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FEATURE

**Learning to Teach Adults: Principles of Adult Education
in the Writings of Ellen White**

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***Abstract:** This paper examines the writings of Ellen White for the presence and application of several key adult education principles as identified by Malcolm Knowles. The practical application of these principles is then examined in the teaching of college English as a second language and compulsory general education Bible classes. These principles can also be applied to other areas, and their implementation will make for better teachers who will integrate their faith in their content areas, and may provide clues for the improvement of strategies for communicating the gospel to adults.*

In the past, education has generally been thought of as being for children or adolescents. This meant that all teaching strategies were directed to this age group. In general, little thought was given to the teaching strategies of adult education. Research into the learning process, the learning environment and best teaching methods focused principally on education for children and adolescents. In higher education, people with the expert knowledge in their particular field of study were usually appointed to teaching positions. Because the student body was seen as adult, no special considerations were deemed necessary. This has begun to change in recent years with a growing awareness that adult education is as specialized an area as child or adolescent education, and that in order for the effective transmission of knowledge to take place, the pedagogical strategies of adult education must be understood.

Perhaps nowhere is this as easily seen as in the area of Second Language Learning. People have long wondered at the apparent ease at which small children acquire a second language without formal education. Many adults—even with painstaking study—fail to acquire the second language to the degree with which the child seems to acquire it with ease. Many studies in psychology, education, philology have been undertaken in order to ex-

plain this phenomenon (Bachman, 1990; Cook, 1997; Gass & Selinker, 1994; Locke, 1993).

In this paper we shall attempt a look at some essential principles of adult learning drawn from some of these studies. Ellen White stands as one of the most important figures in the formulation and founding of the Seventh-day Adventist educational system. We will examine her writings in order to determine if essential adult education principles can be found in them and if so how she advises their application. We have chosen five principles that we considered the most relevant, drawn from the work of Malcolm Knowles (1979) and others. This is not meant to be comprehensive, since there are many principles which could be studied in addition to these five. We will be applying these principles to the teaching of two diverse areas: the teaching of English as a second language, as well as the teaching of compulsory general education Bible classes, both of them at University level. We think that these principles can be applied to other areas of adult education as well and hope that their implementation will make us not only better teachers who will integrate our faith in our specialties, but also may provide clues as to improve our strategies to communicate the gospel to adults.

“As It Was”: Education in the World and Time of Ellen White

Education in the nineteenth century in the USA was an adventure yet to be designed (Knight, 1987). Particularly in the colonized east coast, the rich sent their children to private schools or had them tutored at home. For the poor, the most accessible education options were the monitorial schools. One teacher instructed a number of older students who then taught the younger students. Some of these schools could have up to a thousand students with one teacher (Norton, 1986). As can be imagined under these circumstances, the most important quality of a teacher, therefore, was the ability to establish and maintain order and discipline. Instruction was largely focused on memorization, also due to the fact that few books were available. Teaching aids were basically non-existent. The rooms did not have proper ventilation, desks or lighting. The situation in the “Wild West” was even less regulated. Parents sometimes pooled resources in order to build a little school room and hired a newly graduated teacher often not more than 17 years old, who had passed through the same informal education system (Norton, 1986). Children that did not live within walking distance to a school simply did not attend school at all and depended heavily upon their parents (if they were literate) to learn the basic skills of reading, writing, and rudimentary mathematics (Knight, 1987).

With the appointment of Horace Mann as secretary of education of the State of Massachusetts in 1837 changes began to be implemented in the public education system (Norton, 1986, p. 331). First, a minimum length school year of six months was established. Second, teacher training programs were introduced. Third, the focus of education changed. Previously

education had emphasized exclusively reading, writing, and basic arithmetic. Now students began to study history, geography and some natural sciences as well. Moral education was retained but religious education was phased out. This resulted in strong opposition from some religious quarters, while others were happy with the changes, arguing that this would now enable Sunday schools to devote themselves exclusively to religious instruction.

Unlike primary school education, higher education (including High School and College/University) was not an issue. Enrollment in studies beyond primary school was very limited and was exclusively made up of children of the wealthy. Most colleges were church-affiliated, with their first concern being the theological training of future clergy. Both on the High School as well as the College level, education consisted mainly of classical languages (Greek and Latin), classical literature, higher mathematics, morals, religion, and some natural philosophy (Knight, 1987, pp. 166-170).

