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Fun in the Classroom



Drawing by Pieter Breughel

Education in the 16th century may have been uproarious fun for some students, but for others it was downright murder. One wonders if learning took place at all.



Bert Witvoet

A Case for Faith Humor

This issue of the *Christian Educator's Journal* is about having fun in the classroom. It's a worthwhile topic

and presents a terrific ideal for which to strive as teacher. We don't always associate fun with school. Many of us remember at least these lines about a person's seven acts on the world's stage, taken from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*: "At first the infant,/ Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms./ And then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel,/ And shining morning face, creeping like snail/ Unwillingly to school." If this reflects Shakespeare's own experience of school (and it may well, considering that he was a right-brain person in a left-brain school system), it doesn't sound as if he had fun in the classroom.

Of course, by fun we don't mean that students ought to have a riot every time they enter the halls of learning. Today's definition of fun often implies physical activity or external excitement. Fun is associated with raucous laughter, slapstick humor and scintillating entertainment. Not that such diversions should be absent from the school setting, nor will they, given the fact that school combines a lot of youthful, energetic human characters, each with his or her own peculiar traits and circumstances. It would be highly unusual for there not to be times of riotous fun. But those are the incidentals and do not really constitute the heart and purpose of schooling.

The laughter of freedom

Humor, on the other hand, is much more an essential part of education. Humor often has to do with seeing the incongruity of a situation or grasping the contrast between expectations and outcome. So much of the study of literature, for example, has to do with the theme of appearance versus reality. Good literature helps us dig below the surface of appearance and unearth the sometimes humbling and embarrassing reality. Good literature exposes the hypocrisy of our lives. That is often reason for a smile. Being the decent sinners that most Christians think they are makes them prime objects for a good laugh.

The classroom situation itself should encourage laughter so that students can experience the liberating power

of hope, which is inherent in good humor. I will never forget an interview I had with Pete Steen, a college and community

lecturer from the 1970s who used to live in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The focus of the interview was on humor. Pete felt that we often laugh for the wrong reasons. "Everything can be laughed at just about," said Steen, who laughed a lot himself. "But to laugh for the wrong reasons, out of unbelief, that's what I am afraid of. The laugh of faith can be about anything that is common to man." Steen felt that by laughing, we surrender things to God's care. One of the problems he had with humanism, socialism and capitalism is that there is no appeal beyond the self, and so life becomes joyless. Laughter, he said, is an expression of "freedom from your own autonomy. Trying to be sovereign is always enslaving yourself in the process. There goes the humor, right out of your own sovereignty" (*Vanguard*, July-August 1979).

I can't find a more eloquent case for giving humor a very important place in the classroom.

A cultural 'riot'

Another source for fun in the schooling experience ought to be the task that was given to us human beings at the dawn of history. In Reformed circles we refer to it as the cultural mandate. This mandate was given when God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply and subdue the earth. It is this command that gives impetus to what happens in the school from day to day as we continue the task that God began when he created heaven and earth. God enjoyed that task, and he invites us to cultivate the potential he laid in what he created.

"Cultivating the earth was never optional," write Hillary Brand and Adrienne Chaplin in *Art and Soul: Signposts for Christians in the Arts*. "The cultural mandate is for every human being and covers every aspect of life. And it is meant to be fun" (p.47). Amen, sisters. The cultural mandate, which includes learning and teaching, is meant to be fun. God had fun when he created the world. Just read Proverbs 8: 22-31, where Wisdom (the Word in John 1) talks about being the craftsman at the side of the Cre-

ator, and how she was “filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in humankind.” If we are made in the image of God and of Wisdom, then we should have as much fun as possible continuing that work of creation. Teacher and student: Be a craftsman and craftswoman at God’s side and delight day after day in his presence.

The burden of proof

I have been a teacher for as long as I have been an editor. I executed both jobs under the burden-of-proof scrutiny. What I mean by that is that I constantly challenged myself with the following question: “What makes you think that anyone is interested in what you have to say?” I asked myself that question because I could think of a hundred and one reasons why someone would not be interested. And so I always had to convince myself that maybe, just maybe, my students or my readers would enjoy listening to me or reading me. What this burden-of-proof approach did for me is put me on my toes and dare myself to be creative.

Boredom became enemy number one for me. According to Francois-Marie Voltaire, “The way to be a bore [for an author] is to say everything” (*Le secret d’ennyuer est ... de toute dire*). Have you ever listened to a preacher who gives you the complete gospel Sunday after Sunday? Bo-o-oring! I learned from a Dutch editor that the best way to write editorials is to shine a spotlight on one side of the building and leave the rest to the imagination of the reader. Good advice. Teachers can apply the same dictum.

Of course, not saying everything drives those people up the wall who are worried about perception and who want you to cover all the bases. They want you to assure them that when you say Jesus is your brother, you don’t deny his divinity! Well, if you want a good example of someone not worrying about covering all the bases, listen to Jesus: “If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off” (Whoa. Didn’t you want to qualify that, Jesus?) “If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic.” (It’s a figure of speech, right, Jesus?)

I’m not suggesting that Jesus was fighting boredom

when he made these radical pronouncements, but he challenged people to think and feel deeper, and he taught them not to worry about political or theological correctness. Speaking the truth tends to be radical stuff, and it is never boring. The most boring people are bureaucrats who engage in fuzzy bureau-speak. A lot of official speeches held at formal occasions are dull and stifling because the speaker says what is expected of him or her.

I am convinced that students see through this kind of hypocrisy in a minute or less. And so it behooves the educator to divest himself of all pretense and present himself in a non-heavenly, that is, down-to-earth, manner so that those placed in his charge may be all the more inspired to reach for that lofty goal of truth and sincerity, yea, that they may quaff at the fountain of knowledge from which their learned tutor has so freely drunk himself. Amen?

Post Script

The secret of a genuine smile can be seen at the laughter lines at the outside of the eyes. Psychologists in London, England, have determined that when people were shown images of happy faces, their gaze lingered on the



outer corners of the eyes rather than on the mouth.

The tightening of the muscle surrounding the eye is known as the “Duchenne smile,” after the observations by 18th-century anatomist Duchenne de Boulogne. Boards do well to look for crow’s feet around the eyes of smiling interviewees. After all, we do want teachers in our classrooms who besides knowing their subject also know how to smile and laugh. On the other hand, teachers are likely to be nervous around interview time and it may be too much to expect a genuine smile to emerge.

Significant Learning that Illuminates



by Curt Gesch

Curt Gesch is a teacher of English at Bulkley Valley Christian School (Secondary) in Smithers, British Columbia.

I once did a workshop called “Divertimento in G: What’s Wrong With a Little Fun in the Classroom?” for a teachers’ convention. The session was packed, which suggests that, however difficult or silly the assignment, the topic is not without interest. The background premise of the workshop was this: Students are not so obsessed with the latest movie/video, clothing and music that they are averse to having lowbrow enjoyment as they learn. Indeed, I have found that high school students (and, I am quite sure, middle and elementary students) are...

*desirous to enjoy classroom work (they *hate* easy, boring, condescending classes);

*interested in significant learning that illuminates everyday life;

*conservative in social values;

*arch-romantic in regard to boy/girl relationships;

*possessed of remarkably long attention spans;

*enthusiastic about singable, old music, whether “old” means big band songs, jazz standards, show tunes, Gregorian chant or Genevan psalms.

All that is left for the teacher to do is to build on these admirable traits. Below are some examples of activities that have lightened my day, given satisfaction and interest to students, and – in some cases – enriched par-

ents’ lives as well.

1. English 8: poetry. I wanted to work on parallelism and alliteration. The students, who liked the idea of doing poetry about as much as President Clinton enjoys hearing the name “Monica,” did like basketball. So I divided the class into two groups and proceeded to the gym. Group 1 was given the onerous assignment of playing a scrimmage for 10 minutes. Group 2 sat on the sidelines making notes of sense impressions that would later form the basis of their poems about basketball. Every 10 minutes the groups changed places. Here is one of the student poems. (Several of these were later included in a *Best in British Columbia* poetry anthology.)

Today I see:

A basketball being bounced,
hear the thump...thump.

A person playing powerfully,
his face full of fearsomeness.

A shot shifting into the air,
a swoosh,
hearing the point excite the
players,
sneakers making sounds.

And I:

Shudder at the large players, who
as giants glide along.

Sheldon Bakker

2. English 8: composition. The biggest trouble in teaching essay writing seems to be unity. So we had to find a way to get everyone to be conscious

of topic sentences, sub-points, transition words, and “proof.”

First, we made up a code for each of these aspects of a prose paragraph. I think it was yelling “Goink!” and raising the right arm when hearing a topic sentence read; “Glurp!” and the left hand for sub-points; “Yurt!” and both hands for transition words; and “Friggle-froggle!” while wiggling all ten fingers for proof. Then I read a well-constructed paragraph containing these four elements. The class became quite noisy, of course, and attracted the attention of passers-by who were confused by the sounds and actions, but pleasantly surprised by the giggles.

Composition exercises, including tests, consisted of my supplying the students with lists of words and facts that they had to organize, sort, and then form into a paragraph. In one case, since so many students were fishermen, I used names and descriptions of trout. Here’s a student paragraph:

“All kinds of trout and char have markings on them. For example, cut-throat trout have red slashes under their jaws. Also, rainbow trout often have a red band on their sides. Finally, the dolly varden (or char) have pale spots on their backs. All of these fish can be caught in local lakes and streams, plus they are great for eating.” – Jason Reedyk

3. Vocabulary. What a boring subject. “Copy the dictionary definition and then use the word in a sentence of your own.” (Gag.) I started by

Authoritative Fun Prophets

By Curth Gesch

The editor of *CEJ* asked me to write about fun in a practical *and* philosophical way. Philosophical? Sounds like 15 ways to ruin a good joke. So, I thought, why not put the philosophy in a sidebar. That will demonstrate academic acumen on my part and satisfy those who need to be convinced on a deeper level that it's alright to have fun.



Curt Gesch (l.) talking to conferee Alan Bron at the 1999 OCSTA Convention.

giving every student the word as used in a sentence from their novel and one point for any guess as to its meaning in context. Then we did the dictionary thing, and the “write your own sentence” thing. I gave extra marks, however, for creative or zany sentences, and published the best (or worst) of these. Below are some of the students’ sentences, with the vocabulary word in italics, the author identified, and my comments in parentheses as printed in a class newsletter.

*The *poultice* Jay applied to Kevin was actually nothing more than a large bundle of soggy poison ivy. – Joshua (the evil alchemist)

**Lethargy* had come to our class as we listened to Mr. Gesch talk. – Jolene (who used to be the teacher’s pet)

*I feared I was in trouble from my *abominable* snow-mummy. – Trevor (who was in trouble when she read this)

4. Music history. In order to teach Gregorian chant, we listened to a few on a recording, noted the characteristics, and then I led the class to our empty, sepulchral gymnasium and stood in two groups facing each other while singing “O Come, O Come Immanuel” *a capella*.

