

Find a Mentor; Be a Mentor!

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The day I walked into my first classroom I was scared stiff. I was a “pre-certified” teacher and had been hired part-time to supervise high school students taking French by correspondence. The week before school started, I woke up on a nightly basis after a recurring dream about my future students: students in my classroom who were out of control, students in my classroom who asked questions about French that I couldn’t answer, students in my classroom who had better pronunciation of the language than I did. I had studied French all summer to brush up on grammar and pronunciation but was still only slightly ahead of where my most advanced class would be on the first day of school. Although I prayed for confidence and wisdom, I thought that God was the only place I could turn with my worries and concerns. The school board had shown confidence in my abilities, and I felt that if I expressed my self-doubts and appeared like I didn’t know what I was doing, they would regret their decision to hire me. I kept my doubts between myself and God and ended up having a year that saw most of my students successfully complete their correspondence coursework.

The next year the school board asked me to come back. However, I would return to actually teach rather than to supervise correspondence curriculum that was already laid out. Armed with my confidence in seeing God’s hand in my classroom the previous year, new French textbooks, and another summer of French study under my belt, the week before school started found me with a couple fewer nightmares than the previous year and more confidence for the first day of school. Once the school year started, though, I quickly found the job of actually teaching rather than supervising a pre-digested program of study was a constant challenge. Without the benefit of training in how to successfully motivate, instruct, and manage students, I found myself floundering at times. I asked my fellow teachers for suggestions, and they generously shared. Yet I continued to cling to the mindset that I shouldn’t ask for too much help from my administrators or peers.

The following year, Michelle Richards, a qualified French teacher, was hired to teach the high school French classes and I was asked to teach some elementary French classes. Because she was approachable (and also because she was going to be seeing the highs and lows of how I had taught the previous two years and I had nothing to lose with my candor), I opened up to my successor and shared my joys and frustrations. Unexpectedly, I found the joy of having a mentor and coach who was able to guide me past some of the pitfalls I had bumped into my first two years in the classroom. An expert in her field, both in curriculum and in classroom management, she shared resources, ideas, and methods of both instruction and management that helped me have a successful school year. Again, God had provided for my needs as a teacher, but this time He had given me a flesh-and-blood coach.

My experience as a beginning teacher is not unique. Veteran educational experts Harry and Rosemary Wong share their conviction that, to be successful, new teachers need extensive

mentoring, with “buddies,” mentors, lead teachers, and administrators working together as coaches. Adventist educators Dan Carley and Lloyd Robinson have also addressed this issue in previous CATnet articles. Carley discusses educational research pointing to the need for new teachers to have mentors and making suggestions on how mentorship can be achieved within the Adventist educational system. Robinson shares a couple of his own personal experiences as a new teacher and reaffirms the need for mentorship as well as sharing what the British Columbia Conference is doing to mentor new teachers.

If you are a new teacher reading this article, don't be afraid that you will seem less professional if you seek out a mentor! Actively search for fellow teachers who will share ideas; talk to your administrator and ask for professional development time to visit another classroom where you can observe and ask questions of a more seasoned teacher working in the same level and/or subject area that you teach; ask questions of the mentoring teachers in this on-line forum: <http://teachers.net/mentors/>. As a new teacher, you bring new ideas, excitement, and enthusiasm to the teaching career, but you don't have to go it alone. You have colleagues who can pass on ideas from their own teaching toolboxes.

If you have taught even one year, you have experiences to share with newer teachers coming into the profession! Teaching sometimes seems a solitary profession as we stand before our students, but it is also a sharing profession. Those of us who have taught for a few (or more) years have skills based on experience and have the privilege of lightening the load of our less experienced colleagues by sharing some of the gifts (and missteps) that have shaped our teaching lives. As our teaching toolboxes become more complete, we burnish those tools as we share them with our colleagues.

So...find a mentor, and be a mentor!

Resources:

- Carley, Daniel. The Fate of the Beginning Teacher July 2000. Catnet Online Journal. 27 Feb. 2009 <http://catnet.sdacc.org/index.php?framesrc=http%3A//catnet.sdacc.org/article-view.php%3FID%3D45>>.
- Robinson, Lloyd. Experience Helps Mar. 2006. Catnet Online Journal. 27 Feb. 2009 <<http://catnet.sdacc.org/index.php?framesrc=http%3A//catnet.sdacc.org/article-view.php%3FID%3D256>>.
- Wong, Harry and Rosemary Wong. Coaches Are More Effective Than Mentors Feb. 2008. Effective Teaching. 30 Mar. 2009 <<http://teachers.net/wong/FEB08/>>.