration and tension filled our small automobile.

As a teacher, your teaching experience can be a fantastic journey. You can walk into the classroom filled with confidence and design a learning experience that will be both enjoyable and enlightening for your students. The key to make this happen is proper preparation for the trip.

Let's take a look at some of the essential steps for successful planning!

Assessing Your Situation

The first step in successful family vacation planning is to assess your situation. You must ask key questions such as: How much time do you have? How much money can you afford to spend? And where do you want to go? Other conditions which must be assessed are the ages of your children, your children's likes and dislikes, and the condition of the family's primary source of transportation. Your determination concerning these items will guide your decisions regarding your trip.

In a similar manner, teachers must assess the learning conditions in their local church. Key questions to be considered are: What outcome do you desire to achieve? How many students do you have in your class? How much room does your classroom provide for learning activities? How much time do you have available for teaching? What human and material resources do you have available to you? And what dynamics exist among your students? Answers to these questions will help you make effective plans that will make the learning experience a more pleasant journey for all concerned.

Where Do You Want to Go?

As strange as it may sound, you are not alone if you don't really have a long-term plan for your class. Many teachers simply follow their curriculum from week to week and feel like they have accomplished their task if they get through the prescribed material. As a result, when their students move on to another class, they really don't know what has been accomplished.

Some teachers have set the goal of helping their students acquire a particular body of biblical knowledge. They hope that

during the course of a year their young students will perhaps learn the books of the Bible, a series of memory verses, and key Bible stories. Teachers of adults may ask their students to learn the outline of a particular book of the Bible, become familiar with a type of Bible study methodology, or learn about the various genres of biblical literature.

These types of “content” goals have their place, but they can’t be the final destination of your students’ learning journey. To settle for these outcomes would be like a person learning to read a map, reading travelogues concerning their desired destination, and even going on the Internet to look at the sights but never actually taking the trip. Each of these activities is good and insightful, but they are not substitutes for being there.

The ultimate destination of every Christian education journey must be spiritual discipleship. Spiritual discipleship, simply defined, is the process of becoming more like Jesus Christ. It is a transformational process rather than simply an educational process. Education about God and His Word are not enough. Even the demons know about God (James 2:19). Many liberal theologians can quote Scripture, yet deny the truth of the Word of God. The apostle Paul said that knowledge must lead to transformation for it to make any spiritual difference (Romans 12:1,2).

In the New Testament era, a group known as the Gnostics taught that knowledge was the key to being accepted and approved by God. Much of this knowledge was “secret knowledge” or “mystical knowledge.” The apostle Paul debunked this concept when he declared that “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Corinthians 8:1).

Jesus had two primary goals for those who followed Him: (1) evangelism and (2) discipleship (Matthew 28:19,20).

So what does discipleship look like? Ephesians 4:11–16

provides us a clear picture of the fully formed disciple. The disciple is one who has been equipped to do the ministry of the church. Disciples are individuals who are in love with God and with His people (Ephesians 4:15; 1 Corinthians 13), who are actively engaged in ministry within the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12,16; 1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12), no longer tossed about by false doctrine (Ephesians 4:14), and reaching out to those who need to develop a relationship with God (Ephesians 4:16). These individuals function in unity within the body of Christ to accomplish God's will and purpose for the local body (Ephesians 4:13).

Obviously not everybody in the church has achieved the status of a fully functioning disciple. Each of us is in a unique stage of spiritual development. This gives teachers a great deal of job security. It also gives them a clear destination. Teachers can't be satisfied with simply exploring the spiritual map and talking about the journey. They must lead their students on a spiritual field trip that will help them move toward spiritual maturity.

It is important to see yourself as a people builder. You are laying one brick on top of the next with the ultimate goal of constructing a beautiful spiritual edifice. Your lesson aims must keep the spiritual development of the students in mind regardless of their age.

How Many Will Be Going on the Trip?

For years we traveled in a little Datsun B210. If you remember that car model, you will recall that there wasn't much passenger room, but it sure got good gas mileage. The unfortunate thing about having such a small car was that we couldn't take along a great deal of extras and we could never take any additional riders. As our children got older, we had to make different decisions regarding the vehicle we used to make our trips.

