

The “Heavenly” Classroom: Creating a Spiritual Environment

by Gail Simons

“There is much which the Lord can do for children through their parents and teachers which He cannot do without them. For this reason there rests upon us the very definite responsibility of providing the best possible environment and education for our children” (George de Charms, *Growth of the Mind*).

Five Levels of Life

Human beings live on several levels at the same time: spiritual, moral, emotional, cognitive and physical. In children these levels develop sequentially as “stages of growth.” Every stage supports the movement into the next stage. We live on all of these levels at the same time but in different ways at different stages of life. As adults we certainly try to stop “growing” physically, but all levels are involved in our welfare. In attempting to create a “heavenly” classroom, I must also consider how my classroom’s environment nourishes each level of my students’ lives at their particular stage of development. Just as I know that the external body contains the spiritual “body,” the physical classroom “holds” a space for all the levels of my students’ lives. As teachers considering the successive levels, from the spiritual to the physical, we can see that the previous, higher levels are present in and influence all the subsequent levels, right down to the physical ultimates.

With every year of teaching, I always hope to improve. Can I make this unit a bit more lively? Can I find a better way to teach this concept? Yet, on a deeper level I am also keenly aware that the “better” a person I become, the better teacher I am able to be. Which would be better for my teaching: taking a graduate course or joining a spiritual growth group? The answer is yes! Perhaps one is more appropriate at a given time, but do teachers allow themselves to see the time given to a spiritual growth group, or to growing a garden, or to joining a volleyball team as contributing to their teaching, and to the spiritual environment of their classroom? Teaching forces us to “grow” along with our students. Teaching is spiritual work.

The Spiritual Environment

Sometimes the spiritual support for the lives of my students intertwines with my own spiritual journey. For example, before saying The Lord’s Prayer together during classroom worship, I always say a spontaneous prayer. Is it for them, or is it for me? Yes. Praying aloud models how to do this for my students. Most importantly, I use the prayer to focus my heart and to seek the Lord’s presence in our classroom.

The Moral Environment

After the spiritual focus on inviting the Lord’s presence, I next consider how to encourage the presence of moral virtues in my classroom. For example, I consider it of high importance to be

even-handed in my relationship with my students. This goes beyond being “fair.” Although it is natural to have an easier time with some students than with others, I must strive to connect with each student in a respectful, kind manner. This will be observed by the class and can set the classroom’s tone, creating an environment of respect, fairness and caring.

The spiritual enters into the moral when we strive to be fair and respectful because that is how the Lord wishes us to act to one another.

The Emotional Environment

Because adolescence is a time of turmoil, the emotional environment of the classroom is very important. I must set a tone at all times that aims to calm the hidden emotional seas my students might be flailing in at any given time. I use weekly journal writing as a way of being more aware of the internal workings of my class. What a teenager won’t tell me in person often comes out in the journal. Awareness of relationship problems within the class can help me when forming work groups and in being an emotional support for my students.

And how can I help my students to deal with their emotional challenge of self-esteem on a moral level? The moral within the emotional ties directly to charitable behavior. Sometimes a student deals with her own insecurities by putting someone else down. This is unacceptable. Students at this age can hold very high ideals while feeling very low about themselves. An atmosphere that values honesty and charity—and gives opportunities for using them—helps the students to value themselves.

The spiritual must enter into the emotional environment to foster the students’ awareness that, despite everything, they are loveable and loved. More specifically, *the Lord* loves them, unconditionally. It occurs to me that some stories from the Word where the Lord loves even the “lowest” person would be good to add.

The Cognitive Environment

Students at this age are experiencing major changes at the cognitive level. In studying any given subject they are now able to approach it with higher thinking skills than ever before. They are beginning to be able to think abstractly. My students can not only learn information but can grasp such concepts as cause and effect. It is important for me to encourage this ability to think abstractly. My questions should not be just factual, but also inferential, requiring synthesis of ideas.

In attempting to create a lively cognitive environment, I must consider my students’ emotional level relative to my teaching method. Although students this age can be comfortable with themselves intellectually, they are often not comfortable with themselves emotionally. If I want my students to feel safe enough to risk answering a question, every effort must be made to avoid embarrassment. No ridicule from other students is allowed. Everyone is urged to risk. Everyone is included and encouraged. And if the whole class has trouble with this, then we break up into small groups or pairs for discussion. In addition, to address the emotional aspect within the cognitive environment I strive to accommodate my lessons to the interests, imaginations, and affections of my students. An autobiographical poem in composition class suits their state of

self-interest and emerging identity. Group projects offer opportunity to work with peers. Being able to choose a topic for a report honors their desire for independence.