5. Church History/Bible. I think it was in connection with a Bible class that we took a short detour to study about the Celtic peoples. Paul and Barnabas had trouble with the local Lystran language (cf. Acts 14:11). Knowing that Lystra was in Galatia, named for a Celtic settlement from

“How grand a gift pleasure is! Calvin in the *Institutes* caned Augustine for lacking a biblical appreciation of life’s pleasures.... To scoop out time for activities that are for you recreative pleasures (music, hobby reading, good conversation, fine food, tennis, trips away, evenings with your spouse, or whatever) is a proper and needful use of Christian liberty; without it, however far you go in Christian expertise and expression, you shrink as a person.... All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, even if he is a sound evangelical.” (J.I. Packer in “Bungee-Jumping, Anyone?” *Christianity Today*, October 5, 1992)

“What is the wind doing in the hayfield? What is Victoria Falls up to, or the surf along the coast of Maine? What about the fire going wild in the belly of the stove, or the rain pounding on the roof like the “Hallelujah Chorus,” or the violet on the window sill leaning toward the sun?

What, for that matter, is God up to, getting the whole thing started in the first place? Hurling the stars around like rice at a wedding, gathering the waters together into the seas like a woman gathering shells, calling forth all the creatures of earth and air like a man calling ‘Swing Your Partner’ at a hoedown. ‘Be fruitful and multiply!’: God calls, and creator and creature both all but lose track of which is which in the wonder of their playing.” (Frederick Buechner in *Whistling in the Dark*)

“I will not argue that teachers should cultivate eccentricity if they want ‘merit pay’ increases. I don’t mean to imply either that as part of every job interview, before the massed student body, the prospective teacher must put on a vaudeville act to see whether he or she qualifies. But I do want to posit and make convincing if I can, that basic to good teaching – teaching which captivates students and opens them up to God’s world and his mighty acts in history – is a competent teacher fascinated by his or her own material, who is himself or herself a ‘captivating’ teacher, that is, one able to stir the imagination of students. It’s that spark of igniting students’ imagination, lifting them up into worlds as yet unknown, that distinguishes, I think, a good teacher from a mediocre one, in *any* subject matter. (Calvin Seerveld in *Rainbows for the Fallen World*)

way back, we naturally moved on to showing where Celts lived in various times (like Boston and Brittany and Gaul!). Of course, this led to Asterix, Obelix and crew. "You're studying Asterix!" exclaimed other classes. "You guys get everything."

The Asterix experience was so successful that I thought, "Why not use it some more?" Students studied hermeneutics later in the year, and were about to take a quiz on various terms, principles, etc. I told the students to study hard, and then handed them a quiz that began like this:

"When we last encountered our friends, Asterix and Obelix, they were deep in a discussion of the 'principles' of biblical interpretation with their friend, _____ics [x]. Asterix showed off his knowledge of Greek by maintaining that a good biblical interpretation should be 'theo-centric.' Obelix said, 'Duh, say that in English.' Asterix sighed and said, "_____ -centered."

6. Memorization. I once had a student who set the words of Yeats' poem, "The Second Coming," which he had to memorize, to the tune of "Abide With Me": "Tur-ning and tur-ning, in the wid'ning gyre." This was a bit too close to sacrilegious for me (and for his mom), but his classmate's choice of music, a song by Billy Idol, didn't offend anybody, since Yeats was perhaps forecasting the popularity of singers like Mr. Idol. Master teacher Art Haverhals often helps students memorize history or geography facts by chanting the facts to "pointed

psalm" rhythms. I'm waiting for the "Periodic Table Rap" to supplement Tom Lehrer's musical version of yesteryear.

7. Miscellaneous. I use music (live music!) a great deal in my classes. I have a piano in the room and prevailed upon our local ladies' fundraising committee also to buy a set of bongos, tambourine, claves and cowbell. When studying the psalms, we accompany Genevan tunes with a full rhythmic beat and a great deal of syncopation. On other occasions, while students study, others take turns playing the piano pieces they're learning at home or a new song from church. Or students simply serenade each other with golden oldies, everything from "Java Jive" to Harry Connick, Jr.'s ballads.

What is fun?

I find "whimsical," "light-hearted" or even "silly" appropriate descriptions for the examples above. Maybe even "creative" or "imaginative." What, after all, is fun? I will wax a little philosophical here. And my waxing involves that horrid expression which is quite common in my area: "fun activities."

Grammatically incorrect, the expression also betrays a way of looking at education. When the student council sponsors a "fun day" or the school staff or administration announces that on Friday afternoon, "we'll be stopping classes early for some fun activities," they are say-

ing something about their view of education. Though I hesitate to criticize Dr. Packer (please see sidebar), his focus is certainly not the same as mine, although I'm sure he will not deny the great enjoyment he gets from theologizing.

Packer's words imply that pleasure is something that one achieves as avocation, somehow in opposition to work. The examples I gave all try to point to another way of seeing things. In my thinking, pleasure is something that should arise naturally and integrally from class activities, rather than as a change of pace or rest from the calling to learn. Fun, I maintain, ought not be the carrot, or a device teachers use now that the stick is illegal.

Indeed, the examples I use are themselves limited. They do not show the extraordinary, almost mystical pleasure and satisfaction ("fun," if you will) that we sometimes achieve in the heavy slogging we do in school. And so I close with a prayer that in common parlance would probably never be labelled, "Thanksgiving for Fun," but which, I think, point to a better way of seeing things.

Lord, you know that today we have another difficult math class; please help us to concentrate, to stimulate each other's curiosity, to exult in the joy of figuring out a difficult problem...

We ask this of you because we are your children, working and playing simultaneously in your world.

In the name of Jesus Christ.

Fun in the Classroom:

by Dale Eizenga, Dan Visser and Jim Peterson

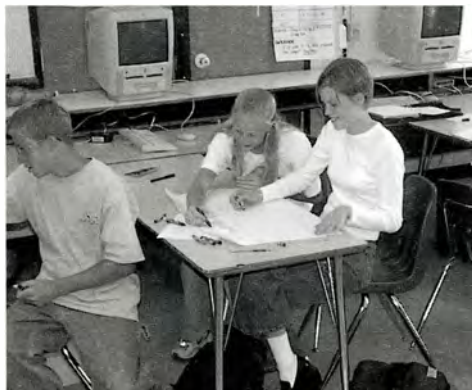
The three co-authors teach at Holland Christian High School in Holland, Michigan. Dale teaches chemistry, freshman science and environmental science; Dan teaches chemistry, biology and freshman science; Jim teaches physics and freshman science and is the technology coordinator. Their email addresses are: deizenga, dvisser or jimp, each @hollandchristian.org.

“Hello, my name is Mr. Peterson, and I’ll be your freshman science teacher today.” A new group of unsuspecting freshmen at Holland Christian High have just begun the adventure of doing science. I wonder how Dale Eizenga and Dan Visser started their freshman science class.

Although each teacher may start with a different introduction, we agree about activities and goals. The next step on the first day is to have students take a sheet of paper and make the best paper airplane they can. So the obedient, and maybe a little confused, students make airplanes, not knowing that in doing so they will be learning about independent, dependent and controlled variables. Before the bell rings students are told, “Students, your assignment for tomorrow is to bring a two-liter bottle to class. We will be using these bottles to apply some of the things you have already learned by making rockets. After only one day, our stu-

dents realize that this is no ordinary science class. It will be a class in which students rarely sit and listen to their teacher dispense knowledge; rather, they need to talk to each other, argue with each other, build things, construct knowledge, and have fun.

This first unit of our freshman science class is all about doing science. One of the big projects is to build rockets out of two-liter bottles. The goal is to launch a bottle 100 meters. To reach this goal, students must identify variables, test variables, and



present the results of those tests to the class. Then they take all that information and apply it to design their own rocket that often reaches the 100 meter goal. Students design experiments, build rockets, launch rockets, get wet while launching rockets, laugh, struggle, gather data, graph and analyze data, and present results to their classmates. Students do a lot of work during the first few weeks of school. Much of it is trial and error. As a teacher, I find it hard to let the students make mistakes, but in the end they have had a lot of fun and have

learned a lot about how science is done in the process.

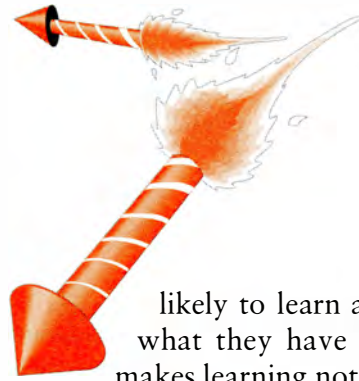
Teacher expectations

So what makes our rocket unit fun? What can you take to your classroom from our experiences? Based on student responses and our own experiences, we came up with two key ingredients to making a classroom fun: teacher attitude and classroom environment.

It must be apparent to all students that their teacher is excited about the rocket project in particular and about science in general. When out in the field launching rockets, we keep asking students questions about how their experiment is going, showing an interest in their project and progress. Often the questioning will lead to improved technique. We make sure that the students see our excitement at their experimental success and understanding of the underlying scientific methods. When a student’s face lights up at a new discovery, we are just as excited, because that student has learned an unforgettable lesson.

The teacher also needs to believe and convey the attitude that student opinions are not only valued, but also necessary to the class’s success. For the rocket project, each team researches only one aspect of the rocket, and therefore needs research from other teams so that they all can succeed at the goal. Presentations and sharing are needed by the teachers to help create a community of scientists. The attitude of openness sets up an environment in which all can try out and evaluate

No Rocket Science



ideas in constructive ways. This is new for some students: some are not used to having their ideas affirmed; others are not used to having their ideas be unsuccessful in public. Done correctly, self-awareness is exciting and challenging. The fun comes from developing the confidence to share one's opinions and knowing they will be valued.

In order to be able to value students' opinions, a teacher must be patient. Many of the initial rocket experiments do not go well. In fact, the first day of shooting rockets has never produced good data. One teacher response could be carefully to explain why things had gone wrong and then provide the correct answers. However, this would take away an opportunity to show that we value the students' ideas. More patience is needed to allow the class to figure out that the data is so poor it cannot be used. Using their ideas, we then develop a better strategy and head back outside to launch again. This shows students that we will allow them to make mistakes and that we will help them recover.

An open and safe place

Besides teacher attitude, work environment is an important factor in making the classroom fun. Before a classroom can be a fun place for students, it must be a safe place. Physical safety is an obvious requirement and is easier to achieve than emotional safety. The teacher must set up expectations early and be vigilant in protecting the emotional safety of every-

one in the classroom. This protection will and should interrupt what is happening in the classroom. Michael *Brandwein*, a children's behavior expert, says, "Children know what is important by what interrupts you." If they know that their emotional safety is important to the teacher, they will have a more enjoyable classroom experience.

Structuring the classroom to give students the opportunity to talk and share ideas with each other uses the natural desire to communicate with others in a positive way. As previously mentioned, this communication can be designed so that it is crucial for success. The structure should also be flexible enough to allow students to share not only information and ask questions related to the curriculum, but also related to topics that are not necessarily part of the curriculum. While some teachers might see this as a "waste of time," if done correctly it can help enhance educational goals. Singing "Happy Birthday" in a high school classroom lets students know that they are part of the "classroom family" and are valued. This will likely increase the students' participation.

A classroom with limited communication opportunities can be plagued with unacceptable ways of student communication – notes between students, whispering and the like.

Students should have opportunities not only to communicate verbally with each other and the teacher, but also to interact with one another. Educators have long known that, when students are active, they are more

likely to learn and remember what they have learned. This makes learning not only more effective, but also more enjoyable.

Finally, teachers should have a classroom environment in which a variety of methods are used to furnish many different experiences for students, and thereby reach more students. No matter how engaging and enjoyable a teaching method may be at the start, using only one method will eventually result in less student interest. Besides launching rockets outside one day, students make posters and presentations the next, and work on spreadsheets and computer-generated graphs the next. Students come to class asking, "What are we going to do today?"

