

Teachers' Strategies in Integrating Faith and Learning at Faith-Based Institutions of Higher Education in Asia

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Abstract

Even though the concept of integrating faith and learning in the classroom is not only well-known but highly encouraged in Adventist educational institutions, observation shows that there are teachers who struggle to implement this effectively in their classrooms. One possible reason for the difficulty is the lack of knowledge regarding the various strategies that can be used in this area. As such, this study was conducted to discover practical strategies that teachers used in integrating faith and learning. The findings of this study can be useful to those who may want to know what real-life strategies other teachers used in integrating faith and learning. Purposive sampling was used in this study to ensure that participants would inform the research question. The participants of this study were 14 teachers who taught at four faith-based institutions in Thailand, Myanmar, and Taiwan. The participants' average length of teaching experience is 11 years. The interview was the main method for generating the data, which were coded. The codes were analyzed through thematic analysis. This study found that participants employed various strategies in integrating faith and learning. The most common ones were illustrative, experiential, and contextual. Conceptual strategies were the least used.

Keywords: Faith, Integration, Learning, Faith-based institution of higher education,

INTRODUCTION

Teachers in Christian educational institutions are familiar with the concept of integration of faith and learning (IFL) because it is “inherent in the very concept of Christian education” (Bailey, 2012). Glanzer (2008) called it “the hallmark” of Christian education (p.41), while Holmes (1987) proposed that it is “the distinctive task” of Christian academic programs (p. 8).

While scholars debated the clarity of the concept of IFL (Badley, 2009), Fischer (1989) defined faith as “...what one's believes in his or her inmost being,” and learning as “...the learning skills, which may or may not require the full exercise of the mind,” and integration is about “...bringing together that which is apart” (pp. 22-23). This definition is consistent with the description provided by Taylor (2001). He proposed that IFL is “teaching all subjects from a Christian perspective (p.409) and explained it more fully as the fusing of faith and learning “to become the pervasive, driving force in Christian education” (Taylor, 2001, p. 410). This meeting of faith and learning is a “purposeful and intentional approach to the entire education from a biblical perspective” (Rasi, 2013).

Most Christian teachers are aware of the importance of integrating faith and learning. Unfortunately, this is one of those things that are easier said than done. Taylor (2001) recognized that “the problem for many Christian educators, however, is not so much a matter of knowledge, but of application” (p.409). How does a Christian integrate faith and learning in the classroom? This is the question this research study attempted to answer. The answer to the question will not only inform teachers of practical strategies that can be used to fuse faith and to learn in the classroom but also guide administrators in providing relevant IFL workshops to teachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Integration of faith and learning has been considered the distinguishing mark of Christian education, which has received great emphasis after the 1970s due to the secularization in American universities (Ringenberg, 2006). Sandin (1982) boldly claimed that a Christian institution that does not integrate faith in its teaching has no reason to continue existing.

At the core of the integration of faith and learning is the Christian educator. Kaul, Hardin, and Beaujean (2017) maintained that “the practice of integrating faith and learning ultimately depends on the attitudes and practices of individual faculty” (p.173). The teacher’s role is crucial because “individual faculty member’s faith background provides a conscious or subconscious...orientation of integration...” (Cosgrove, 2015). This is the very reason why Gaebelien (1962) boldly declared, “There is no Christian education without Christian teachers” (p.27). Knight (2006) concurred. He believed that when teachers understand the fundamental responsibility of Christian teachers and its implication for daily activities in a Christian setting, they can effectively reach out to the young people.

However, being Christian alone is not adequate for the teachers to integrate faith and learning. Knight (2006) argued that a Christian teacher must be armed with the right tools to execute Christian education. Wilhoit (1987) explained that Christian teachers must view faith as a set of fundamental beliefs, preferences, and presuppositions that guide their lives, including their teaching.

Taylor (2001) developed a model of instructional strategies for the implementation of IFL. This model consists of four broad categories which are contextual, illustrative, conceptual, and experiential. Each of the strategies is briefly explained below.

Contextual Strategies—the use of features within the context

- Tactical—strategic use of words and statements in names and official documents
 - name of the institution – e.g., Adventist International Mission School
 - academic bulletin – e.g., statement of the institution’s vision and mission
 - institutional policies – e.g., codes of conduct of employees, hiring policies
 - course descriptions – e.g., the inclusion of concepts such as character, ethics, morals, and biblical.
- Ornamental—messages of faith embedded in the surrounding features
 - Bible passages on bulletin boards or walls
 - Landscape items featuring moral values/biblical messages
 - Classroom decoration that conveys biblical messages
- Environmental—refers to the application of biblical principles in action

- Organizational structure
- Classroom management
- Interaction among employees
- Interaction between teachers and students
- Extra-curricular activities
- Disciplinary procedures

Robert and Patricia (2001) defined contextualized learning as a practice that links theoretical constructs taught during learning to a practical, real-world context. According to Mazzeo et al (2003):

A diverse family of instructional strategies designed to more seamlessly link the learning of foundational skills and academic or occupational content by focusing teaching and learning squarely on concrete applications in a specific context that is of interest to the student (pp. 3–4).

