

“RIDING HERD”

Developing Character by Allowing Choices

In the Old West, the cattle drive was a cowboy's most demanding work. Riding all day, and taking turns at watch all night, the crew had to round up the cattle from the open plains, form them into a herd, and then drive them up the trail to market. There were, of course, no fences along the trail. So the cowboys and their trusted horses had to “ride herd”

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along the edges of the moving mass of cattle. This allowed them to round up the strays and runaways, to protect the cattle from predators, and to keep the herd on the trail and moving. The cowboys themselves were the “fence”

around the herd until it was safely delivered to market.

In dealing with young people, Christian educators can apply some of this “trail drive”

BY JERRY D. THOMAS

mentality. Our young charges are on the trail from childhood to adulthood. They are developing Christian characters and becoming successful adults. It is our job to “ride herd,” protecting them from outside dangers and keeping them on the path as they grow closer to God and become productive members of society.

But how can we guide them along the right path without controlling their every move? How can we protect them from the influences of our world without stunting their freedom of choice? To help them develop character, we must be aware of how this process occurs and what our part in it should be.

One’s character develops through decision making. No amount of knowledge or information, no number of practices or rote repetitions will develop character until a person has the freedom to make his or her own decisions. Even in the perfection of Eden, Adam and Eve needed to make choices in order to develop their characters.

“God might have created them without the power to transgress His requirements, but in that case there could have been no development of character; their service would not have been voluntary, but forced. Therefore He gave them the power of choice—the power to yield or to withhold obedience” (*Education*, p. 23).

God allowed Adam and Eve to make choices, even though He knew they would make bad choices. He wanted rational, choosing beings, not robots.

Today we wish to see our students develop character, yet we sometimes refuse to allow them to make meaningful choices. Too often this is the case even when they reach academy. Teenagers need to feel some real control over their own lives. But sometimes we seem so afraid that they will make wrong choices that we refuse them any freedom to choose!

If students are to learn to make good decisions, they must be taught how to choose and then be given the opportu-

nity to make decisions for themselves. But we need to shield them from the overwhelming array of possibilities, some of which they lack the wisdom to deal with. We must provide them a “structure” within which they can make real decisions, free from the danger that wrong choices could cause more trouble

make such choices, they build character.

Our schools should be “corrals” where students can make “fenced” choices. As teachers, we should “ride herd” on their developing characters by supervising their decisions, correcting them to keep them inside the “fence,” while allowing them the freedom to choose.

Policies that Encourage Choice

An example of this might be a teacher’s book report policy: “For this quarter, one book report on an outside book of your choice is required. If you choose not to complete the book report, your grade will be lowered by an extra 10 percent. However, if you choose to do two book reports, that will raise your grade by 10 percent.”

A policy such as this allows the student to choose between acceptable options. Certainly we would prefer that students do a book report, or even the extra credit report, but if they do not, the results are acceptable. And, when they understand the policy clearly, they realize that they are in control of their own grade in the class. In addition to learning about books and book reporting, they are developing character.

Adventists claim that character building is one of the main purposes of our schools.

To be successful in this most important work, we must go into it purposefully, with understanding, and most importantly, with a prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We must constantly seek ways to incorporate the principles of character development into the everyday program of the school.

Modeling

One area where we can or should make a strong impact on the character development of our students is in modeling.

Modeling, or learning a behavior by observing someone else, is the primary method by which young children learn. First they model their parents and then significant others, especially teachers.

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than they can handle.

We can do this by forming a “fence” to enclose the acceptable options. Then students will have real choices to make. They will feel a measure of control over their own lives. And through learning to

The modeling of others helps children evaluate what is correct and acceptable in our society and in our church.

In the classroom, teachers are on display, whether they wish to be or not. They stand as the authority on the subject at hand. Students see them as living examples of what happens when the material of the course intersects with "real life." Teachers are the best illustration of the value of their courses.

In a Christian school, teachers are also seen as living examples of Christianity in action. Everything they do shows the students what happens when Christianity intersects with real life.

In this Christian setting, what teachers *do* speaks much louder than what they *say*. If teachers want their students to feel enthusiastic about classwork, they must exude enthusiasm themselves. Likewise, if they wish to instill a love for God in their students, they must exhibit an open love for God themselves. Modeling becomes an instrument for character development when the student sees the teacher as someone he or she wishes to be like. The teacher can positively affect students' characters by "modeling" a type of Christianity that awakens a desire for imitation.

Choices and Grades

The process of earning a grade offers an opportunity for demanding choices. While not every student can achieve the grade he or she would choose in every class, most students should be able to choose to pass any course, if they do the work assigned and study diligently.

If a teacher can describe the grading process in terms that allow a choice between failure, success, and excellence, the students will see their grade as something they control, something they can change at will. But this also means allowing students to suffer the consequences of choosing *not* to do the work. Their grades must suffer when they choose wrongly, or their character development will be restricted. We must even be willing to allow students to fail a course if they make those choices. When we intercede and allow extra time or extra-credit work to make up the difference, we cheat them of their lesson in character development. And they will have to learn that lesson another time, probably outside of our "fences" that could protect and help them.

Extracurricular Choices

Most academies schedule a number of programs planned by students. The student association, class organizations, clubs, and other groups are constantly putting together programs to enlighten, entertain, or raise money from other students or their parents. These programs always demand supervision and sponsorship by a teacher or staff member. This is an excellent setting for making choices and developing character.

Too often we, as adults, exercise too much control over student-planned pro-

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grams. We cut into student creativity by controlling the decisions. Often, we rob young people of the valuable lessons that can be learned when a program doesn't happen as it was planned. Sometimes, it seems, we are more concerned with not looking bad as sponsors than we are with the development of our students. They need supervision and help, certainly, but they also need the freedom to make choices and the freedom to fail. Isn't it much better that they err while we can teach them how to handle failure, how to recover from it, and how to avoid repeating their mistakes? Our "fences" can protect them from making a mistake too large for them to handle. They will learn more by making choices and planning a program that fails than from carrying out a successful program planned by the teacher.

Choices and Discipline

Student discipline provides another opportunity to allow character-forming choices. Our object in discipline should not be to control students, but to help students learn to control themselves. The word *discipline* comes from a root meaning "disciple" or "learner." Discipline, then, is actually training that leads

to self-control. It focuses on the future of the student, not his or her past.

This means that before taking any disciplinary action, we should have carefully defined our character development goals for that student. Then we can choose discipline that will move them toward that goal.

If we want our students to become good Christians, then we should keep ourselves pro-active rather than reactive. We should respond not to what they have done, but to what we want them to do in the future. We can teach students what kind of behavior is expected from a growing Christian, and then give them opportunities to choose to behave in this manner. If their behavior becomes a problem, then the clearly defined consequence occurs without further intervention by the teacher.

Students can help determine how they should be corrected. By "fencing" their options, we can allow them to choose a punishment that satisfies our concern that they not repeat the behavior while leaving them feeling in control of their lives and responsible for their behavior.

We must allow students the freedom to choose in as many situations as possible, even if we fear they may make wrong choices. They can often learn more by failing on their own than by succeeding because of our intervention.

"Riding herd" has never been easy. Cowboys worked long, hard days on the trail. In the same way, Christian educators need dedication and perseverance to work the long, hard hours in their classrooms. Character building makes for long days and difficult confrontations. Our charges often seem determined to slip through the "fences" and do as they wish. But we can be sure that we do not struggle alone. It may be our job to educate and train them, but it is the work of the Holy Spirit to develop their characters. And there is no reward like knowing that God worked through us to make a difference in the life of a young person. ☺

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