Classrooms should be interesting places. With the proper teacher attitude and a pleasant environment the classroom can be a place of fun for students and teachers alike. The attitudes and environments we seek to foster are governed by the principles found in I Corinthians 13:4-7(RSV), "Love is patient and kind, love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

Reference: *Brandwein, Michael. Notes on presentation June 5, 1999, Central Michigan University.*

Breaking the Classroom Routine

by **Mert Smits**

Mert Smits is head of the English Department at Valley Christian High School in Cerritos, California.

It was midwinter in California. This means only that as a person who moved from upstate New York I missed the seasons: snow falling outside the windows, the comfort of a fireplace in the midst of a blizzard, the colors of fall leaves, and a driving rain. In California, a driving rain is minutes long and rarely washes the dirt away. The trees don't lose their leaves, so poetry with seasonal references is often lost on my students, even those in the AP class. So, during the winter I sometimes wear bright colors to alleviate the loss.

Smart Alec

This particular day I had on my bright yellow sweater. I felt invigorated and sunny and began my pre-class group work with a few minutes of instruction, only to be interrupted by Chris, holding his hand in a commanding way and loudly proclaiming, "I can't see or think. I'm blinded by your sweater!"

This had not been the first time Chris had broken the pace of a good lesson with his comments. He is one of those students with a quick wit who is an asset to the class because he brings a little levity to the situation,

but needs to be curtailed occasionally so his humor does not prevent learning from taking place. I devised a system whereby one of his friends was to put his hand on his own head so that Chris would know that his comment was irrelevant to the discussion at hand. The year is almost over, and both Chris and I are still smiling ... I think.

Need for quiet

Just the other day, my AP language and composition class was ready to take a little multiple-choice practice test. Since it was May, the students were not as quick to become task-oriented as usual.

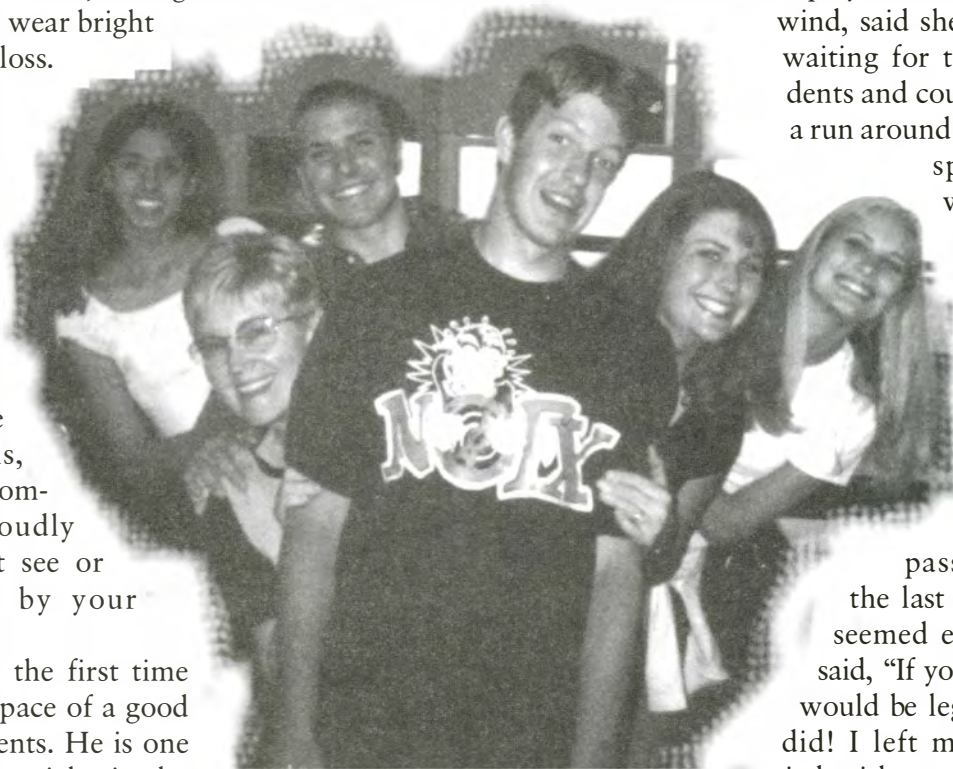
Christian said loudly, "It's too loud in here; I can't think." And with that statement she got up with her quiz and sat in the hall to begin. The class quieted and, after two or three minutes, I called her back into the room, suggesting that order had been restored and she could probably finish without interruption.

Last month during first period, when my AP class was supposed to be watching Channel One, two or three students had run to the computer room to run off the paper that was due that period. Printers always have fatal accidents the day before due date, you know. Jennifer, a tall lithe soccer player who could run like the wind, said she was going crazy waiting for the returning students and could she please take a run around the building? I responded that this

was probably illegal since she would have no valid reason to be there and no note.

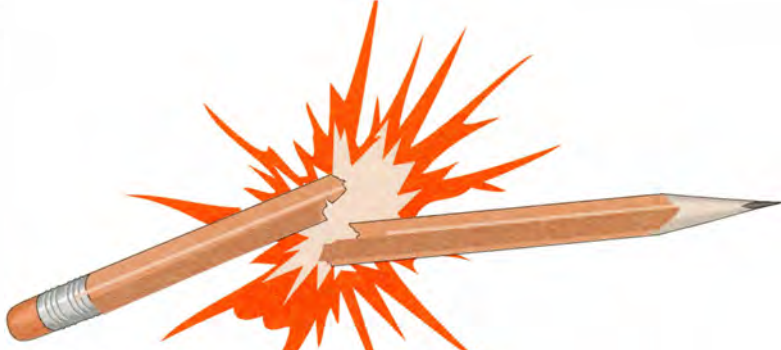
A legal run

Another five minutes passed; waiting for the last student to return seemed endless, when she said, "If you ran with me, we would be legal, right?" So we did! I left my classroom and tried with my short legs aching with possible osteoporosis to keep up with Jen. She slowed up on the last



No routine here!

from l. to r. Jennifer Pappas, Mrs. Smits, Dave Marquis, Chris Cottqias, Noelle Dinniny, Ashley Taylor



third of our trip around the quad. The other kids were all at the window cheering. When we were back in the classroom, we went to work within record time. Jennifer made the only comment: "Only you would be that crazy, Mrs. Smits!" I just sent up a prayer of thanks that I hadn't had any palpitations during the run. I do want to say that I don't plan to do that again!

For some reason, such occasions are not uncommon in my classroom. Sometimes I initiate them myself. Just the other day, my age, for only a brief moment, became a topic for discussion as essays were being stapled in correct order and handed in. One student, in what I took to be a joking attempt at humor, suggested that my lack of skill in something under discussion was possibly due to the fact that the next decade I entered would be my sixties. When I remarked that this was only one year away, I noted a degree of surprise on their part.

In a desire to salvage an ego which becomes somewhat more fragile with age, I chose to believe that my blond hair and ... well, anyway, I felt they perceived me to be younger. When Dan came up and stapled his paper, he stared at me for a good 30 seconds and then blurted out, "You are remarkably well preserved!"

Room to laugh

Students love to laugh. If I have the ability to laugh at myself, they can laugh too. We laugh at attempts at themes which are less than accurate, or the meaning of a poem, no matter

how bizarre it seems, because, you see, they are allowed to laugh ... gently ... when I make mistakes, and gently when they make mistakes. I ask them never to belittle one another, but to develop an atmosphere in which mistakes are viable parts of learning, and sharing them in a communal discourse makes them seem less painful.

I tell them I do not have Webster imprinted on my forehead when I am asked to spell words, and when I misspell one, or they question my spelling, we look up the word together. They cheer when I am right, and sometimes they cheer when I am wrong. And as the year progresses and we don't make some of the mistakes we made earlier in the year, we can all feel a sense of pride.

Sad party

This year will be my 23rd year of teaching. I will be 60 years old. I plan to wear black on my birthday and have a formal mourning in class. We will write mood poetry, make nasty posters about people who mock the aging, create a video on the dangers of youth culture, and end the day with brownies and ice cream, even if I have just begun another diet.

I also plan to be rebellious and not bring treats to the faculty on my birthday. Anyone who is 60 and still teaching high school students should receive treats. Oh, and maybe we will have journal writing sessions out on the quad. It's illegal, you know, to take your class out on the quad. It might disturb others. Ha! Ha! I bet they won't fire me!

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teacher's aids

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OF RUBBER CHICKENS AND INFLATABLE COWS

by Gayle Monsma

Gayle Monsma is principal of Covenant Christian School in Leduc, Alberta.

It is one of my firmly held beliefs that every school should own at least one rubber chicken. If finances allow, a whole coopful would be even better. These rubber chickens should be used often, should make regular appearances in the strangest of places, and should provide activities for at least one physical education class per grade.

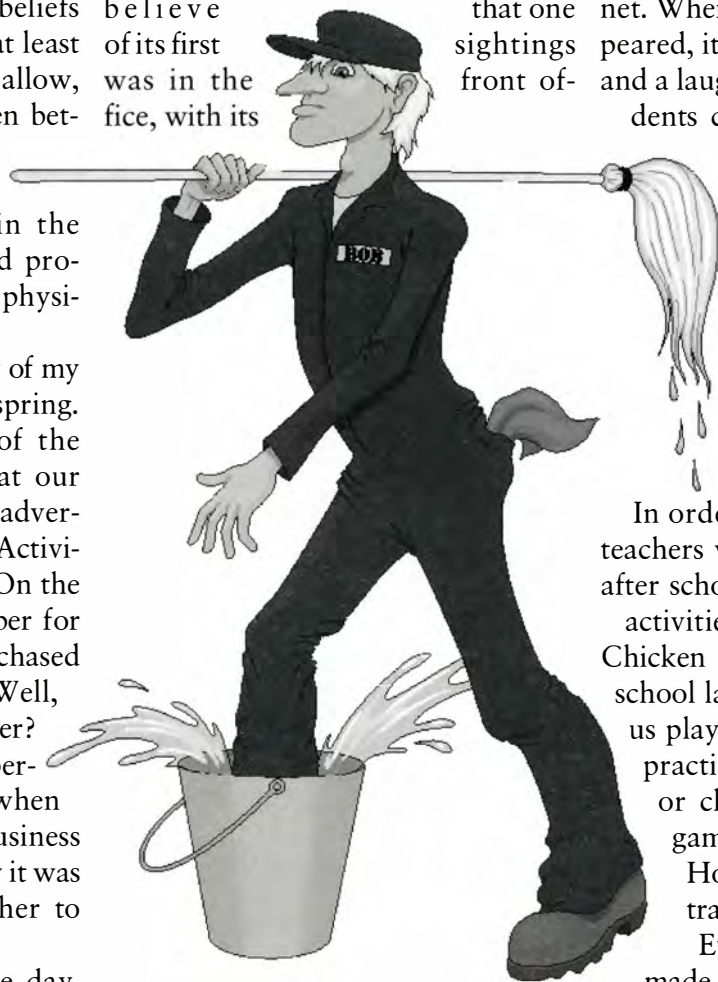
The above belief became part of my philosophy of education last spring. When leafing through one of the many catalogues that arrive at our school daily, I came across one advertising a book entitled "Zany Activities With a Rubber Chicken." On the same page was the order number for the needed rubber chicken, purchased either singly or by the coop. Well, who could pass up such an offer? I put together the necessary paperwork, although I suspect that when she checked the order, our business administrator thought, "I knew it was coming, but I didn't expect her to crack up quite this soon."