Within the Millerite movement, most Adventists (we are not talking about the denomination here, but rather about the non-denominational movement) were skeptical about higher education, since most scholars and theologians were among their most fanatical critics (Schwarz, 1979). Schwarz explains that most Adventist parents felt that even primary education was relatively unimportant since Jesus was coming soon. Why would one want to waste time on learning how to read and write if the most glorious event in history was about to take place? Because of the tremendous amount of ridicule experienced by their children in the public primary schools, Adventist parents began home schooling or joining together with other believers to open small schools. The leaders of the movement made no attempt to systematically develop a coherent school system. After this, the Advent movement consisted predominantly of small groups of scattered believers with no concrete plans for the organization of a denomination. Only after 1872—after Ellen White’s first vision concerning the importance of Christian education—the fledgling denomination began to develop a more systematic strategy for church-based primary and higher education.¹

The period following the Civil War (1861-1865) is characterized by tremendous changes in US education (Norton, 1986, pp. 437-439; Schwarz, 1979). The newly freed slaves were eager to learn. Schwarz explains that religious and charitable organizations from the north (including SDA efforts spearheaded by Edson White) assisted in creating an extensive public school system in the southern States. By 1877 over 600,000 blacks were enrolled in elementary school. Political logic played a decisive role here. If a black man now had the right to vote, then he should be educated to use his vote wisely.

As will be demonstrated in the following sections, Ellen White’s instructions for the beginning SDA educational system not only paralleled but

¹ For a more in-depth discussion of the topic, see Schwarz (1979, pp. 120-123).

superseded general education reforms in North America in the nineteenth century.

“As It Should Be”: Essential Principles of Adult Learning

The following principles for adult education are taken from Malcolm Knowles book *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* (1979).² The principles can be divided into five different areas. (1) The needs of the adult learner; (2) the characteristics of teacher; (3) the learning environment; (4) the employed teaching methodologies; and (5) the purpose of teaching. In the following we will discuss each area and will try to identify them in the writings of Ellen White. Although Ellen White does not mention the term “adult education,” and her writings on education focus predominantly upon child education, the principles of adult education can be found and very useful applications can be extracted. As we will discuss later, her closest application to adult education as such can be found in her extensive writings on evangelism.

Element 1: The Needs of the Adult Learner

In order to learn effectively, adults need to feel that they have some control and choice in the learning process. They need to see that the teaching builds on their previous experience and they need to be able to find an immediate application in their own lives (Doss, 2004; Knowles, 1979)

Ellen White (1954) emphasized particularly the need to direct, but never break or force the will of a learner. While she refers generally to children, the same principle may be applied in adult education. She writes:

Since the surrender of the will is so much more difficult for some pupils than for others, the teacher should make obedience to his requirements as easy as possible. The will should be guided and molded, but not ignored or crushed.... Allow the children under your care to have an individuality, as well as yourselves. Ever try to lead them, but never drive them. (1954, p. 210)

In the same place in *Child Guidance* Ellen White suggests that “too much management is as bad as too little” (p. 210), a principle that would also apply in adult education. Dynamic leadership seems to be another important characteristic of the respective teacher of adult learners that can be learned from White’s principles of child education.

Ellen White (1948) also speaks against leaders who sermonize and forget to teach their churches’ practical missionary work. Similarly, regarding the work of the mother in child rearing, she writes: “The study of books will be of little benefit, unless the ideas gained can be carried out in practical

² Other helpful literature dealing with adult education includes Astley (2000); Donald (1997); Imel (1996); Middleton (1994) and in the area of religious training O’Connor (1994) and Stych (1993).

life” (1954, p. 32). This correlates well with adult education where learners want to see practical applications and benefits to their own lives.

Element 2: The Characteristics of the Teacher

The effective teacher in adult education needs to show respect for the learner’s current viewpoint and status and should not be condescending. The teacher must be trustworthy and model the attitudes and behaviors appropriate to the teaching (Doss, 2004; Knowles, 1979).