The underlying theme behind the use of contextual learning activities is simple. It recognizes that by embedding instructions in contexts that learners are familiar with, learners more readily understand and assimilate those instructions. Taylor (2001) suggested that teachers must carefully analyze the subliminal messages being transmitted through the instructional setting to ensure that they intentionally solidify rather than detract from spiritual growth.

Illustrative Strategies—the use of stories and presentations

- Analogy—a comparison between two things for clarification.
 - The Bible and light in the darkness
 - Plants and spiritual growth
- Narrative—the use of a story to illustrate a point.
 - The story of the Good Samaritan illustrates compassion to others in need
 - An account of Thomas Edison’s discovery of the incandescent light bulb in which he tested over 12,000 filaments before succeeding to illustrate perseverance
- Exemplary—real-life modeling of Christian character
 - The way the teacher deals with students who struggle in their studies
 - The teacher’s response to annoying situations

Conceptual Strategies—the linking of lessons to biblical concepts

- Textual—the incorporation of a relevant biblical text in learning activities
 - Honesty (Lev.19:35,36; Deut. 25:15)
 - Justice (Deut.27:19; Col 4:1)
- Thematic—examining themes in disciplines from the biblical perspectives
 - Conflict management
 - Decision making
- Valuative—examining values of issues from the biblical perspectives
 - Ethical issues
 - Competition

Experiential Strategies—seeking to create an experience that will give students the opportunity to know God

- Personal—the teacher demonstrates personal interest in student's well-being and seek the opportunity to converse regarding spiritual things when appropriate
- Inter-relational—the teacher helps the students to inter-relate with others in ways that will enhance the integration of faith and learning. Two strategies that have been found quite effective are cooperation and service.
- Declarative—the teacher helps students to see themselves as active witnesses for God.

METHODOLOGY

Data was collected via oral and written semi-structured interviews (email) from 14 participants who taught at four different faith-based higher-educational institutions in Asia, specifically Myanmar, Taiwan, and Thailand. The participants' average length of teaching experience was 11 years. They responded to open-ended questions through which they narrated their experiences with IFL in their teaching. All the data were subsequently transcribed. The data was analyzed thematically to identify the instructional strategies participants used in their teaching. The analysis was made based on the model of instructional strategies developed by Taylor (2001).

RESULTS

Four main strategies have been identified in this study based on Taylor's (2001) model of IFL instructional strategies: illustrative, experiential, contextual, and conceptual strategies. These instructional approaches have "...emerged from the consensus of Christian professional practice" (p.411)

Experiential Strategies

Experiential strategies refer to integrating faith and learning by seeking to create an experience that will give students the opportunity to know God. The participants reported the following experiential strategies in their teaching.

Table 1: Participants' experiential strategies

Participant	Strategies	Participant's Comments
Jane	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "Positive Impact" project ● group work ● students identify individuals/groups that they want to make a positive impact on ● after much planning, the students execute the actual positive impact project ● after the implementation of the project, students will share their project and experiences with the class 	I have been doing this type of project for different classes in the last two semesters, and I see how the students are positively affected by doing good to others.

Alex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● talk to students outside the classroom ● do things together with students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● inviting them for lunch/dinner ● doing community work together 	<p>I believe that the best integration of faith and learning can be achieved... doing things together inside and outside of the classroom. Also, the best teacher is your own experience.... These were part of my belief in how to ease the challenges that I have faced.</p>
George	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● take personal interests of all my students ● seek opportunities to make discussion of spirituality such as chats, interviews, or counseling sessions 	
Bob	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Group work strategy in IFL 	<p>... finding the sources by themselves... help them to remember for long term</p>
Mike	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Involve the class in doing an AY program at the church on Sabbath. ● Practice songs (group and solo) ● Prepare games and memory verses ● Arrange for testimony or word of encouragement 	<p>While working or practicing or participating together with them, I have better communication with them. Communication that is difficult to create while in a class as a teacher and students. This also creates trust and a safe relationship between students and me.</p>
Joseph	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Advise students to reflect when they face a problem. 	<p>When they face a problem, I will ask them to think. What should we do to conform to the teachings of the Bible? ...For example, if Cain controls his temper, can he avoid crime? What can we learn from Cain's story?</p>

As shown by the results, most of the experiential strategies involve personal strategy (the teacher demonstrates personal interest in students) and inter-relational strategy involving group projects or “doing things together.” Jane saw that her students were “positively affected by doing good to others.” Along with the same note, Mike observed that carrying out a group project provided him with communication opportunities that he could not have in class. He believed that this deeper level of communication nurtured trust and a sense of safety in the relationship with students. The third experiential strategy, declarative, is shown in Mike’s AY program, where students had the opportunity to share their testimonies.