Time passed, and then, one day, upon returning to my office after teaching, I walked in and saw the rubber chicken sitting regally in my chair. By this time it was approaching mid-June, and we all know what schools are like in the last month before summer vacation. Our staff discovered that a rubber chicken is a very good antidote to many of the seasonal

ailments. The fun was just beginning!

Omnipresent pullet

In the next few weeks, the rubber chicken earned its weight in gold. I believe that one of its first sightings was in the front of the office, with its



head stuck through the little round hole in our message center. After that it made many appearances around the school. One teacher's assistant was shocked when she opened the microwave and found the chicken staring out at her (I believe she let out a chick-sized squeal). After this it was only natural that it also spent some time

in the staff room fridge cooling off. In order to help out our secretary, someone created a file labeled "Rubber Chicken" and appropriately stored the chicken in her filing cabinet. Wherever the rubber chicken appeared, it never failed to elicit a smile and a laugh, whether it was from students coming to the office to get some photocopying done or from a parent dropping by to pick up a child.

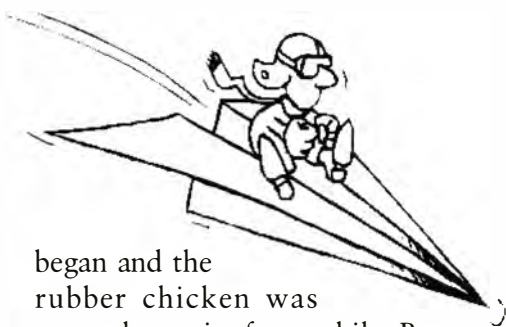
We began to see the potential benefits of this chicken's addition to our school community and realized that we needed to expand its influence and take it to our student body.

In order to prepare us, a group of teachers would spend a few minutes after school practicing some of the activities described in the Rubber Chicken book. Had you visited our school last June, you may have seen us playing "Chicken Hacky Sack," practicing our "Chicken Chuck" or challenging a colleague to a game of "Chicken in the Hen House" — all in the name of training, of course.

Eventually, the rubber chicken made its way into several physical education classes. What a great way to relieve the predictability that often sets in by the end of the year! Need a pick-me-up in June? Get yourself a rubber chicken!

Principal's pet

Lest you think this was a passing fad, read on! The new school year



began and the rubber chicken was somewhat quiet for a while. But toward the end of September, I was preparing to attend our district's annual Christian Principal's Association conference. The organizing committee asked the principals to bring along an item that described their leadership style (e.g. towel, hammer, candle). Unsure of what to take, I asked three staff members at different times throughout the day to give me a suggestion. Within seconds all three suggested the same item — the rubber chicken! Surprised by the quick and common response from three col-

leagues, I asked them to describe why the rubber chicken would be the thing to take. Their reasoning was also similar — it was flexible, approachable and illustrated my love of fun and humor. Who was I to argue? So the rubber chicken accompanied me to Banff. I soon realized that principals enjoy a good rubber chicken as much as a fourth-grade or a kindergarten teacher! I don't know what it is about a rubber chicken, but it never fails to bring a smile to the face.

Through all this, I have become convinced that every school should have a rubber chicken (or an inflatable cow, but that's another story!). The laughs

that are shared, the memories that are created and the bonds that are strengthened are worth the price of a rubber chicken. Now my next challenge: getting the activity book and chicken back from a principal colleague who borrowed it to use in conjunction with his master's course work. I think he said something about needing to do a presentation on "Humor in the Classroom."

Note: Rubber chickens and an activity book can be ordered from: Canadian Intramural Recreation Association, 1600 James Naismith Drive, Gloucester, Ont. K1B 5N4. Tel.: (613) 748-5639; Fax: (613) 742-5467.



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Stefan Ulstein

The Phantom Majority

Stefan Ulstein teaches media and English courses at Bellevue Christian Junior High School in Bellevue, Washington.

Nobody ever got rich assaulting the values of their customers. Yet, Bert den Boggende asserts just that in his informative article, "The Golden Age of Movie Censorship," in *Media Studies*, a CSI newsletter for Christian teachers. Den Boggende suggests that the current movie rating system "... could be regarded as wishy washy. Not surprisingly, there have been calls for a halt to the assault against the values held by most North Americans" (my emphasis). Judging by the rest of his article, one assumes that den Boggende is being a bit disingenuous.

On the page in *Media Studies* following the article referred to above, an unrelated sidebar includes a list of the top 20 video rentals for the week ending November 28, 1999. Most of the titles are action movies, horror or comedy. Number one is *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*. The list includes *The Haunting* (7), *The Blair Witch Project* (8), and *The Rage: Carrie 2*. But it also contains *Life is Beautiful* (17) and *The Out of Towners* (20).

Probably 15 of the 20 would pass the religious right's litmus test for an assault on family values, but that begs the question: Who is renting these videos? When I go to my local video store it is full of families renting the titles on the list. The video stores are not serving some cabal of family-hating anarchists. Why have my students (and their parents) seen *Top Gun* a dozen times but nobody has heard of the excellent adaptation of *Shadowlands*? More Christians have seen Anthony Hopkins as Hannibal Lecter than as C.S. Lewis.

Film as spectacle

Den Boggende hits on one key reason for this situation. "In 1915, in a stunning decision, the U.S. Supreme Court stated that the guarantees of freedom of speech and press did not apply to films. Rather than being conveyors of ideas, films were declared mere spectacles. That judgment was not overturned until 1952." While the 1915 decision served to open the door to film censorship, the attitude that films are mere spectacle serves a different purpose today. With a few exceptions, the top video rentals are films that serve as the film

equivalent to what English teachers used to call escape fiction. They are designed to divert attention away from real issues and to provide an escape.

Unfortunately, many of the well-intentioned folks who rave about the assault on family values are looking for a product that cannot exist. It would be like complaining that hockey is a great game except that there are so many violent white men hitting each other with sticks. That's a big part of the reason hockey sells tickets. Take that away and the ticket sales begin to slump. If a film is designed to divert attention, to provide a visceral thrill, and to excite, without challenging, we can hardly complain about the content.

Pretending that there is a majority of North Americans who want good, wholesome family fare just doesn't wash. Those folks can be found, on Friday night, checking out the same old thrills and chills at Blockbuster.

Film as communication

What is needed is a paradigm shift in the way we view films. They are not mere spectacle. They are a powerful form of communication. They are entertainment. At times, they are even art. Den Boggende points out several excellent examples of what happens when art is reduced to spectacle. Ernest Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* are eviscerated by studio censors and become mere shells of the authors' intent. *Black Fury*, based on the 1929 murder of a coal miner by private police, became a rosy story of cooperation between mine workers and bosses. Miners who lived through the labor wars of the Depression might wonder what the point of such a film would be. Viewers see the film version and feel that they have in some sense experienced the book. But the culture is impoverished. If we were to apply the same standards for good, clean, wholesome, family-oriented entertainment to books that we do to films, the libraries would be cleaned out. First to go would be the Old Testament.

We know better than that, however. We understand that there are many kinds of books, and that, to a certain extent, books and readers sort themselves out. We don't really have to worry that impressionable kids will become obsessed with Tolstoy or Nabokov. They find such authors difficult and hard to understand.

The same is not true of film, however. You don't have to be a reader to see a film. You just have to sit there. Whereas you might put a book down, you sit through a film until it is over. Even if you hate it. Even if it terrifies you.

A good strategy

Trying to come up with a new censorship system for films won't accomplish its goal. Movie studios will continue to make films that sell. When the films stop selling, they'll make something else. It happens all the time. Boycotts don't work, though. The best way to ensure big sales for a mediocre film is to bring out the pickets.

Many North American families have capitulated to the status quo. They watch the films they know about.

The films they know about are the ones that are sitting on the shelves. They try to choose the ones that are the least objectionable, while still entertaining. Videos are used as

babysitters. Many children grow up watching the same Disney cartoons thousands of times. Their worldviews are shaped by singing mermaids and genies. Part of the reason for this dismal state of affairs is that today's adults were not taught to view good films in school, in church, or in the home. They were taught that film is mere spectacle.

The role of the Christian teacher is to introduce students to good films that do more than repeat the same stories and themes over and over. The Christian teacher should teach students to watch critically, but not by just listing what is wrong. Good criticism includes a discussion of what is good about a film. Christians who take



art seriously will always be in the minority. Populist calls for censorship will always get a few votes — even from the voters who are watching the very movies they publicly decry. And so it goes

But our job is not to win, we are only called to fight the good fight.

CEA News

This fall, members of the Christian Educators Association will have the opportunity to gather with the Michigan Association of Non-Public Schools for an October convention in Grand Rapids. They may look forward to searching for common ground with Catholic, Lutheran and other Christian educators. In this way Christian educators can work to encourage each other as they do God's work.

The Gift of the See

by Lori Jackson Imans

Lori Jackson Imans is a mother of two who lives with her husband George in St. Catharines, Ont. She holds a B.A. in child studies.

The teacher stands in front of her kindergarten class. She is providing her four- to six-year-old students with an opportunity to develop their sorting skills.

“Small. Large. Round. Pointed. Bumpy. Smooth.” These are the descriptive words chosen by the teacher to reflect various properties of seashells. Each child in her class, after having examined a single shell, is asked to place his or her seashell into one of the aforementioned categories. Linden, a four-year-old boy, feels his shell with his fingers and puts it under the label “bumpy.” All shells are sorted. No questions asked. Well done, class.

The same seashells are returned to the same children and the exercise is repeated. This time, however, each child must place his or her seashell in a different, yet still applicable, category. Ann, whose shell was “small” during the first round, now chooses “round.” David, who judged earlier that his shell was “pointed,” now picks “bumpy.” Linden examines his shell further, and, after having judged it to be “bumpy” the first time around, now deems it to be “smooth.” But how can this be? Linden’s response did not make sense to the teacher.

Assuming that Linden must be unfamiliar with such a tactile difference, she proceeded to give him two more seashells, one obviously “bumpy” and one obviously “smooth,” to compare. Looking a little bewildered, Linden handled his new shells while the teacher chanted, “Bumpy. Smooth. Bumpy. Smooth.”

As Linden’s mother I watched this scenario from where I was sitting. Later on, I asked Linden, “Was the shell smooth on the inside?” He nodded his head.

The ‘seeing’ child

As I watched this incident unfold before me, it struck me that the teacher had entered into this sorting exercise with distinct ideas as to where each seashell belonged. Such preconceived notions leave little room for the expression and encouragement of creative differences among

students.

Linden had followed the teacher’s instructions, but his own cognitive processes had led him to respond in a way not expected (or accepted) by the teacher. Such is often

the plight of creative children in a typically routine school setting. Jeffrey Freed and Laurie Parsons, in their book *Right-Brained Children in a Left-Brained World: Unlocking the Potential of Your ADD Child* (Simon & Schuster, 1997), discuss the difficulties visual, imaginative, creative children often encounter in the left-brain-dominated field of teaching and offer practical solutions to everyday problems identified in each subject area.