The methods we use to teach are highly impacted by the number of students in our classrooms. I have had the opportunity to teach classes as small as two or three students and teaching a group of over eight hundred students in an educational setting. The methods I used in these various settings were quite different. It is difficult to use methods like role playing or discussion groups when you have a very small class. It is equally difficult to lecture effectively to one or two students. When dealing with eight hundred students, it is nearly impossible to use an open discussion method or a question-and-answer format that will captivate the attention of the whole group.

It is imperative that you become familiar with various methods and techniques that work with varying class sizes. There are great methods that will work for you and make the learning process comfortable for all those who are along for the journey. Many of these methods will be discussed in greater detail later in this book.

How Much Room Do You Have?

Your room size is almost as important to the planning process as the number of students that you have in your class. Many churches have limited facilities. One of the advantages of home Bible studies and small groups is the flexibility available to use multiple rooms in the home if the group grows larger or you need a different setting for a method you would like to use.

If you have plenty of classroom space, your teaching approaches are almost unlimited. But those with smaller classrooms have to be creative and selective. Regardless of your space, it is important that you do not limit your options to sitting around tables each week and surrendering to a single learning method. When a teacher does this, it is like cramming children in the backseat of a car for a long trip and expecting them not to get bored.

Many of the problems that occur on long family trips are the same problems that will happen in your classroom if you don't think of creative ways to overcome your space limitations. Some ways to accomplish this without adding cost to your church would be to remove the tables and chairs occasionally in the younger children's rooms and allow the children to sit on the floor. This will provide you with an open space to do interactive activities such as role play, physical games, and more relaxed storytelling. If your lesson calls for table work, plan to bring the tables and chairs back into the room that class session.

Another effective means to maximize classroom space when teaching children is to work in cooperation with a fellow elementary teacher. Have one teacher set their room up with tables and chairs and the other take the tables and chairs out of their classroom. Take turns using the rooms during the class time enabling one group to perform hands-on work while the other is in story time or game time during the first portion of the session and then have the groups switch during the second half of the session. This will provide variety for the students, opportunity for students to move, and still give you the option to use methods such as art projects and crafts.

Adult space is also often limited. One of the most overlooked ways to maximize adult space is to have multiple classes in the same space. Many churches have a large, open-space fellowship room. It is unwise to limit this room to only one class. Instead, use round tables that seat eight to ten people and consider using each table as a self-contained class. All the tables can share certain space, such as a counter for a common coffee pot and snacks. You may even want to pray together as a larger group, but when it comes to study and interaction time, members at each table can be studying a different topic. Some may object to this idea, thinking that

the noise coming from the room would be too distracting. In reality, this approach produces less distracting noise than the open-floor approach because the eight to ten people are looking at each other and focusing on what they are trying to accomplish.

These are just a couple of ideas that will hopefully spark other ideas concerning ways to maximize the on-site facilities of your church.

How Much Time Do You Have?

When you take a road trip, time often determines your destination. My family generally was limited to a four-week vacation period when our children were younger. We would almost always schedule our vacation around the Fourth of July so that we could add at least one day to our trip.

The amount of time available to us also determined our driving schedule. If we had a few extra days, or we weren't going a great distance from home, we would drive a leisurely six to eight hours a day. If we were making the cross-country trip from California to Maine, we would often drive fourteen- to sixteen-hour days.

As you can imagine, the attitudes of the people in the car were much different when we had shorter days. Being less tired, it took less effort for my wife and I to keep our children occupied and we were much more pleasant with one another. The longer the days, the more planning was required to keep the peace and to enjoy the journey.

In recent years, the time allotted to studying God's Word in the church has decreased. More time is given to singing and preaching in the main service so time spent in classes has often been reduced to forty-five or fifty minutes. This isn't much time to try to accomplish all that some teachers feel is necessary to accomplish.

Limited time requires teachers to keep their ultimate task in focus. If we feel that we must teach our students all that has been placed in a piece of curriculum, we will often concentrate on transmitting knowledge to our students while leaving out other aspects of disciple making. No matter how much time we have, we must keep three key elements of disciple making in every lesson plan: (1) quality fellowship, (2) meaningful prayer, and (3) application of God's Word. If we squeeze any one of these components out of the learning experience on a regular basis, we will fall short of our mission.

Quality Fellowship

The tendency of many teachers is to eliminate quality fellowship from a tight schedule. This is a mistake. A great deal of what we learn that helps us to be more like Christ comes from personal interaction with other Christians. The apostle Paul understood this when he wrote, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). Discipleship happens in the context of community.