Ellen White repeatedly spoke of the need for tact when working with adults. She praised the work of a certain church elder who was using “ingenuity” as well as “tact” in evangelism (1970, p. 205). She always held up Jesus as the model for the master teacher:

In every human being He discerned infinite possibilities. He saw men as they might be, transfigured by His grace—in “the beauty of the Lord our God” (Psalm 90:17). Looking upon them with hope, He inspired hope. Meeting them with confidence, He inspired trust. Revealing in Himself man's true ideal, He awakened, for its attainment, both desire and faith. In His presence souls despised and fallen realized that they still were men, and they longed to prove themselves worthy of His regard. In many a heart that seemed dead to all things holy, were awakened new impulses. To many a despairing one there opened the possibility of a new life. (1952, p. 80)

Knight (1985) has given a good definition of a first-rate Christian teacher: “The Christian teacher knows not only his subject matter but also his students, and knows both within the context of the Christian worldview” (p. 189).

Element 3: The Ideal Learning Environment

In order for adult learning to take place the environment needs to be warm, friendly, informal, and frequently, humorous. The learners must feel safe without fear of embarrassment or condemnation. They should also feel free to ask questions and must be able to foster good relationships with other learners (Doss, 2004; Knowles, 1979).

Ellen White greatly supported these learning environment characteristics in her writings. In particular she speaks very strongly against the practice of a teacher making an example of a student in front of others. She rather suggests that the teacher should try to correct the “erring” student privately with tact and love (1943, p. 267).

Although she was against frivolity when solemn themes were being presented, she was not above drawing humor from situations herself. While preaching at a particular convention Ellen White noticed that her adult son Willie had fallen asleep on the platform sitting behind her. Turning to the audience she said: “When Willie was a baby, I used to take him into the

pulpit and let him sleep in a basket beneath the pulpit, and he has never gotten over the habit” (as cited in Douglass, 1998, p. 95).

On the subject of fostering good relationships with other learners she writes:

Christian sociability is altogether too little cultivated by God’s people. This branch of education should not be neglected or lost sight of in our schools. Students should be taught that they are not independent atoms, but that each one is a thread which is to unite with other threads in composing a fabric....Those who shut themselves up within themselves, who are unwilling to be drawn upon to bless others by friendly associations, lose many blessings; for by mutual contact minds receive polish and refinement; by social intercourse, acquaintances are formed and friendships contracted which result in a unity of heart and an atmosphere of love which is pleasing in the sight of heaven. (1948, p. 172)

Element 4: Effective Teaching Methods

In child education, great emphasis is placed on teaching methodologies. This is also needed in adult education. The teaching methods should include interactive small group work. This should be varied to include activities such as role play, case studies and group discussions. Additionally, visual aids (such as graphics, video-clips, diagrams, etc.) are highly important in order for adult education to be effective (Doss, 2004; Knowles, 1979).

Ellen White uses Christ’s parables as illustrations of his innovative and didactic teaching method. She also emphasizes the fact that Christ made also use of small group dynamics by working primarily with the twelve (1970). She highly commended the efforts of an evangelist in Oakland who made large papier-mâché beasts to illustrate Daniel and Revelation. She particularly challenges the church to study the ways that would make the truth interesting (1970). “Let the workers for God manifest tact and talent, and originate devices by which to communicate light to those who are near and to those who are afar off” (p. 206). Again, she encourages “the use of charts, symbols, and representations of various kinds,” but with regards to these visual aids she cautions that they must not be exorbitantly expensive or become a means in themselves and detract from the message itself. They should glorify God and not be a “theatrical performance” (p. 206).

Element 5: Teaching Practice

Adults need to know where they are going. This means that the purpose of teaching a certain subject must be stated clearly at the outset and specific practical and assessable goals must be set for the adult learner. The learners need to be allowed to come to their own conclusions based on the evidence offered to them. They should be given manageable amounts of information and should be encouraged to integrate the received information. Adequate

time for reflection and personal application should be given to them (Doss, 2004; Knowles, 1979).

On the topic of manageable amounts of information Ellen White writes:

The Great Teacher held in His hand the entire map of truth, but He did not disclose it all to His disciples. He opened to them those subjects only which were essential for their advancement in the path to heaven. There were many things in regard to which His wisdom kept Him silent. As Christ withheld many things from His first disciples, knowing that then it would be impossible for them to comprehend them, so today he withholds many things from us, knowing the capacity of our understanding. (1970, p. 202)

White also emphasizes that the example of Christ as the master teacher should inspire us to do everything with a clearly defined purpose (1952). Again, in speaking about the evangelist in Oakland, she commends his method of presenting the truth clearly, in an interesting way, avoiding debates, but with sufficient space for the listener to make up his/her own mind (1970). Interestingly, in most of her personal letters to individuals with problems (some of which appear anonymously in the *Testimonies*) White always includes practical and specific suggestions to the individual, focusing upon the main goal of their eternal salvation.