Unfortunately, a child’s natural creativity often inadvertently becomes stifled within the confines of the logical and orderly classroom. Too often it is the final product that is evaluated, not the underlying cognitive processes. For example, the teacher attended to *where* each child had put his/her shell and from there had inferred the *why* of the decision to do so. But if the “why” is not obvious, rather than immediately correcting the child, it may be more enlightening for the teacher simply to ask the child pointedly the reason for the choice made. Had Linden been questioned specifically — “You classed your shell as bumpy and now as smooth. How can it be both? — I am confident he would have turned his “bumpy” shell over and presented its smooth underside.

A young child, lacking the language skills or confidence to be assertive and to explain him- or herself, and viewing the teacher as an authority figure, is unlikely or hesitant to contradict the teacher or insist on the validity of his or her response. Therefore, it is up to the teacher to make the extra effort required to identify and respond to each child’s observations, cognitive processing patterns, and learning styles with affirmation and encouragement.

Linden the artist

My four-year-old boy loves to paint. The end result is often a piece of paper covered in a thick, multilayer mass of blackish paint. However, upon taking the time to talk with Linden while observing him actively engaged in the process of painting, I soon come to recognize and appre-



Linden Imans

ciate the evolution of Linden's remarkable creation. What began as a painting of a red roller coaster, since transformed into a yellow robot, a blue train, an experiment with mixing colors, etc., now resembles nothing more than a disturbingly dark image. But, when provided with the opportunity, Linden will eagerly, with eyes aglow, share the many stories that are so carefully embedded in his masterpiece.

Donning his artist's hat, Linden embraces the entire painting experience. After carefully examining the shape of the paintbrush handle, gingerly stroking the bristles, thoughtfully choosing the paint colors for that moment, marveling at the cool wetness of the paint on his hands, he is now ready to produce life on a blank piece of paper.

Feeling the urge to merge different colors, Linden's paper is gradually transformed into a collage of gold, brown, and red. Standing back to admire his painting, he suddenly jumps in the air and exclaims, "Hey, this looks like a fall tree!" Excitedly grasping his paintbrush, Linden proceeds to add the trunk to his tree with a single thick stroke of brown.

In the words of Picasso, "It takes a lifetime to learn to paint like a child."

Learning to skate

With ice skates on his feet, a helmet on his head, and mittens on his hands, Linden, with great anticipation, grasps my hand and cautiously steps onto the ice rink. It is Linden's first time on skates and almost instantly I am aware that this is going to be an unforgettable experience for us both. A couple of small steps and down falls Linden. Up. Down. Up. Down.

"Gee, this ice is really slippery," remarks Linden with a mouthful of snow he just moments before had scooped up off the ice.

"Yes, it is," I reply, trying to sound as amazed as he is. Then, in my best motherly tone I add, "And don't eat the ice. It's dirty."

We continue in our futile attempts to skate. Up. Down.

purposefully this time.

"Linden, we are here to learn how to skate, not just to lie on the ice." I am beginning to get frustrated with what I construe to be simply a lack of effort on his part. Experienced and not-so-experienced skaters pass us by. I am getting concerned that Linden is creating a dangerous situation as he remains stretched out, apparently quite comfortable. After telling him repeatedly to get up, I take a deep breath, regain composure, crouch down, and seek to understand his behavior.

"Linden," I say calmly and quietly, trying to be as patient as can be, "What are you doing just lying there on the ice?"

"I'm listening to the sound of the skate blades as they cut through the ice," he easily replies.

From the mouth of babes. In that moment of epiphany for me, Linden's various behaviors that remarkable day at the arena (sliding his feet, eating the snow, lying on the ice) became reconciled.

In order for Linden to learn, he feels the need to engage all of his five senses in each and every experience. For Linden, skating is not just about keeping your balance and moving your feet. Before he could even begin to attempt to follow the step-by-step instructions necessary to acquire the skills for skating, he felt it to be imperative that he first examine, experience, and familiarize himself in his own way with the properties of ice and skates.

Linden did not learn to skate that day, but, in the hour it took for him and me to slip and slide, taste and listen our way around that rink just one time, I was once again reminded of just how extraordinary Linden truly is.

Up. Down. At last, we reach the center blue line. I look down and find Linden quite contentedly lying there, belly down. I struggle to get him back up on his feet. Up. Down. Up. Down. Up ... Down he goes again, but

Tech Talk



Ron Sjoerdsma

Ron Sjoerdsma teaches in the education department at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The Next Level

“Well, it seems to me that we all have to move to the next level.” Jim Sooterma heard Sara James say the words, but their full impact didn’t register immediately.

Jim wanted to move to the next level, but he was tired. Life in the keep-up-to-date world of educational technology was too much like work — it had been fun once. He remembered when his colleagues saw him as the tech guru. He smiled as he thought of the first Apple II he had brought into his classroom in the late 70s and how he had proudly shown off the first primitive version of *Oregon Trail* from MECC. And now others were beginning to pass him.

Sara had just shown the rest of the Hillendale Christian Middle School eighth-grade team an article on a new piece of software that would allow her students to do scientific exploration with other students in communities around the country. She thought they at least ought to order the free introductory CD-ROM. Jim had argued that this was going to push her Web designing skills way past where they were now. And she had snapped back, “You’re not the only one who can do this stuff, you know. I was even thinking of asking for the middle school version of *Classroom Webivore*, like the high school has, and I thought ... (Jim detected some sarcasm) you might be able to help me a little with that one.”

Jim tried to remember the last time that Sara and he had had an argument about technology. During her early years at Hillendale, she seemed to question every technology purchase, every move that Jim suggested for integrating technology into their curriculum. Now, perhaps under the influence of her husband, one of the high school’s science teachers, she seemed to be moving rapidly in the opposite direction. It had to have been months since they’d even had friendly banter about how best to use technology. That was probably a direct result of breaking up the computer lab and spreading it around to individual classrooms.

The lists grow

The team had gathered to begin assembling a technology budget for the next school year. Jim thought it had

been easier when there had been just the lab to keep updated. He had suggested to Helene Peters, their principal, that the cleanest procedure would be for each

teacher to request what he or she needed for the computers in each classroom. But she didn’t buy it. She wanted the eighth-grade teachers to continue to function like a team.

Bill Hamilton responded before Jim could think of a snappy retort to Sara’s invitation. “I don’t have any problem with you ordering a preview copy — you could do that anytime. What we have to work on today is what we want to put in the budget for next year. Let’s keep going here.” Bill was getting grumpy. “I’ve made a list of a few new additions I’d like — and no, they are not just more calculator attachments.”

Jim looked at Bill’s list with growing apprehension. Bill had rarely asked for new things for the computer lab when it existed; in fact, just a few years ago, Bill had to be pushed into seeing any connection between computers and eighth-grade math. Now his list not only included a couple of enrichment CD-ROMs like the highly rated *KaleidoMania!*, an interactive symmetry tool from Key Curriculum Press, but a much more complex piece of software, the Center for Image Processing’s *HIP Mathematics*. Bill was asking for a “lab kit” for 5 computers to the tune of \$500.

“I know I can’t have everything,” Bill was adding, “and maybe I’m willing to put these off if we could get some kind of diagnostic and testing tool that I could use to track my students’ math progress — especially my slower ones. And I know that can be really expensive, and I’d probably have to go to some sort of training this summer.” Jim’s stomach did a little flip-flop: Bill was moving to the next level — something he’d never expected — and he, Jim, was being left behind.

Lame duck leader

Jim had to try to deflect some of this pressure he was feeling on Kate Wells. Their team leader had not yet tipped her hand, no list or even a comment on the other lists. “So, Kate, what’s on your wish list?”

“I’m just thinking of building my own and my students’ web skills this year. So far we’ve pretty much left that up



to the high school. I've been looking at *Highwired.Net*. It seems like a great tool for creating a little online newspaper, and it has all kinds of possibilities for communication with parents and other schools and teachers. Kind of like what Sara was talking about, I think, only more general. And the best part is that it's free."

"Whoa, let's just stop a minute. When are you going to find time to do all this? And aren't we supposed to be thinking about integrating our curriculum? It seems you're all going in different directions." Jim didn't really feel as strongly as he was implying, but he was beginning to feel inferior. The only new software on his list was another Microsoft reference CD-ROM to add to his already extensive collection. This one focused on African history and geography and had won several awards, but it required no skills from Jim or his students. The bottom line was that he was losing his technology status, and he wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing.

Kate tackled his challenge first. "OK, Jim, now that you've brought it up — I was going to suggest that we ask for a few general pieces of software on web design. It's something I think we all could use, and it so happens that Macromedia has just come out with a suite of software for students and teachers called *Web Design 101*. I was thinking that we could, with our students, work together next year on taking a little more ownership of our middle school web page."

Lean budgets

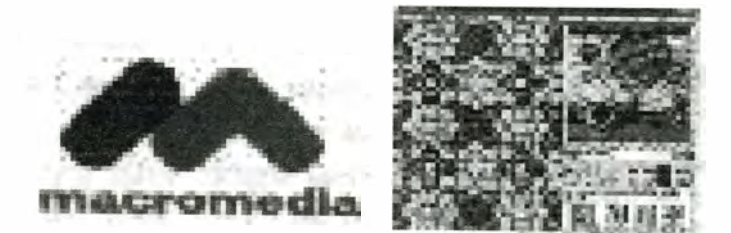
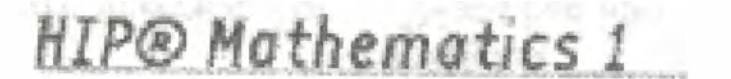
Now Jim was really feeling attacked. He knew that even though the team had never stated it directly, he had been expected to take the lead in web design when he had attended a workshop the previous summer. But he had not tackled a project immediately and had already lost the knowledge and skills. Currently, a few high school students eagerly and easily handled the middle school's web needs.

"And if," Kate continued, "you really want to tackle the curriculum integration issue, maybe we should put off most of our individual requests and encourage something that would benefit the whole school. I hesitate to bring it up because it seems like a lot of work, but I think Helene was hinting at last week's staff meeting that our software budgets should be kept lean because she was

looking at a curriculum management and integration package. I know she didn't say it directly, but she's been talking about it for a while. And something like that might even include the diagnostic tool Bill is looking for."

"Great! That's just what we need. Something to keep us busy in the summer. And I know who'll get stuck with answering all the questions and taking care of such a beast." Jim quickly realized that the martyr tack was probably the wrong one.

He cringed when Sara replied with a smile, "Well, Jim, as I said before, we all need to move to the next level."



Dynamic Fruit of the Spirit

Are Teaching Methods Neutral?



by John Van Dyk

John Van Dyk is professor of education at Dordt College in Sioux Centre, Iowa.

Jim and Sandra have decided to take their children out of the Christian school. It's not that they don't like the Christian school. On the contrary: they know that the atmosphere there is caring and supportive. Sandra, in fact, taught in a Christian school for a while. But the public school around the corner also provides a caring and supportive environment. Many of the teachers attend church, and there is much stress on morality and good behavior.

Why did Jim and Sandra, responsible and knowledgeable Christian parents, make this decision? Here is the gist of their argument: "Public schools and Christian schools," they explain, "look pretty similar to us. Be honest now, is there really any significant difference between a good teacher teaching algebra in the Christian school and a good teacher teaching algebra in a public school? They do exactly the same thing, don't they? They explain equations, give worksheets, assign homework and write report cards. What's the difference? Whatever it is, we don't believe it's worth the expense. We're sending our kids to the public school."