Quality fellowship can be simple, such as standing around and talking over a cup of coffee; or organized, such as an ice-breaker designed to get students discussing the topic of the day. No matter what the age of the student, plan at least ten minutes for students to simply enjoy one another.

Meaningful Prayer

Meaningful prayer is not the same as a quick prayer in which someone recites a list of requests just given by the members of the class. Meaningful prayer is prayer that students look forward to and anticipate because of its effectiveness. Many times we never check back to see if God has answered the prayers that we make. When this happens, people get the feeling that the person praying really didn't care about their need and was

simply going through a weekly ritual. It is always wise to allow ten minutes of time for testimonies in which students are encouraged to report to the group concerning specific results from previous weeks' prayers and to offer new prayer needs that members of the group may have. This accountability demonstrates to everyone in the group that someone remembered the request and the testimonies will provide needed faith that God answers the prayers of this group of people.

Application of God's Word

You probably have already figured out that this only leaves twenty-five to thirty minutes for the lesson. Perhaps you wonder how you can get significant material across to your students in such a short time.

The quantity of material that you get across to your students is far less important than the quality of application your students make of the material you do present. Most students of all ages only remember one or two concepts per class period. It is most important for you to do a good job presenting one point and helping students to determine ways to put that principle into practice.

Consider the teaching ministry of Jesus. With the exception of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 through 7), Jesus' lessons were extremely short. He used parables with the people and then gave short explanations later to His disciples. Jesus was not tied to a three-point lesson plan. He provided enough information to stimulate the mind and then asked His students to consider how the principles applied to their lives.

As you plan your lesson, include the three keys to spiritual development. Don't get frustrated because you don't have enough time. Consider taking shorter spiritual trips each week. Remember, a spiritual journey is a process that develops over time. Each lesson is a small, but important, segment of that journey.

What Human and Material Resources Do You Have?

Money and schedules have always played a large role in determining our family vacations. When the kids were little, we didn't have a great deal of money. Really, that is why we began taking road trips. It was much cheaper to pile the four of us in a car than it was to buy four airplane tickets. When Bridgette and Robert entered school and our income increased a bit, our vacation schedule was limited to the summer months and Christmas vacation because of their school schedules thus, another reason for the Fourth of July vacations.

In a similar manner, money and human resources will influence your lesson planning process. If you are fortunate to have a large budget to work with or your church provides items like computers, video games, video projectors, televisions, and other technology, you can do many exciting and creative activities with little effort. If you are like most teachers, you are fortunate to have chalk and crayons. Don't let the programs of the bigger churches around you discourage you. Also, don't let the lack of resources limit your options. You may not have computers in your rooms but you can still do creative things on a limited budget.

If you teach children, consider using empty paper towel rolls as swords to reenact an Old Testament battle or Peter cutting off the ear of the soldier. Use sponges and water paints to do inexpensive but beautiful art projects. Use your imagination to see what God would have you use to get your message across.

The key to creativity is not to be in crisis. If you begin planning your lessons early, you will have more opportunity to come up with effective methods that will help your students learn. Additional ideas will be present throughout this book to help spark your imagination.

Human resources will also impact your planning. Traditionally classes in the church have been modeled after public school classrooms. Each class has a single teacher who leads and guides the learning process. Although teaching can be done by an individual teacher, team teaching provides many more options and is the optimal approach to teaching. Having multiple teachers in the same classroom provides opportunity for more individualized attention to the students and also allows teachers to operate in their strengths while letting the other teachers perform tasks that fit them better.

If you are in a situation where there is no one else to help you, you will have to be more intentional in your planning as you attempt to minister to all the students in your classroom. This will mean stretching yourself beyond your personal comfort zone. If you have never thought of asking someone to assist you in leading your class, you should do so. These people may simply be helpers at first, but over time, they will become more comfortable in participating in the class leadership.

What's the Atmosphere of the Group You Teach?

Every group is different. You may lead a group of seasoned Christians who need to be challenged to get outside their comfort zone and act on what they already know. Perhaps you lead a group of teens who won't settle for pat answers and challenge you each week. Maybe you teach a group of children that have been brought to the church and their parents have no church background. Understanding the composition of your class will help you develop a plan to move them along in the discipleship process.

Understanding the atmosphere doesn't mean you need to cater to the whims of your students. Remember that your task is not to make your students feel comfortable. Your task is to nudge them along the discipleship continuum so that they will

be more like Jesus. Sometimes this will mean stretching your students, helping them to see beyond the horizon.

