

Too Much of a Good Thing

There's an old saying that you can't have too much of a good thing. That's not exactly true. Those of us who teach recognize that we cannot successfully hold the class's attention by doing the same thing all the time, even though what is being done has been tested and tried.

“I need more than a lecture.”

The lecture method is a good example. Schools are largely designed around the lecture method of teaching because it is easier for the teacher to dictate material. The theory is sound because approximately 80 percent of students can and do learn effectively this way. But for the others, there are some things that should be given consideration.

First, students forget 90 percent of what they hear in just 24 hours. That's not a very good rate of retention. So while the learning is efficient, it is not very effective. With something as important as Christian education and Sunday school, because we have students for such a short time, we would hope for greater retention. It is possible to increase learning, however—not by doing more of what we have been doing but in varying our method of teaching as each situation demands.

Second, not all students learn in the same way. Some do learn through the ear gate, and if we repeat what we want them to know often enough, long-term learning can be achieved. The question is, do we have that kind of time, and are our students that faithful in their attendance? The answer to these questions is, of course, no.

Third, teaching is more an art than it is a science, because it takes an artist's discerning eye to notice the subtle differences in the behaviors of learners, and it takes the artist's creativity to be flexible enough to do what is appropriate to achieve desired results.

There are very few hard and fast rules about how a teacher interacts with a group of students. Students learn best when material is presented to them in an organized sequence. This helps students to reconstruct the ideas and concepts so that they may be recalled more easily. When a student says “I don't get it,” what is really being said is that the learning experience makes no logical sense.

Since it is generally agreed that 20 percent of students do not respond well to the lecture method, Sunday school teachers need some other ways to reach those students. Further, because our students will forget 90 percent of what we say 24 hours later, the learning curve drops dramatically once these students leave a classroom where the lecture method is used exclusively.

“I'm bored!”

Students learn in various ways and to various degrees. In addition, a great many discipline problems in the classroom are the direct result of a student's not being taught in the mode he or she most favors. For example, when Michael or Emma begins to fidget about 10 minutes into the lesson, we attempt to ignore the signal that we need to do something different. We concentrate on getting through the lesson, and we allow these disturbances to continue. This is not only unfair to us because of the limited time we have to teach but also to the other students who are there to learn. This is where teaching becomes more of an art and less of a science. Students give certain indicators that we are not “getting through” to them. When this happens, we must find a way to interest the Michaels and the Emmas, not only for their sakes but for the sakes of the

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rest of the students. Teachers must make a quick analysis of the situation and change to a more effective teaching method than the one being used at the time.

“Just show me.”

Some students who are not auditory learners—that is, those who learn by listening, may profit immensely from visual learning. They have to see the concept applied in a drawing, photograph, diagram, diorama, video, drama, or some other way that will let them visualize the concepts to be learned. That’s why whiteboards are found in classrooms and why pictures are abundant when children first learn to read. God, in fact, utilized the visuals learning mode when He instituted the Lord’s Supper and baptism. These are visual representations of biblical concepts that are easily remembered.

Teachers, then, ought to incorporate visual applications into their teaching. Interesting posters and attractive bulletin boards that illustrate the main concepts of the lesson or unit, changed often, capitalize on this mode of reaching the students’ minds.

“Let me do it!”

Even so, students still tend to forget about 50 percent of what they see 24 hours later. Any trial attorney will testify that eyewitness testimony is not always accurate and is subject to great error. There are times when people see what they expect to see, not necessarily what is really there. Another teaching mode is yet available.

The third means by which students learn is the kinesthetic. This is a term that means “learning by doing.” Children remember 90 percent of what they do 24 hours later. Ninety percent is a pretty good return on time spent in the classroom. Some students who tune us out or seem to daydream in class, and can’t answer the simplest of questions about the lesson, may, in fact, be kinesthetic learners. They may fidget or disturb other students. We may try to rearrange the seating so that they won’t disturb the others or us, but it’s no use. Or we may be critical of them and, in so doing, may lay the groundwork for their dropping out of Sunday school later. These students will find a way to expend their energy. Have you ever noticed that these learners love to run errands or they have to go to the restroom often?

These students need activity. They need a chance to talk, to act, to handle things. They need models to manipulate. Asking these students open-ended questions that involve how they feel about certain things can satisfy their need to be active and can improve their feelings of self-worth. Role-playing is another great way to get active students to learn, because it teaches to their strength—activity. Having them draw a picture of the lesson is also a good method to use. Many of these students may love to write a play and act out the lesson for the benefit of others, especially for the benefit of the visual learners. But if we expect them to sit quietly while we lecture in class, we are fooling ourselves, because they can’t and they won’t.

Some students are being turned off to Sunday school, not by the personalities of the teachers but by the way lessons are presented. This could help to explain why so many of our young people quit Sunday school as soon as they are able to resist their parents’ pressures and their teacher’s pleading. This need not happen. We need to realize that not all students learn in the same way and they can’t be taught using the same methods. Our job as Christian educators is to present Bible truths in such a way that students can make practical application of biblical principles in their daily lives.