Illustrative Strategies

Illustrative strategies refer to ways of integrating faith and learning through the use of stories in different forms. The participants reported the following illustrative strategies in their teaching:

Table 2: Participants' illustrative strategies

Participant	Strategies	Participant's Comments
Joseph	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • share personal experience of God's leading and blessing • share short moral stories 	...every student loves inspirational and moral stories. I would add the lesson in reference to the Biblical texts.
Rose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have each student share an experience or story with others • each student provides a supporting Bible verse 	Through this activity, many non-Christian/ non-Adventist students shared experiences, stories and that helped me to know the student better, and it also helped the student to know about God.
Lucy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • give illustrations of a personal story of struggles and determination • share stories regarding faith 	
Clarie	Tell a story relevant to the lesson	
Carl	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show faith not only in words but in life • Show forgiveness • Practice patience • Emphasize prayer 	...you should work as hard as you can and then pray with all your heart as much as you can and entrust the outcomes to God
Mary	Make a spiritual object lesson	...when an opportunity comes
Cynthia	Include a Bible story related to the topic	
Diana	Give a devotional message that is connected to the lesson of the day	

The most common method under the illustrative strategy is the narrative followed by exemplary. The narration can take place in two forms—sharing by the teacher and sharing by the students. Joseph observed that “every student loves inspirational and moral stories.” Along with the same note, Rose believed that the sharing of experience and relating the experience to the Bible verses “helped her students to know about God.”

Contextual Strategies

The contextual strategy refers to the use of features within the context of the institution or the class. No participant reported any contextual strategy. However, one participant did indicate that she was “inspired” to develop a “positive impact” project by her university’s new slogan, “Mission to Impact the World.” This illustrates the power of the contextual strategy in encouraging teachers to integrate faith in their teaching.

Since the contextual strategies deal with areas outside the classroom such as the name of the institution, formal statements in official documents, ornamental features, and organizational policies, it is not surprising that they are hardly used by teachers.

Conceptual Strategies

The conceptual strategies refer to the linking of lessons to biblical concepts. The participants reported the following conceptual strategies in their teaching:

Table 3: Participants’ conceptual strategies

Participant	Strategies	Participant’s Comments
David	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compare faith-based knowledge with the textbook 	Comparison creates discussions, debates, and additional information, especially in a science subject
Beth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use biblical examples to illustrate concepts 	Personally, when using the teacher-centered method due to time allotment limitation, I rather asked the students what to think instead of how to think.
John	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include Christian perspective in the discussion question 	

The most common method used in conceptual strategies is thematic strategy. Beth used biblical examples to illustrate concepts while David and John engaged the students in activities that required them to see the lessons from the Christian perspectives.

The summary of the results is shown in Figure 1, which shows the number of instructional strategies used by participants.

Figure 1: Summary results of the study

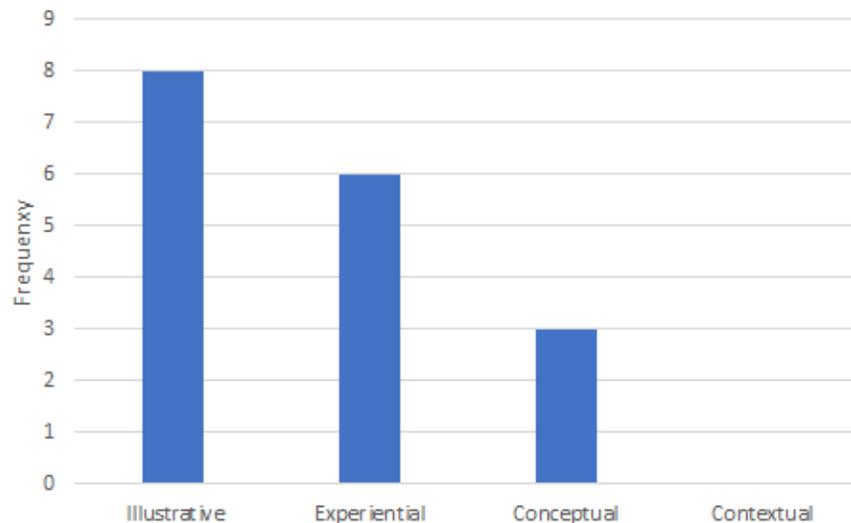


Figure 1 shows that illustrative strategies were used the most by the participants, followed by experiential strategies and then by conceptual approach. There was no reported application of contextual strategies.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the results of this study are consistent with the findings of other studies (McCulley, 2008; Ramirez, Sawyers, Wood, & Benjamin, 2020). The instructional strategies employed by the participants mirrored many of the approaches recommended by Taylor (2001), as shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Participants' IFL instructional strategies