Assessing Your Students

After getting answers to key questions concerning your situation, it is essential to assess those who will be riding with you on the journey. As I considered scheduling a family trip, it would have been foolish to do so only thinking of my own needs and desires. My wife and I have many things in common, but we see life quite differently when it comes to travel. Rachel likes to take her time and smell the roses. I, on the other hand, like to race the clock to see how many miles I can make in an hour. For Rachel stopping the car is an opportunity. For me, stopping the car is an interruption. We even have different ideas on what makes a good vacation. Rachel likes to spend time with people. For her a good vacation would be to visit family or to spend time with old college friends. Not me! I like to go places and see things. Take me out to the ball game! That's what I call a vacation.

Not only did my wife and I have to consider our own wants when planning our vacation, we also had to consider our children. I will never forget a trip when we didn't do a great job of assessing our children's needs. It was the trip of a lifetime. We decided to go to Hawaii as a family.

Unfortunately, when we arrived we all had conflicting expectations of what an "ideal" vacation was. For me, the ideal vacation was seeing the sights and playing golf. I tried to get the family to take a helicopter ride to see the unreachable portions of Kauai, but no one wanted to go with me. My daughter wanted us to spend all of our time toasting on the beautiful sun-soaked beaches. This would have been fine, except my fair-skinned wife can't spend much time exposed to the sun's rays.

My wife wanted to spend time shopping, which thrilled none of the rest of us. And my son wanted to spend a week sitting in the condo watching cable television because we didn't have cable at home. As you can imagine, there was tension on that trip that could have been avoided if we had done a little better job of planning based on individual needs and desires.

As a teacher, there are a variety of needs and desires represented in the student body you lead. It is important that you plan your presentations with the following issues in focus.

Age-Level Considerations

Most people view life from their own perspectives. This can lead to situations like the one I created for myself in Hawaii. If you are an adult teacher, it is easy to think that your students process material in a similar manner that you process it. This is rarely the case unless you teach a homogeneous group of students about your own age.

The first consideration you must take into account is how age affects your students' ability to learn. If you teach preschool students, you know they have a great capacity to learn. Most learning experts tell us that the majority of the learning that takes place in a person's life occurs in the preschool years. It is not the amount of learning that should concern a preschool teacher, but the type of learning that we should expect from them.

In the preschool years, students are learning basics like trust, love, relationships, and confidence. They are also able to learn building block information such as numbers, letters, and story characters. Preschool students are also able to recognize universal principles such as good and bad. They are even able to associate good consequences with good behavior and anticipate bad consequences for bad behavior, but few are truly able to understand the rationale behind those consequences.

When teaching preschool children, concentrate on instilling the basics; leave the theological implications of these concepts until later, when they are ready to handle this type of material.

Elementary children are ready to move beyond the basics and to begin to fill in some of the gaps that were left in their preschool education. It is during the elementary years that students begin to write words and sentences with the letters they have learned as preschoolers and solve math problems using the numbers they have memorized. In the church setting, elementary children are able to begin to flesh out the stories that surround the Bible characters they learned about in preschool. They want to experience the adventure of David picking up the stones and slinging that single stone that tumbled Goliath. They want to feel like they were a part of the story and to imagine what it must have been like to watch God work in biblical times.

During the elementary years, students begin to understand the reasons behind the consequences their actions bring. The bigger issue for this age group is justice. They don't mind if they receive negative consequences for negative behavior as long as the same consequences are distributed to each person who acts in a similar manner. This basic principle is important to remember because it also reflects the way elementary students tend to learn.

This is not the time to challenge students with "agree-disagree" questions and expect them to grapple with the "gray" areas of the Bible. To present biblical information that appears to contradict itself will only confuse your students. Stick to the clear-cut stories of the Bible when teaching elementary students. They will be ready to struggle with the tougher Bible passages in just a few years. Until that time, lay a solid foundation that will assist them as they transition to their teen years.

Teachers that work with teens can challenge their students to expand their knowledge beyond the basics. No longer are teachers satisfied to teach adding and subtracting. Now they challenge their students to use those principles to learn abstract concepts taught in algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and calculus. Basic science principles are expanded through study of biology, chemistry, and physics. And simple sentences are turned into term papers, poems, and short stories. During the teen years, students must be challenged to think outside the box to determine how all they have learned before can impact situations they will face in the future.