What shall we say about Jim and Sandra's argument? What comes to mind at once, of course, is the question of perspective. Don't you see, Jim and Sandra, that in a Christian school students are taught a biblical perspec-

tive on the stuff they learn? Even on algebra?

No, Jim and Sandra don't see. They remain quite unconvinced. Aside from some pious "God talk" here and there, Jim and Sandra believe there is no major difference between Christian or public school teaching – certainly not when it comes to the *methods* used to teach students how to solve equations or how to use the past tense in Spanish or how to write a well-constructed paragraph.

A key question

Is it true that teachers in both Christian and public schools use identical teaching methods? Are teaching strategies neutral? Is talk about "Christian teaching methods" just poppycock?

The neutrality issue is extremely important. For if we answer "Yes" to the questions just posed, then, surely, we should review at once the value of Christian education. After all, teachers do use teaching methods. If these methods are the same for Christian, Muslim and atheist teachers alike, then why do we pay so much money to have our children spend so much time in these indistinctive classrooms?

But wait a minute! In our Christian school communities we have always maintained that the Lord is King of all – of every square inch of life, we like to say. Christ rules all, including our instructional decisions, curriculum approach *and* classroom practices. We have long rejected the dualistic notion that what makes a school Christian is devotional activity, chapel exercises and Bible courses tacked on

to a standard curriculum. We have unwaveringly maintained: not only the stuff we teach must reflect God's glory, but also our *teaching practice itself* must be an expression of our faith and an obedient response to the will of the Lord.

It looks as if Jim and Sandra have rejected this emphasis.

What has prompted Jim and Sandra to make such a decision? Surely it's not a question of money: the cash they will save they plan to donate to worthy causes in Appalachia. Could it be that much of their argument is based on what they themselves observed when they were students in a Christian school? Did they experience curriculum content, teaching methods and classroom situations which were essentially not different from those in the public school around the corner?

The appearance

What makes it appear that teaching = teaching = teaching is the technical, structural, definable component in all teaching methods. Take lecturing, for example. Effective lecturing requires compliance with commonly accepted rules. A good lecture must be carefully organized, sequenced, and delivered. All good teachers know that in middle and high school classrooms a lecture should not go beyond 20-25 minutes. Holding forth longer than that — unless the teacher is spell-binding, a not uncommon delusion — will create restlessness, inattention, boredom and management problems. After 20 minutes or so, the teacher must get the students involved by ask-

ing them to respond, raise questions or reflect.

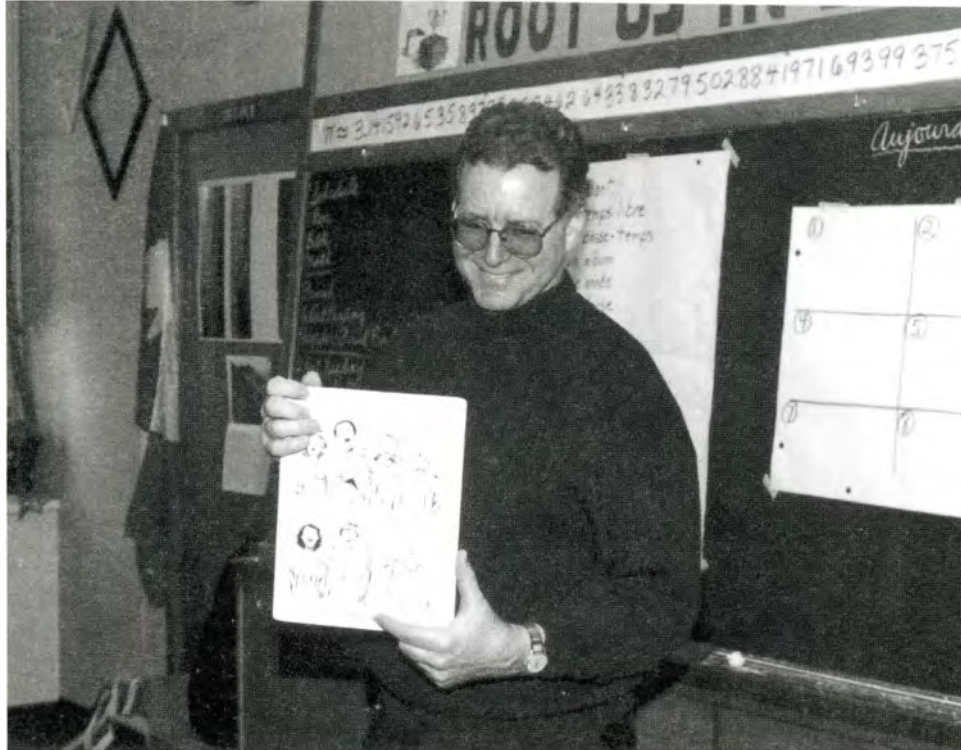
Or take cooperative learning as another example. Cooperative learning is a strategy that exhibits universal characteristics, structural features that all good teachers, no matter what or where they teach, will keep in mind. Such teachers will aim for heterogeneous groups, carefully set expectations for appropriate group behavior, and structure the group task in such a way that no single group member can complete it without input from, and participation by, all the other group members.

The reality

So, yes, there is a technical, universal, definable aspect to all teaching strategies. The important point to note, however, is that teaching methods are never *merely* technical activities. In reality, in a real classroom with real kids, a teaching strategy — whether lecturing, cooperative learning, discovery learning, a game or simulation, or story telling — is always implemented by real teachers in real situations. And these real teachers turn these teaching methods into intensely personal affairs. They bring into their methods their beliefs, their sense of priority, their feelings, yes, their very personalities with manner-

isms and all, and thereby and personalize the methods in fundamental ways.

That is why no two teachers lecture in the same way, and no two teachers implement cooperative learning in the same way. A definition or a technical description of a teaching method, though ultimately anchored in God's



Teaching strategies become personal acts.

design for the creation, is always an abstraction, a mere concept. Apart from live teachers and live students in a real classroom, such abstractions have no independent reality.

Mere words?

Teaching methods, no matter how carefully defined, never exist in a vacuum, any more than the words we speak or the prayers we pray. Words can be defined on a page in the dictionary. In print they look permanently fixed, delineated and deter-

mined by Webster. But there is a huge difference between a dictionary definition and the spoken word. The very same words can hurt or they can heal. The hurting or healing depends not on definitions but on who utters the words to whom and in what context. A spoken word is alive and always transcends its dictionary definition.

A prayer, too, printed on a page in a Psalter, can be read by a skeptical unbeliever as a quaint bit of self-deception. But when recited in close communication between the believer and his God, the prayer is transformed into a unique, intensely personal experience.

So it is with teaching methods. On paper they may look the same. In the

concrete practice of working with students in the classroom, they take on a distinctive, even unique status and identity.

Personal acts

What is a teaching method anyway? I define it roughly as “an individual teacher’s way of intentionally organizing the classroom and classroom procedures for learning.” Described in this way, teaching strategies become *personal acts*. They are not tangible tools, like hammers and nails, but pic-



tures of teachers working their craft. A teaching method is not a static set of prescribed steps but a dynamic, live process of teacher-learner interaction.

Teaching methods are inescapably contextualized and personalized by a number of variables, such as the personality of the teacher, his or her philosophy of education, the goals, objectives and learning outcomes to be achieved, and the relationship with and among students.

For example, a teacher who believes that the goal of teaching is merely the transmission of information will design and deliver a lecture in quite a different way than one who lectures in order to stimulate critical thinking. A teacher committed to individualism will lecture differently than one who wants to foster community in the classroom.

Cooperative learning, too, is affected by goals and objectives. A teacher who believes that students need to learn the skill of cooperation in order to succeed in a competitive marketplace will implement the strategy differently than one who sees cooperation as a necessary prerequisite for servanthood.

An example:

How can we show Jim and Sandra that not only the perspective on subject matter but also the very teaching methods themselves are framed and determined by who we are, what we believe, what we are to accomplish, and how we relate to our students?

Let's try a specific example. Let's assume you are a committed Christian teacher, eager to do the will of the Lord. Suppose you teach a unit on solving equations in your ninth-grade algebra class. Suppose you have

articulated a Christian perspective on mathematics in general. Now suppose further that you have decided to depend on the commonly used "I'll show you — you show me" method of teaching about equations. It's a form of direct teaching: you (1) explain how to solve equations, then (2) do some problems with the students, and (3) end with students themselves working on their own. Let's focus on the first of these three stages.

As you stand at the chalkboard or use the overhead, your explanations and demonstrations will be shaped and colored by a combination of at least the following factors: (1) the words you use will be clear, well-paced, and sensitive to the needs and abilities of your students; (2) your explanation will be permeated with awe for God's design for creation — including his design for algebraic patterns — rather than just for human ingenuity; (3) your illustrations and demonstrations acknowledge the linkage between mathematical equations and life to be lived before the face of God — you unambiguously disclose the relevance of algebra not only to the present experience of your students but also to their future lives as servants of God and neighbors; (4) you will speak "mathematical truth" in love, accompanied by the fruit of the Spirit; (5) your "I'll show you" explanations recognize and respond to the diversity in your classroom, to the differences in giftedness and learning styles and needs among your students. Add all these factors together, and your "I'll show you — you show me" method is transformed — not perfectly, of course — into a distinctively Christian teaching act.

But can secular teachers not do these

same things? Can't they explain equations in a loving and sensitive way? Yes, they can! And when they do, their methods begin to respond to what we take to be God's will for teaching. Praise the Lord when that happens!

No method is neutral

Sometimes I think that a secular teacher can actually teach more "Christianly" than a Christian teacher. How can this be? We know of Christian teachers who are callous and insensitive, who see their students not as gifted images of God but as animals to be tamed or as stupid dunderheads. Such teachers teach in Christian schools, but their teaching methods are decidedly un-Christian.

So what is the conclusion of the matter? Here it is: It is not so that some teaching methods are Christian and some are not. Just about every method in the book can be transformed into a Christian teaching-learning situation. By the same token, every method can be distorted through false philosophies, ungodly personalities and secular goals. About every teaching strategy we must not ask whether it is Christian or secular, but, whether it can approximate what the Lord would have us do in the classroom? The very possibility of asking and answering this question shows that teaching methods cannot be neutral.

We need to work hard to remove reasons such as Jim and Sandra construe as grounds for removing their kids from the Christian school. Let's show Jim and Sandra that even if perspective sounds at times like pious God-talk, teaching Christianly is nevertheless a reality which can flourish only in a Christian school.



Nancy Knol
Column Editor

by Jim Rauwerda

Jim Rauwerda is a social studies teacher at Byron Center Christian Middle School, Byron Center, Michigan.

“Hey! Can we do another worksheet?” “Yeah, and can we have some more notes? Notes are so fun!”

Grrrr. These comments make my skin crawl. I try. I really do. Sure, we all do things students think are fun. There are field trips and guest speakers, simulations and activities, games, films, presentations. The Bible class cooks a Jewish feast, the social studies class tries a criminal case, the literature class debates, and the science class grows fungi. We do lots of things students find entertaining. But we also do notes and worksheets.

Designing my class around “fun” sounds like a grand idea. Every day would be games, jokes and raucous jocularity. Students would return years later reminiscing about how much they learned. Or would they? We may be setting ourselves up for a trap. We need to be wary of over-emphasizing “fun” at the expense of education.

Life’s most rewarding experiences are often the result of hard work. We’ve all had experiences that were trying, whether studying for a test, wallpapering a crooked room, running a race, or trying to reach a difficult student. When the experience is over, we no longer focus on the process; rather, we are proud of our achievement. Likewise, learning can be a “hard work” experience. And after our hard work, we can be proud of a job well done.