Illustrative	Experiential	Conceptual	Contextual
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Testimonies by students and teacher ● Sharing or moral stories ● Modeling through life ● Bible stories ● Drawing spiritual object lessons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Group project with guided objectives ● Involving students in activities as a way of demonstrating concern and care ● Taking a personal interest in students ● Encourage students to consider biblical perspective in dealing with problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Inclusion of Christian perspectives in discussion ● Use of biblical examples to illustrate concepts ● Comparison of faith-based knowledge with textbook 	None

In the use of illustrative strategies, the most common methods were the narrative method. In this method, stories in different forms—testimonies (students and teachers), Bible narratives, moral and inspirational accounts—were shared. This is probably because the use of stories for

instruction is very common in many cultures. It is a method that can be used with audiences of different cultural backgrounds and ages. Within the illustrative strategies, the exemplary method was also used, which parallels the finding in other research studies reported the least. This could be indicative of teachers' lack of awareness of the impact of their actions, which has been accepted as a way of integrating faith into teaching and learning (Glanzer & Talbert, 2005).

In the use of experiential strategies, the method most used by the participants in integrating faith and learning was the inter-relational method that took the form of group work and involvement of students in activities where teachers had the opportunity to interact with students, and students with students, outside the classroom. The other method used within the experiential strategies was the personal method, where the educator demonstrated personal interest in students' well-being and sought an opportunity to dialog regarding spiritual matters when appropriate.

In the use of conceptual strategies, the most common method used was thematic—examining themes or topics of lessons from the biblical perspectives—is supported by the literature (Reeder & Pacino, 2013). This was one of the strategies least used by the participants, however. This lack of use could be attributed to the fact that conceptual strategies require expertise in both the subject/courses and the Bible. Some teachers may not have an in-depth understanding of both areas to see the connection between them. Taylor (2001) insisted that this is a prerequisite to effective IFL. He stated:

Before one can develop and effectively deploy integrational strategies, two fundamental conditions must be met. First, one must be conscious of theological and philosophical presuppositions. That implies some in-depth thinking concerning personal beliefs, particularly as they relate to one's discipline and academic function. In effect, a teacher cannot share with students what he or she has not thought through. (Taylor, 2001, 410-411)

There was no usage of contextual strategies probably because most contextual areas are not within the teachers' control, for example, the name of the institution, official documents, and organizational or academic policies. Much higher education teachers are also not involved in ornamental projects of the school, such as bulletin boards or classroom decoration. The third method—environmental—which refers to the application of biblical principles in action or hidden curriculum, may not be familiar to the teachers because they are not usually involved in policy formulation and development of systems and mechanisms for operation. In higher education, classroom management is often not a concern. Disciplinary issues are normally delegated to a committee rather than the individual teachers. However, this does not mean that contextual strategies cannot be applied by university teachers. They could include concepts reflective of faith and biblical concepts in their course outlines, for instance.

The findings of this study show that teachers have a different level of familiarity with each of the instructional strategies. It is not surprising that illustration is the most popular strategy of IFL. Story-telling is widely embraced by various cultures, and it is fairly easy to implement. Experiential strategy comes in second. Experiential strategies may require time and energy to implement because of the nature of group work. Conceptual shows a much smaller number because of the inherent prerequisite for an in-depth understanding of both the discipline and biblical beliefs.

The effective and ongoing integration of faith and learning requires teachers to recognize that there is ample opportunity to integrate faith in all they do. Lawrence, Burton, and Nwosu (2005) maintained:

For educators who are serious about helping students gain knowledge anchored in a firm Christian faith, it is in the day-to-day interaction with students, with their growth in foundational beliefs and the continued grappling of issues of the discipline, that faith and learning experiences intersect.

CONCLUSION

This research study has a number of limitations. Foremost is the limited data in answering the research question. Involving more participants would generate more data which may lead to the discovery of more methods and strategies in integrating faith and learning. The study also lacks generalization of its findings due to the small number of participants. Future research in this area can consider involving more participants so that the findings can be generalizable to other similar contexts. Despite this weakness, the results are able to suggest the following:

1. Christian higher education teachers' can benefit from deepening their familiarity and understanding of the Bible to allow increased use of conceptual strategies in class.
2. Administrators can conduct workshops and seminars to help strengthen teachers' understanding of the Bible in ways that they can be assisted to see the relevance of the Bible to their courses.
3. Workshops on the instructional strategies, especially conceptual strategies and certain areas of contextual strategies, can potentially be useful for teachers in helping them to raise awareness of the strategies that are relevant to their sphere of influence.
4. Administrators can seek to nurture and strengthen teachers' commitment towards IFL.

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