Christian educators often lose the respect and attention of their teen students because they approach their students in the same manner they would approach elementary children if they were teaching them. They tell Bible stories by simply repeating the biblical account, they repeat basic Bible information that has been mastered in the earlier years, and they expect their students to embrace each doctrine they teach without question.

Young teens may accept this approach, but as students arrive at the upper reaches of their teen years, they find this approach boring and unfulfilling. Teens want to explore beyond the basic storyline to see if it is true and determine if it has practical relevance to their lives. If the principles of the story can't work for them, they really have little desire to embrace them.

The key word for working with teens is relevance. If you can't answer the "so what" question when you are preparing a lesson, you need to go back and do more preparation. The "so what" question basically asks, "So what difference will this lesson make in the real-world life of the students I teach?"

Teens are at the age when they can be challenged and they will challenge you. Don't feel offended if your teens question the Bible and the values you hold. They are in a process of

developing their own beliefs based on their understanding of Scripture. Be careful to honestly share the biblical text and encourage your students to grapple with its implications to their lives.

By the time students reach adulthood, they are focused on solving real-world problems rather than simply learning for the sake of learning. The foundation should be laid by this time and now it is time to build on it. At this juncture, the algebra and geometry the young adult has mastered is seen as a means to reaching the goal of becoming an architect. The writing skills learned in high school provide the path to become a published author. The biology and chemistry classes assist a person to become a doctor. Adults generally reserve additional formal education endeavors for courses that will help them advance in an occupation, to change occupations, or to learn a skill that will help them accomplish a specific goal they have established.

When teaching adults in the church, you must remember to focus your teaching on problem solving rather than the further accumulation of biblical information. It is vital that everything you do as a teacher is based on the biblical text, but the way you couch the material will determine if your adult learners will continue to come and continue to learn.

As an example, you have the option of advertising the next series of adult Bible studies as “Studies in the Book of Jeremiah” or you might title the series of lessons, “Learning to Live Victoriously in a Spiritually Hostile Environment.” In either case, you would be teaching the Book of Jeremiah, but which class would you be more drawn to attend? People want to learn a better way to live, and teachers in the church have the greatest resource available to help them accomplish this goal. Often the wall that keeps these two realities apart is the label we assign to the learning experience.

Stages of Development

Another mistake I made in planning the Hawaii trip was not taking into consideration the stages of life the various members of my family were in. My daughter was a sophomore in college. She had recently finished her semester and really just wanted to “veg out.” She was more interested in sunning on the beach to look good in her bathing suit the rest of the summer months. My son had just graduated from high school. He was a little bummed that this “family” vacation was taking the place of his graduation trip. He really didn’t want to hang around with his sister or with his parents. He would have rather been with a group of his friends in another part of the world. My wife and I were celebrating our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, so we had our own set of expectations—which did not include laying around watching television or burning up on the beach. If we had been wise, we would have taken a little time before the trip to determine how our various silent agendas could have been harmonized.

Understanding the stages of development in your students will help you to better assist them in developing in a healthy manner. Erik Erikson is known for his “developmental stages” research. He explains that at the various stages of life, there are tasks that must be accomplished for healthy development to take place. It is important to keep this information in focus as you teach your students.

According to Erikson, at the infant stage of life the individual develops either “trust” or “mistrust.”¹ Caregivers must provide maximum comfort with minimal uncertainty so the child will trust himself, others, and the environment. The implications to the teacher of infants are obvious. The nursery must be safe and comfortable. Teachers must be loving and tender with the students. The staff must be consistent so the children will not

have to learn a new face every time they come to class. When children navigate this stage successfully they develop confidence and hope that situations will work out for the best.