Finalizing this section we would like to quote Ellen White's famous statement that somewhat summarizes most of the principles of adult learning introduced above:

The Prince of teachers sought access to the people by the pathway of their most familiar associations. He presented the truth in such a way that ever after it was to His hearers intertwined with their most hallowed recollections and sympathies. He taught in a way that made them feel the completeness of His identification with their interests and happiness. His instruction was so simple, His illustrations so appropriate, His words so sympathetic and so cheerful, that His hearers were charmed. (1970, p. 148)³

Application of Adult Learning Principles

In Table 1 we describe our experiences of incorporating these essential principles of adult education in our particular classes. All of these examples were developed in the context of University education, dealing with young adults. We covered both areas of our respective specializations, i.e., English as a Second Language (Chantal J. Klingbeil) and the compulsory Bible general education class focusing on *Christ and Salvation* (Gerald A. Klingbeil). These classes were taught during the 2004 school year at River Plate Adventist University, Libertador San Martín, Argentina. Based upon this ex-

³ It is interesting to note that this quote appears in the compilation focusing upon evangelism and not in her major work on Christian education.

perience we have also included some suggestions which should be considered when planning effective adult evangelism. As Ellen White does, we would like to approach adult evangelism as a type of adult education.

Table 1
Application of Adult Education Principles in Selected Settings

ADULT EDUCATION PRINCIPLE	BIBLE CLASS	ENGLISH CLASS	EVANGELISM
Adults need to have a choice	Offer students a choice for their written assignments (either reading report or written paper connecting subject with their specialty)	Keep one class unit free and let students choose the relevant topic/theme to be covered	Individualize Bible study approaches—every-one should not have to study the same Bible Study course; let adults choose their point of departure
Adults need to build upon previous experience	When discussing the actions of Christ on earth students were asked to compare and contrast between popular super-heroes and Jesus	When dealing with vocabulary on marriage and family relations students were asked what their favorite romantic movie was and to what degree the depicted romance reflects real life experiences	Connect with the adult's world, drawing examples from their personal context, e.g., evangelism presented by a paleontologist/ biologist, beginning with the theme of what happened to the dinosaurs
Adults need to be able to make immediate applications	Include a weekly time where students write personal applications in a <i>journal</i> , e.g., "what does the Great Controversy have to do with me?", "what would I ask Jesus for if he asked me the question he asked Bartimaeus?"	After a class on economic activity, the concept of tithing was introduced and students were encouraged to experience the benefits of tithing	Bible Studies should be designed not to convince or persuade, but rather to solve problems; each section should have an immediate application

(table continues)

Table 1 (continued)
Application of Adult Education Principles in Selected Settings

ADULT EDUCATION PRINCIPLE	BIBLE CLASS	ENGLISH CLASS	EVANGELISM
The effective adult teacher must respect the learners and their viewpoints	Never belittle students; use the comments in the journals to interact personally with students	Discourage laughter at mistakes or observations; take all questions seriously	Avoid arguments; do not insult or belittle other beliefs or philosophies
The adult learning environment must be warm and friendly	Large classes are divided into small groups of 4-5 people; include "warm-up" group activities at the beginning of the class, e.g., each one thinking about a complimentary nick-name of the other group members when talking about the title of Jesus	Sit in a circle whenever possible; in a small class context take five minutes on a Monday morning to ask individuals how their weekend was; wish people happy birthday, etc.	Find friendly greeters for a public meeting; try to cultivate an informal atmosphere; divide into smaller groups where possible; the value of small group work has been discovered over the past decade; preferably use loose chairs rather than pews; invite people to share prayer requests at the beginning of the presentation
The adult learner should not be embarrassed	Speak to people personally, communicate with the students via the <i>journal</i> , e.g., tell them that you missed them the previous period	Never laugh at their mistakes; be willing to acknowledge your own mistakes, e.g., when you have misspelled something	Compare and contrast biblical beliefs with other beliefs but always be respectful; don't assume that people know Bible books, give page numbers or directions
The adult learner must be able to foster good relationships with co-learners	Small group activities; encourage extra-curricular activities, e.g., celebrate an agape feast of thanksgiving at the end of the semester	Discourage negative comments about others or other teachers; in order to learn cooking vocabulary cook and eat a meal in the teacher's house	Try to create a networking atmosphere, e.g., prayer groups, having babysitters for parents attending the meetings, or provide an opportunity to socialize after the meetings with refreshments