Work can be satisfying

Okay, so boring notes can produce success. But are they the best form of education? A teacher whom I respect a great deal once told me that even in this high-tech age, notes are still the most expedient form of transmitting information to students. Few of us will deny the truth of that statement. Expedience allows us to cover more topics. Sometimes I simply need to give notes so we can “get through the material.” Unfortunately, “getting through the material” is not an exercise in excitement.

“Hard-work” classes provide another positive result: they offer a balance to the fun classes. William Shakespeare said it well 400 years ago, “If all the year were playing holidays,/ To sport would be as tedious as to work.” Many

a professional athlete experiences Shakespeare’s words first hand. The job on the playing field becomes just that: a job. Because the sport is no longer fun, the athlete retires a disillusioned millionaire at age 27.

Anything can be fun

The truly hard part is balancing the fun with realistic education. It can be done, but it is difficult. For example, middle school students find the topic of federal and state government about as exciting as watching cereal get soggy. Yet with proper planning and creativity, even this topic can be made palatable.

Not that my class is the supreme example, but the following worked for me. The day’s topic was federal government, and the names of students were inserted into a preposterous story about a bank robbery. With a quick reference, we find that Johnny’s little bank robbery is a federal offence, while Susan’s armed robbery of the local gas station is not. The plot wanders around a kidnaping, a high-speed car chase and a beating. The students love being involved in the outrageous and ridiculous. If necessary, I’ll give verbal hints including “the FBI” and the “Feds.” When I ask, “Who chases Johnny through Indiana?” I find students using the word “federal” as if they know what it means ... and quite frankly, they do. The story doesn’t take long, and it unfolds while the notebooks remain empty.

If the federal government can be fun, then anything can be fun. But not all classes need to be fun. I’m pretty sure that tomorrow’s lesson about the legislative branch will not be the “revelry” of today. After all, I devoted 20 minutes of today’s class to an amusing anecdote, and I have some material that I need to cover.

So, what is the function of fun in the classroom? It creates a positive atmosphere in which students may be more apt to pay attention. Second, students will see a teacher who is “human.” None of us wants to be that sullen, somber teacher deplorably depicted in the media. Thirdly, a fun lesson may allow students to enjoy your subject, and, finally, it may offset those really dull “work, work, work” classes that teachers find so productive.

The balance between work and fun is essential for effective education.

Query



Tena Siebenga-Valstar

Tena Siebenga-Valstar, a former teacher and principal, lives in Fort McMurray, Alberta. If you wish to submit a question to her, you can find her address on the back page.

Ask for a teacher's aide?

Question #1

How is it that some classrooms/teachers receive a teacher's aide and others do not? How does a teacher qualify for a teacher's aide?

Response:

At one time a teacher's aide was hired only when the class size became too large, and it seemed that every school made its own decision as to what "too large" meant. Subsequently there were other reasons for a teacher's aide becoming part of the classroom: the class may have included students with behavioral or academic challenges, or the teacher was experiencing emotional or medical difficulties.

Many times we as teachers wonder why another teacher receives an aide, being aware that we or someone else is a worthy candidate for the additional help as well. Sometimes a teacher's aide is hired to help a number of teachers with marking, putting up bulletin boards and displays, covering playground duty assignments, and being a general help to all teachers. The hiring of an aide may also depend on whether or not other support staff within the school can be utilized. For example, if a secretary runs off tests and worksheets needed for classroom use, an aide will not be hired for that job.

In recent years school boards have established policies for class size and for the hiring of teacher's aides. These may give guide lines for when a teacher's aide is to be recommended. One school system set upper limits for a single-grade class size, followed by limits for combined grades. When enrolment reached beyond the class size limit, the student would be encouraged to enrol in another school within the system; but if transfers were not possible, a teacher aide or part-time teacher might be

hired.

A school board is often put in a difficult situation because the enrolment exceeds that which is projected when the budget is approved and tuition has been set for the up-coming year. Government funding may also stipulate the conditions for the use of money allocated to a student or students with special needs. I suggest that you inquire as to the school's policy for the hiring and allocation of a teacher's aide.

Too busy to do a good job

Question #2

In our school system we expect so much from ourselves that we are too busy to do things well. How do we stop ourselves from doing a mediocre job because we have run out of time and energy?

Response:

We have to prioritize. That is an easy answer but so many of us find that difficult to do. Some of us don't even know where to start. The great commandment sets the stage. Love God above all and our neighbors as ourselves. Set aside time to be with God, to give him praise and adoration, to learn from his Word, and to seek his will for all of our daily living. Was it not said of Martin Luther that the busier he became the more time he spent in prayer?

Note that the great commandment says we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, meaning that we must first love ourselves and care for ourselves. Find ways to cherish the person whom God created you to be. Take time to receive love from and give love to family members. Then we can love our neighbors, which in a teacher's case means students and the school community.

One school had a parent-teacher meeting during which a facilitator from outside the community helped the group determine priorities for the school. The question was asked, "What do you expect your child to have achieved or gained by the time your child completes his/her education in this school?" This led to some interesting dis-



discussion in which teachers gained a greater awareness of the priorities of individual parents, but also of the entire parent community. It took time to come to a consensus on the desires of the group as a whole. Being aware of the priorities which came out of the discussion, the staff could evaluate their yearly calendar to see how many of the activities corresponded to the stated priorities.

When I was a principal of one school, we began to realize we were beginning to burn out. Sometimes our energies were devoted to extracurricular activities at the expense of our teaching. We listed all the activities that appeared on the school calendar, activities in which teachers were expected to be involved. We looked at each in terms of the amount of time and energy which was required. We then tried to prioritize or categorize all the activities.

Here again we had some fruitful discussions. Why was this activity offered to the students? Was this offered just because it had always been offered? Why was it offered outside of school hours? Could it become part of the curriculum? How did it reflect our schools goals and objectives? Did a teacher have to be responsible or could a parent or other adult be responsible for the activity? Did junior high school teachers have to supervise all of the junior high school activities or could elementary teachers help (and visa versa)?

Upon evaluating each of the activities, we found it difficult to eliminate activities, but what we did was evaluate how much a teacher had to be involved. We sought other adult help to assist with the activities. Because many of our schools are parent controlled schools, we need to nurture ways in which parents can be meaningfully involved.

Happiness over a baby out of wedlock?

Question #3

A student came into class today and was very excited.

“My dad’s girlfriend just had a new baby!” she said. I didn’t know how to respond. I wanted to rejoice with the student, but I didn’t want the class to think that I approved of a child born out of wedlock. Yet, I wanted to affirm the student’s joy and delight in her family. So I smiled and said nothing. Afterward a colleague suggested that I could have talked about how wonderful it was that the mother had not chosen abortion as an alternative. I’m afraid I would have been uncomfortable doing that also. How do you think I should have responded?

Response:

Although your question does not indicate how old this student is, I believe your response was appropriate in a public setting. You indicate that you wanted to affirm the student’s joy and delight in her family. Do you think she “caught” that from the response given?

At your earliest opportunity, talk with her privately to indicate how you really feel about the situation. Tell her you rejoice with her in the gift of life, a child known by God before even entering the world (Psalm 139), but at the same time, explain that you do not encourage or approve of having a child born out of wedlock. This would also give you the teachable moment to indicate God’s plan for marriage and his plan that children are born within the environment of a Christian home.

Since she indicates this is her dad’s girlfriend, it is apparent there has been brokenness in this situation, brokenness that obviously must have affected her. By talking with her privately, you may be providing the opportunity for some dialog and healing in the midst of brokenness. Where does she fit within the family at this point? Does she live with her dad? How does this influence affect her own ideas of marriage and family?

Pray for wisdom to listen carefully and respond appropriately in a loving manner. This may be the only opportunity you have. Although I agree with the sentiment on abortion, there may be other opportune times to discuss that issue.

“Slouching Toward Bedlam”

by Jan Kaarsvlam

Jan Kaarsvlam has been teaching in Christian schools for almost 15 years. He is currently teaching social studies, art and auto shop at Redeemer Christian High in Muckwannago, Wisconsin (though he is on probation following an incident with a hydraulic jack and the principal's car).

Everything I Ever Needed to Know I Learned Behind a Lawnmower

“Fifth day in a row,” muttered Cal VanderMeer.

“Fifth day in a row what?” asked Carrie Wellema, looking up from the newspaper she was reading.

“Fifth day in a row Gord DeVries fell asleep in my class. Fifth day in a row he didn’t have his homework done. Fifth day in a row he told me school doesn’t matter anyway because he’d already got a business mowing lawns, and he doesn’t need to know anything I’m teaching in sociology to do that successfully.”

“Don’t feel bad,” said Jane VanderAsh, who had just entered the lounge. Jane taught math and she was two years from retirement. She took a seat across the table from Cal and Carrie. “Some of these kids don’t want to learn anything.”

“I know,” Cal said. He blew out a deep sigh. “But just because they don’t want to learn doesn’t mean I don’t have an obligation to reach them anyway.”

“It’s a waste of time,” Jane said. “At least with a few of

them. You may as well throw pearls before swine.”

“Exactly,” said Rex Kane, from the other end of the table. No one had realized he was listening. Or perhaps they were just hoping he wasn’t. “Like we used to say on the farm, you can sift mud all day, but that won’t fix the

rust on the corn crib.”

Cal, Carrie and Jane stared at him for a moment, then turned again to one another.

“I’ll tell you what I think,” Carrie said. “The problem is not with you, Cal. The problem is with these outside jobs. I have some students who are working between 30 and 40 hours per week. For crying out loud, they’re working full-time jobs while trying to go to school. If we kept that kind of pace, we’d fall asleep in the middle of class as well.”

“True,” said Jane, “but that’s not our problem. If their

parents don’t care about their keeping that kind of schedule, why should we?”

“Because we’re losing kids,” Cal countered. “Gord DeVries and other students like him might not care what they’re missing in sociology, but I do. I believe it is important stuff. What they learn about human behavior and interaction does apply to lawn mowing businesses. It applies to marriages. It applies to parent-child relationships, to church relations, to politics, to ... to ... to everything. If Gord can’t see how

Introduction to “Slouching Toward Bedlam”

Most of you CEJ readers have forgotten about Omni Christian High, though its Asylum for eccentric and exhausted teachers was once featured regularly within the pages of this journal. Some of you, of course, know all about that bastion of secondary learning because you teach there, patrol the halls during noon hours enforcing “proper behavior,” inspire or tire the students — and yourself, and daily witness the cheers and tears of educators in the act of leading the young. I also know you regret that others haven’t heard all about the ruckus of John Vroom’s retirement and about Lucy DenDenker’s honor as Teacher of the Year. But you’ve had your spot under the searchlight; it’s time to move on.

I’m happy for CEJ readers that Jan Kaarsvlam, a former student teacher at Omni, is taking up the candle, so to speak, to shed some light on the goings on at his own school, and in the process perhaps shed some light for all of us as we stride and stumble our way in Christian education. I wish him well. In the well-known words of a beloved mentor, may it give us “more to be Christian with” as teachers.

H. Zoeklicht

this material matters, it is my responsibility to make him see it.”

Carrie nodded in agreement, Jane snorted derisively, but it was Rex who broke the silence.

“You know,” he said, “you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.” Rex’s eyes searched out those of his companions as if he had imparted great wisdom unto them.