At the toddler stage the individual develops either “autonomy” or “shame and doubt.” Students of this age work to master the physical environment while maintaining self-esteem. If caregivers “guide children gradually and firmly, praise and accept attempts to be independent, **autonomy** develops. The result will be a sense of **will** which helps us . . . build self-esteem.” If caregivers “are too permissive, harsh, or demanding, the child can feel defeated, and experience extreme **shame and doubt**, and grow up to engage in neurotic attempts to regain feelings of control, power, and competency.”²

The preschooler’s developmental task will result in either “initiative” or “guilt.” At this stage the child begins to initiate, not imitate, activities. This is when the child develops conscience and sexual identity. At the preschool stage, children become curious about people and model adults around them. If caregivers “are understanding and supportive of a child’s efforts to show **initiative**, the child develops **purpose**, and sets goals and acts in ways to reach them. If children are punished for attempts to show initiative, they are likely to develop a sense of **guilt**, which can lead to **inhibition**. Too much purpose and no guilt can lead to ruthlessness” as a person attempts to get their way.³

Elementary students’ developmental task will lead to either “industry” or “inferiority.”⁴ At this stage a child tries to develop a sense of self-worth by refining skills. Erikson felt that this was the time when students learned to tame their impulses as they entered school. If adults support the child’s efforts to become socialized, a sense of competence develops. If adults do not support the child’s efforts, a feeling of inferiority is likely to develop. It is essential that church and school teachers

provide support to students at this crucial period in their lives. Oftentimes, the Christian teacher is the only person in the child's life to provide this type of unconditional love.

During adolescence, students try to integrate many roles (child, sibling, student, friend, athlete, and employee) into a self-image in the face of peer pressure. It is during this stage that teens develop either "identity" or "role confusion."⁵ During these years, teens "try on" different identities, relying on their peers to help them determine if the identity fits. Students who settle on an identity that they are comfortable with will be stable in that role and develop their identity. If they are unable to do so, the result is role confusion and they become susceptible to being led from group to group with no moorings.

It is at this crucial stage that the church must help students determine their values and identity. Many teens find their identity as leaders in the youth group or in the Sunday School class. As a teacher it is essential to help your students see themselves as an important part of the Christian community. If they see themselves as just "another class member" they will seek to find their identity elsewhere. The majority of teens that make a successful transition from their teen years to their young adult years remaining plugged into the church are those who were actively involved in leadership positions in the church and youth group during their teen years.

During the young adult years, individuals either develop "intimacy" or "isolation."⁶ It is during this stage that individuals learn to make personal commitments to others as spouse and parent. "Intimacy is the ability to be close, loving, and vulnerable with romances and friends." It is based on developing healthy love for yourself and others. People who don't learn how to love in a healthy manner, often become involved in "**promiscuity** (getting too close too quick and not sustaining

it) or **exclusion** (rejecting relationships and those who have them).”⁷

It is tragic that so many of the young adults in our churches go to secular environments after high school that encourage and foster unhealthy love relationships. It is at this juncture of life that students need to be learning from those who understand the importance of godly love and the importance of caring for those who are important to them.

As teachers in the church, make sure that you provide a healthy example of love to your students and encourage them to resist the temptation of trading a long-term fulfilling relationship for immediate unbridled pleasure that will lead to a void in their lives. A great deal of the future happiness of a person is determined at this stage of development. We must take advantage of our teaching opportunities to positively impact the young adults we teach.

Erikson identifies the developmental task of the middle-age adult as “generativity vs. stagnation.”⁸ The successful middle-age student seeks satisfaction through productivity in career, family, and civic interests. Erikson argues that to have a successful older adult life, one must become actively involved investing in the lives of those who are coming along behind. Thus a middle-aged adult who teaches Sunday School, Boy Scouts, or serves as a coach of a youth sports team will have greater future happiness than a person who becomes self-centered and self-absorbed.

Teachers of middle-aged adults must help students see that service is a crucial component of the gospel message, not only for the good of others, but also for their own good. Keeping service opportunities before students will assist them in seeing the multitude of opportunities that are available. Plan service activities for the group to participate in and celebrate the testimonies of students who take part.

Finally, Erikson states that older adults are faced with tasks that either lead to “integrity” or “despair.”⁹ During this stage individuals review their life accomplishments, deal with loss, and prepare for death. Older adults face the ending of life and must accept their successes and failures. Those who can look back on their lives with satisfaction for the difference they have made through their service recognize “integrity” in their lives and are satisfied to pass from the scene knowing they have done well. These people don’t fear death and even develop a reputation as people of wisdom. Those who look back on their lives with regret often develop despair and feel that it is too late to change a life of missed opportunities.

Teaching older adults can be a great joy or a difficult task. Those who have lived productive “others-oriented” lives are fun to be around. Those who have lived self-absorbed lives can make associating with them a hard task. If you teach this group, you must find a way to offer hope to those in despair and encourage them to spend the rest of their lives making eternal investments in others.