The moral factor within the cognitive environment includes the creation of safe interaction as discussed above, but it goes further than that. The moral environment for thinking and learning includes intellectual honesty and compassion. I need to allow time within a lesson for a concept to really be understood, not just sufficiently noted to be memorized for a test. By “intellectual compassion” I mean being touched by what we learn. Students at this age are very keen about “fairness.” Thus they can be stirred to care for the plight of immigrants, or of the Jews during the Holocaust, as an introduction to the “social perspective” which comes in adulthood.

The obvious spiritual content of the cognitive level is teaching the Word, but we must consider what part of the Word is most appropriate for each age. In considering this statement, the current 8th grade curriculum of teaching parables from the New Testament works very well. With their relatively new ability to think abstractly, the parables challenge the students intellectually while teaching moral lessons and fostering a relationship to Jesus.

The Physical Environment

Now to the actual physical classroom environment. How does the room itself influence the lives of my students? Adolescents need physical space, not just for group activities, but for “ramming” around in with their often awkwardly growing bodies. With this in mind, I can attempt to arrange their desks as much as possible with generous aisles. I can include opportunities for moving away from desks during some of the day’s lessons. And in decorating my classroom, I will look to beauty. This means having “real” art and the Lord’s words in front of our eyes. It means watching green things grow and placing wonderful things from the Lord’s creation, like shells and stones, on the shelves. And although I need to accommodate my wall decorations and bulletin boards to the state of teenagers, I am cautious with posters that aren’t meaningful.

I am aware of the cognitive level in the environment of my classroom by placing games or books on the table that my students might peruse informally during break. Adolescents aren’t children, but they still need to “play.” However, I find they are more likely to get involved with the game or book if I point it out and then walk away. Doing more than that would not be “cool.”

How do I support the emotional lives of my students through their physical environment? Adolescents are often in a state of emotional turmoil. Along with beauty, the room needs to have simplicity and order. My classroom needs to be attractive but not too cluttered. Student involvement in both decorating and cleaning the classroom also relates to their emotional lives. Though they don’t openly say it, having their work displayed and published means a lot to adolescent students. Once again, I often do this in a low key manner. More than that might be just too embarrassing. And participating in classroom chores is not only practice in developing orderly habits, but can bring a sense of contribution and the satisfaction of a job well done. All of this is good for emotional well-being.

The moral can be seen in the physical environment of my classroom in more than just such

objects as posters that teach morals. For example, students need to know that their property will be respected. And, of course, classroom property must also be used and returned carefully.

What sets the spiritual tone in the external appearance of my classroom? Beyond the beauty that appreciates the Lord's creation, beyond the order that reflects His truth, beyond the respect for property that reflects His love, I see it in the presence of His Word in a place of honor at the front of the classroom. And I see it in the presence of pictures of the Lord

A Heavenly Environment

I again stroll mentally through my classroom, considering its environment. It looks to the Lord and His Word, prayer, honesty, and charity. Not bad. What more can I do to create a spiritual environment for my students? Although many of the things I have discussed point to the presence of God in my classroom, I think there is more. My students need to really "feel" the presence of the Lord with us. So, the more the Lord is truly "present," the more I can foster a truly "heavenly" classroom environment. How is the Lord truly present with us? We know He is there in the remains and innocence within my students. And the more that the Lord is present with me, their teacher, the more He will be present for my students. I think this is where my own spiritual journey and the spiritual environment of my classroom merge. I can go through all the motions of working toward my dream of a "heavenly" classroom, but the degree to which I am successful depends on my personal work of regeneration.

However, we have to be careful not to be too hard on ourselves. We must hold a vision of a truly spiritual environment as a goal and be thankful each day for the opportunity to grow toward it. We must remember that we don't change ourselves; the Lord does. Nor do we change our students. Our job is to cooperate with His work! The Lord is the real Teacher in our classrooms. It is He who fills the space with His limitless love that can carry our classrooms into the sphere of heaven.