

## Developing Engaged Students

by Troy Wathen

A wise teacher reminded me a few years ago that the process of repairing the ruins of our educational system takes time because the learning curve is steep. We are the workers, while at the same time partial beneficiaries, of this repair. In our efforts to restore something that has been lost, we sometimes find

challenge is actually convincing our students that *active engagement* in learning is a worthwhile endeavor. By active engagement, I mean the mental exercise of sticking with a line of thought or with a discipline of behavior necessary to make learning fruitful. Recent educational theory has reasserted the importance of understanding

two possible goal orientations: **performance goals** (getting As, getting into a good college, or being in the top ten percent) or **mastery goals** (learning the skill or concept, developing a particular virtue, or enjoying the learning endeavor). Likewise, teachers create classroom environments that foster performance goals or mastery goals or some mixture of the two. As classical educators, most of us want our students to perform well, but we should not forsake the inner growth in our students in pursuit of the accolades that come with performing well. In an assessment-centered educational culture, we must pursue wisdom for Christ's sake and His glory, not superior test scores for our own glory.

A second theme in theories of metacognitive and volitional strategies is that of self-regulation. Not only should we train our students to pursue wisdom for its own good, but the literature supports the training of students in self-regulatory strategies. This self-regulation means that students must first recognize what motivates them and what hinders their educational development. In order for our students to practice self-regulation, they must possess some ability to reflect upon their own thinking. Not only is self-reflection a distinction that defines us as spiritual creatures, but it is also a practice that develops our spiritual nature. Christian philosopher Dallas Willard supports this observation in his discussion of the nature of spiritual transformation. He argues, "If I intend to obey Jesus Christ, I must intend and decide to become the kind of person who *would* obey" [emphasis Willard's].<sup>4</sup> Not only is the educational endeavor

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ourselves engaging in what C.S. Lewis referred to as chronological snobbery. We discount modern educational theories because we sometimes have a predisposition to distrust modern philosophies. Much of this distrust is warranted, but I would like to argue for a vein of modern educational theory and research that provides support for some of the strategies used in our ACCS schools.

According to John Milton Gregory, "Teaching is *arousing* and *using the pupil's mind* to grasp the desired thought or to master the desired art."<sup>1</sup> Most of us have read Gregory's *Seven Laws of Teaching* and agree that our role as teachers is to arouse the minds of our students and that our students must attend with interest to that which is to be learned. The issue is not convincing others that education is more fruitful when we have students who are awake and engaged; most teachers agree to this educational law. The

the nature of, and the training in, the strategies of the learner's internal motivation. This point is where we can, and should, utilize some of the findings of modern educational theories regarding metacognition and volitional strategies—strategies used by the learner to control his mind and will as he approaches learning. The precepts of Proverbs clearly supports this assertion as the wise calls on the young man to "be attentive," "incline your ear to my sayings," and "do not forget my teachings."<sup>2</sup>

McKeachie addresses the issue of student engagement in the learning process. He argues that many students "are not clear about their educational goals in general or their goals for specific courses."<sup>3</sup> One of the themes in this vein of research is that of the *goal orientations* of both the student and the classroom environment. These theorists argue that students approach learning with

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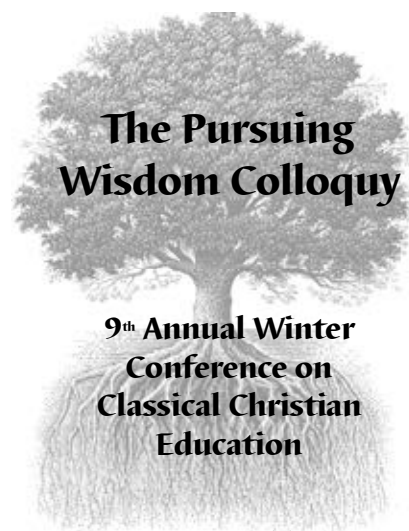
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affected by our self-regulation, but our spiritual transformation into Christlikeness relies partially on our intentional engagement. Training our students to be self-regulating in the academic process has been demonstrated to be highly profitable. I believe that this training in self-regulation can also have implications beyond the classroom as self-regulation translates into introspection, self-evaluation, and the spiritual dispositions that come with these pursuits.

As educators in classical Christian schools, we must not only recognize our need for practicing the seven laws of teaching: we must go further to sharpen our understanding of the factors of motivation and the pitfalls of some types of motivations. We must also train our students in the skills necessary to become self-regulating as they approach the learning process. Any time we recommend that we read educational journals, we often must add the caveat that not all ideas in this vein of literature fit our educational philosophy; however, enough is useful that I can recommend our attending to the theories of volitional and metacognitive strategies. A good place to start would be to read *Teachers College Record Volume 106*<sup>5</sup>, devoted almost entirely to the topic of volitional strategies. From there, follow the citation trail to other articles that cite research supporting many of the practices that are becoming common in classical Christian schools.

### ENDNOTES

1. John Milton Gregory, *The Seven Laws of Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), p. 19.
2. Proverbs 1-2 (NIV).
3. W. J. McKeachie, *McKeachie's Teaching Tips* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), p. 271.
4. Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002) p. 90.
5. *Teachers College Record* Volume 106 Number 6, 2004, can be purchased at <http://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentid=11565>.



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