Jane found herself reluctant to agree with Rex in anything, yet she said, “Hackneyed as that sentence is, the sentiment is correct. You cannot make kids learn. You can only offer knowledge. They must then choose to take it from you.”

Carrie disagreed. “Part of education is engaging students at their level. You need to make clear, in ways they can understand, why the subject you are studying matters. Take your subject, for example, Jane. If you teach geometry as just a bunch of theorems and equations, kids might learn it, but they don’t know why they are learning it. And for some, if it seems pointless, they will shut down. But if you use real world examples to demonstrate how geometry is used in everything from construction to engineering dams and bridges, to building cars, your students will see a reason for what they are studying and they will focus.”

“I used to think so, too,” Jane said. “But after 32 years of teaching, I can say this: some kids don’t want to learn anything. If they can make \$8 or \$9 an hour mowing lawns or pumping gas, that’s all they care about, and

no matter how many hoops you jump through, no matter how hard you try to connect your material to ‘the real world,’ they will not care.”

“We always come back to jobs,” Cal said. “Maybe the problem is not an academic one. Maybe it’s spiritual. Are we raising a generation of kids so greedy that academics get pummeled in their rush to bow at the shrine of mammon?”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Rex piped up from the other side of the table. “Remember now, some of these kids need to work. They’re helping pay tuition, you know.”

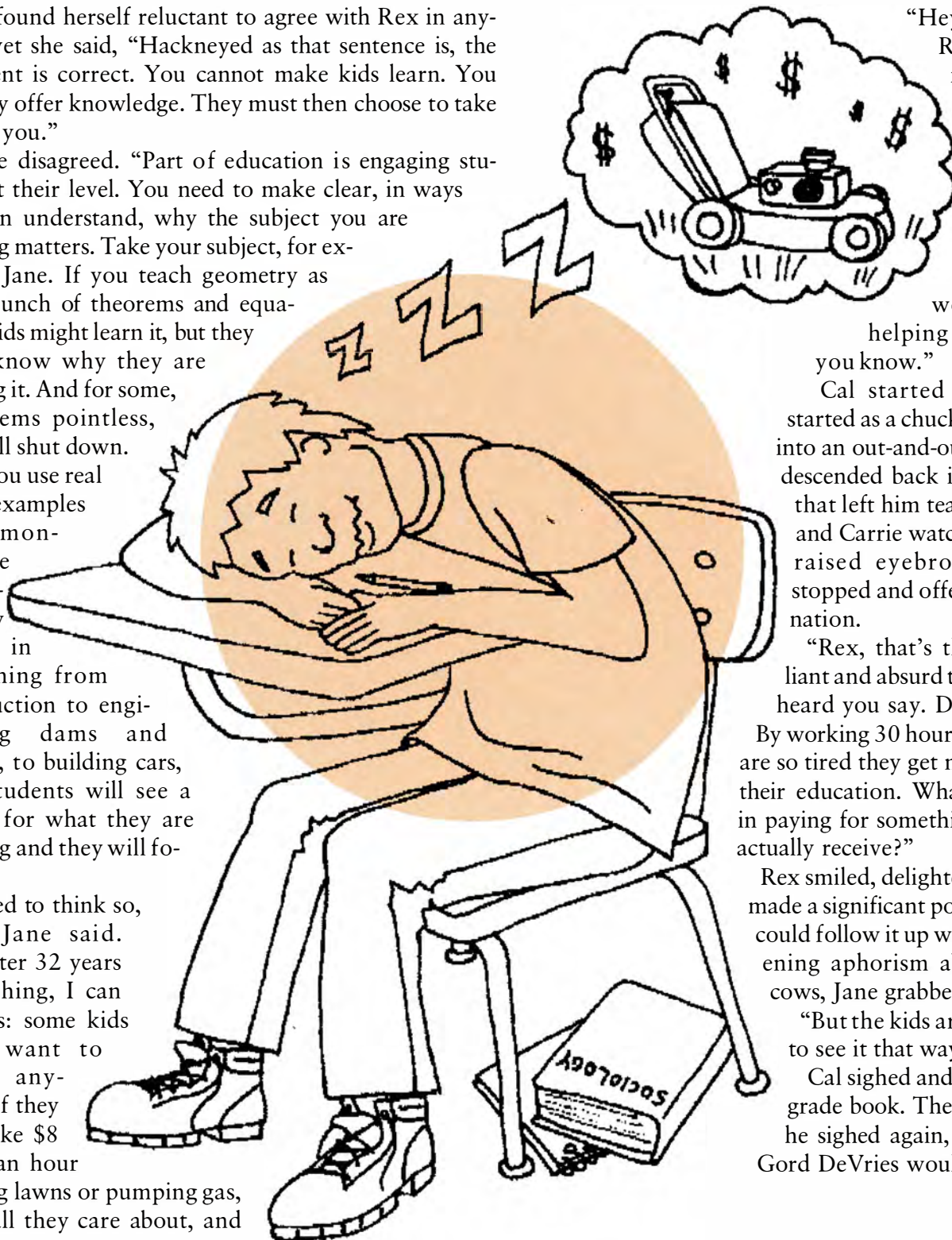
Cal started to laugh. It started as a chuckle, then grew into an out-and-out laugh, then descended back into a wheeze that left him teary-eyed. Jane and Carrie watched him with raised eyebrows until he stopped and offered an explanation.

“Rex, that’s the most brilliant and absurd thing I’ve ever heard you say. Don’t you see? By working 30 hours a week, they are so tired they get nothing out of their education. What’s the point in paying for something you never actually receive?”

Rex smiled, delighted that he had made a significant point. Before he could follow it up with an enlightening aphorism about milking cows, Jane grabbed the floor.

“But the kids are never going to see it that way, Cal.”

Cal sighed and picked up his grade book. The bell rang and he sighed again, wondering if Gord DeVries would pass.



The Journey Continues



by Carolyn Prinsen

Carolyn Prinsen wrote "A Teacher Invites Her Pupils Along on the Road of Pregnancy" for the October 1999 issue, before her baby was born. We promised a follow-up article after the birth. Carolyn is taking a pregnancy leave from teaching at the Christian School in Wellandport, Ontario.

IT'S A GIRL! Kate Adrina Prinsen was born in the wee hours of the morning on August 28, 1999, also my own birthday. When my students of last year heard the news, the girls were thrilled! The boys ... well, this was not what they had prayed for, but she would do. At least she was here, and "kinda cute," too.

Kate was healthy, for which we were thankful. We had prayed for that so often, together as a class. To a great extent, I must admit that I simply assumed that she would be. But in July, a major irregularity was detected in her heartbeat. We went through a series of tests at McMaster University Medical Centre, where we were grateful to learn that it was nothing serious. However, that experience caused me to stop and think. Yes, I had prayed all those prayers with my students. But did any of us *really* think that God might al-

low her to *not* be healthy? I, obviously, had a lesson to learn. *God creates each of us special. It's a miracle that we are even here. Life is precious and a gift from God.*

Part of me wishes that the problems with Kate's heart had occurred during the school year, so that we could have worked through it together as a class. As it was, some of the kids knew what was going on, but only a few

even realize this ourselves?

I have returned to the school a number of times this year to visit. It is amazing how people are drawn to babies. The students were so excited to see her! They were awed at how small she was, yet how perfectly she was created. I could see some distinctions between how the boys and the girls approached her. The boys were very curious to take a look at her, cradled

in my arms, before they went back to their soccer game. The girls hung around, constantly asking if they could hold her. I purposely asked one of the boys to hold her for a photograph. He gulped, stuck out both his arms as if he were prepared to carry a load of wood, and squashed her tightly when I placed her in his arms. He was willing, but somewhat dubious. Is this part of the



Carolyn Prinsen and Kate Adrina surrounded by adoring students

that I had spoken with. They prayed fervently for the baby to be well, sharing my concern. But, looking back on all those prayers we had said at school, I began to wonder. How often do we pray out of habit? Do we, as educators, inadvertently teach children thoughtlessness by not challenging them to really consider what they are praying? Do we spend enough time teaching them what prayer is: a powerful weapon against sin, a truly extraordinary link with God? Do we

way God made us, or do we encourage these patterns? Perhaps a bit of both!

The first stage of the amazing journey of Kate's life is now past. The tiny, mysterious person that was hidden for so long is now here. My students have added so much to the experience! In a very special way, we have seen how awesome our God is. It rings true yet again: *God creates each of us special. It's a miracle that we are even here. Life is precious and a gift from God.*

Book Review

Julia K. Stronks and Gloria Goris-Stronks, *Christian Teachers in Public Schools*. 1999. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books. 188 pages.
Reviewed by Rick Eigenbrood, director of graduate education and professor of education at Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa..



Steve J. Van Der Weele
Column Editor

Can Christians who teach in the public school remain grounded in their faith as they engage in their tasks as educators? Is this possible without breaking the law? These are the main questions which Stronks and Goris-Stronks address in this book. At a time when many are criticizing public schools for their reluctance to teach Judeo-Christian values and even their open hostility to Christianity, this book is a significant contribution for Christians who either are teaching in public schools or thinking about it. The authors argue that a teacher's faith can and should make a difference as they carry out their tasks as teachers. For others, especially parents who have children in public schools, this book will allow them to develop clarity on these issues.

The authors acknowledge that Christian teachers often find teaching in public schools to be difficult. These teachers see the tremendous needs that many of their students have and feel discouraged that their faith cannot be more explicit in their desire to help. The authors also suggest that many of these Christian teachers feel uneasy because they feel judged by others who question the legitimacy of their decision to teach in public schools. However, the authors argue that teaching in public schools is not only legitimate but that these teachers serve the kingdom of God in an important way.

In order to help teachers understand how they can teach and remain true to their faith, the authors identify three roles which teachers may adopt. In the "agent for enculturation" role, teachers go out of their way to avoid any possible conflict between their faith and teaching. Teachers who adopt the "Christian advocate/evangelist" role believe that they must take risks to share their faith even if it means violating the law. However, it is only the third role, the role of the "golden rule truth seeker," which the authors believe will allow Christian teachers to integrate their beliefs into their teaching while maintaining a

clear understanding of the place of "religion" in the public school forum. From this position, the authors state, Christian teachers can ground their teaching in their faith.

In response to the common criticism that public schools fail to teach morals and values, the authors argue that many of the values which are commonly agreed on by a civil society are consistent with the Christian faith and that these same teachers can play a significant role in the

inclusion of these values in their curriculum and teaching. This, suggests the book, is possible without having to be explicit about their faith; it happens through their interactions with students and the inclusion of themes of morality and character in the curriculum. Similarly, when planning and carrying out a curriculum, teachers should be able to use a framework which reflects their understanding of the theme of creation, fall and redemption.

However, the authors believe that teachers must have a clear understanding of the law if they are to be successful. The book summarizes the current U.S. law and litigation which provide the basis of current practice in public schools. This summary of current law makes it clear that expressions of religion do not need to be absent from schools.

The book also examines the question as to whether a school, its teachers, and curriculum can ever be neutral as some in public education would suggest or whether public schools by default promote the "religion" of human secularism. Through an historical review of court decisions the authors argue strongly that neutrality is simply not possible.

The last chapter of the book presents the results of interviews done with teachers who teach in public schools. Through these stories the reader becomes aware of the frustrations and joys which these teachers experience as they carry out their tasks in this part of God's creation.