Learning Styles

If I had the opportunity to step into most classrooms unnoticed, this is what I would observe. There are some students transfixed by the presentation of the teacher. They are engaged and excited to be in the class. There are some that are looking around or out the window, there are others that are rummaging through their purses, flipping pencils, or aimlessly turning the pages of their Bibles, and there are others with a blank stare on their faces seemingly saying, “Why am I here?”

Does that description sound anything like your classroom? Don’t be ashamed if it does, because nearly every place I present this material, teachers tell me that this is what they are experiencing. The reason that this is happening, for the

most part, is because you are teaching to only one learning style.

Most teachers teach the way they were taught and the way they enjoy learning. The majority of teachers, both professional and volunteer, teach because of the positive experience they had as students. Some teacher patted them on the back and encouraged them for their efforts as a student because the student responded to the teacher's style and approach to the learning experience. This was a positive experience for the student so they chose to follow the path of their teacher and used the shared learning/teaching style to shape their own teaching.

In that same classroom probably sat a number of children who didn't please their teacher. These people may not have been abused by the teacher, but they definitely were not encouraged because they didn't respond to the teacher like the "pleasing" students had. As a result, these "less-than-perfect" students walked away from the experience determined to spend as little time in a classroom as possible. These students seldom enter the teaching profession.

Unfortunately, the cycle can continue for many generations. Teachers beget teachers like themselves and when future generations of children come along that don't learn like the prototypical teacher desires, they have the same negative experiences as those who went before them. The result is generations of students who fail to receive a positive learning experience.

So how can we remedy this situation?

It is essential that as you make your lesson plans that you keep in mind the wide range of learning styles represented among your students. There are a variety of ways of looking at learning styles.

At present there are at least seventy-one distinct learning style theorists that fall into five general categories of ways of

describing the way people learn. There are merits to each of these learning theories, but it would be well beyond the scope of this book and the interest of most readers to explore each of them.

A commonly used and understandable way to look at learning styles is based on the way individuals receive information. Various proponents of this category of learning style theories believe that people are either visual learners (learn primarily through the eyes), auditory learners (learn primarily through the ears), kinesthetic learners (learn best through movement), or tactile learners (learn through hands-on/touching). This will be the learning modality model discussed in this book.

The bulk of this book, starting with chapter 3, will deal with these four primary learning modalities. Not only will you discover ways to identify the various learning styles of your students, but you will also discover creative ways to minister to those individuals that learn in ways much different than you learn. By the time you are finished with this book and implement its principles, you will have an entire classroom excited about the spiritual journey you have in store for them.

Assessing Your Options

Recently I was discussing the topic of this book with a gentleman I had just met. I told him that I was using our family vacations as the unifying theme in the book. He thanked me for doing this because he said that he wasted many years not taking a family vacation only to learn later in life how much he had missed. Year after year he worked hard for his family, following the example of his dad, not understanding the importance of getting away with his family. He was thankful for this emphasis because he hoped that in some way the illustrations in the book would nudge someone who was making the same

mistake he made to spend quality “away time” with the people they love.

Many people who don’t take a family vacation point to the cost of such an adventure and feel they can’t afford to spend their money in that fashion. Others like my new friend don’t go away together as a family because they have never done it before and don’t realize the great benefits it provides. Others just don’t want to spend their time on this type of activity.

As a teacher, you may not feel a need to change the way that you have been doing things in the classroom. You may feel that all this talk about assessing your situation and assessing your students is too much work. Perhaps you feel that your students should just be happy that you take the time each week to show up and teach them. If this represents your thoughts, this book probably isn’t for you.

If you want your classroom to be more exciting and your students to be more engaged, and if you are willing to make some changes, I challenge you to read further and to put the principles found in this book into practice. I think you will enjoy the trip.

Reflection Questions

1. What are two primary goals you want to accomplish with your students over the next twelve months?
2. How can you make your present class situation a positive situation even if you have a limited space, time, or resources?
3. What do you consider the basic emotional needs of the students you teach?
4. What steps can you take to help your students to positively accomplish their developmental tasks as identified by Erikson?

Endnotes

¹“Erikson’s Psychosocial Stages of Development,” *Resources for Students*, available from <http://www.psychpage.com/learning/library/person/erikson.html>. Internet, accessed May 10, 2006.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.



Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could.

—ROBERT FROST, "THE ROAD NOT TAKEN"