(table continues)

Table 1 (continued)
Application of Adult Education Principles in Selected Settings

ADULT EDUCATION PRINCIPLE	BIBLE CLASS	ENGLISH CLASS	EVANGELISM
The adult learner needs effective methods	Include in each class two group activities, (drawings, discussion of a questions, crossword puzzle, etc.); make use of multi-media (DVD of Matthew: The Visual Bible) and Powerpoint presentations; act out the precise details of (e.g.) the "day of atonement" ritual	Draw on the blackboard for certain activities; games for vocabulary; role playing telephone conversations; group discussions; writing and acting out advertisements; using video extracts (instead of a complete video)	Group discussion; Bible used as a guide for case studies; group singing; responsive readings; video extracts; Powerpoint
The adult learner needs to know where he/she is going	Include at the beginning of the class a well-laid-out syllabus; begin each class or each week with a brief outline of the focus of this particular week; include more smaller evaluations than just one or two big ones (e.g., journaling)	Advise students about topics of the next class and ask them to think about the needed English vocabulary for that particular area; if you have taught it before, include all the material that will be handed out at the beginning of the semester	At the beginning of your Bible study or evangelistic presentation tell listeners which ground you will cover and where you hope to end; be open about your motives
The adult learner needs to reach his/her own conclusions	In the journal entry the class participant can formulate his/her own appreciation of the presented class; ask questions that require decisions	Have open book exams; encourage thinking and not just memorizing	Ask real questions about things that are important to people; present Bible solutions and encourage activities that require thinking about the basic principles, e.g., write a letter to God about a particular issue

Conclusions

As most teachers probably do, we have been applying some (if not most) of the above-mentioned principles subconsciously in our teaching. However—partially as a result of this study—we have begun to consciously integrate these principles into our classes. We believe that this has improved our teaching. We noticed that students opened up in their journal writing, sharing details of their struggle with particular problems or specific prayer requests. They have also felt free to express doubt. The results of the exams generally have been positive and students that initially had been rather negative towards the compulsory Bible class requirements have participated actively in their groups and were not disruptive. In both of our classes, students did not use their allowed absence percentage and most of them were present without exception. This is particularly helpful in contexts where students have a maximum percentage of absences (as in the Argentinean educational system). Professors teaching general education classes to non-religion majors should include a strategy to maximize class attendance, since realistically, students will not spend a great deal of time outside the classroom on the subject matter.

We have since applied these principles to special evangelistic seminars, which were geared towards reaching professionals and people belonging to the middle class and living in an urban environment. Between 2004 and 2005 we presented two week-long outreach seminars entitled “Archaeology, the Bible, and Me” in several urban centers of Argentina. In October 2004 we developed this program for the small church of Núñez, Capital Federal, Buenos Aires, Argentina, and were encouraged by the positive results and the capacity of the program design to connect with people from all walks of life, but particularly those with a professional background. In October 2005 we were invited to present the same seminar in the Cordoba Central Church in Cordoba, Argentina. This church was much larger and was comprised of many university students and professionals. To the surprise of the organizing local church leadership, the seminar not only attracted non-Seventh-day Adventists, but also resulted in a high retention rate for long standing Seventh-day Adventist members who usually would not join in a regular evangelistic seminar. The interactive elements applied in this seminar represented some of the reasons for the success of this project. In 2006, this model of doing outreach was presented to ministers in Thailand, Myanmar and Singapore, together with three sample seminar presentations that were given to any interested participant. While we did not have the time to do a full-fledged analysis of the impact of the seminar, initial feedback from pastors implementing the seminar in their churches in an Asian context has been encouraging. We hope that the further integration and application of these principles of adult education, so clearly outlined in the writings of Ellen White, will again remind us of Ellen White’s inspired vision for Adventist education, i.e., “in the highest sense the work of education and the work of redemption are one” (1952, p. 30).

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