

# The Classroom Teacher in the New Millennium



Karl-Heinz Schroeder, history professor at Union College (UC), says, "I feel that teaching is the most important activity besides parenting that one can be engaged in. I see individuals first and foremost. We don't have mass education; we have individual inspiration."

**In many classrooms, technology has become the primary tool for conveying knowledge, thereby minimizing or transforming the role of the teacher.**

She stood there in her academic garb, ready to march in the commencement procession. Her classes and tests were over, the bills were paid, and her friends had left or were marching with her.

In a final reflective moment, she turned to me and said, "I want to thank you . . . for knowing who I am." Her words startled me. She added that I was only one of two or three teachers who had known her name while she was a student at the Adventist college where I taught. She let me know

how important that was—even more important than the things she had learned in my class, for which she was also appreciative. With a smile, she turned away and commenced her journey.

I reflect often on that incident when I think about the future of Adventist higher education. A new millennium has come and with it sweeping changes. In many classrooms, technology has become the primary tool for conveying knowledge, thereby minimizing or transforming the role of the teacher. Larger classes, tighter schedules, greater specialization, more convenient delivery, and other trends reflect the increasing depersonalization of the college classroom.

**By David Smith**

## What Is Education?

These trends and the changes driving them force us to re-examine the question: What is education? If education is only the conveying and acquisition of knowledge, the role of the classroom teacher in the new millennium will likely diminish. But if education is something more than that, then Seventh-day Adventist teachers need to prayerfully rethink their classroom roles.

Today, Adventist higher education focuses on educating the whole person, striving for balance. Learning in this setting is highly experiential and relational. Character development and spiritual formation complement the formal learning process.



**Jim McClelland, fine arts professor at Union College, says: “I work with students the way God works with me—with love and kindness, with mercy and compassion, with generosity and patience. And with justice, too. I am grateful God never gives up on me, so I will never give up on a student.”**



**Engel Hall houses Union College’s Division of Fine Arts.**



**Everett Dick Building (UC’s Administration Building).**



**This 1976 bench was constructed of bricks from the smokestack of the old power house at Union College and includes the cornerstone of the 1890 College Building.**

It is difficult to provide direction for teachers who, like their students, face unpredictable changes, but one thing seems paramount. As we face a future perhaps less affirming of individual identity, teachers need to do all they can to help their students feel that they know them well—even as God knows them fully. Regardless of changing classroom roles, the relational element must remain part of the student’s experience in our classrooms if the mission of Seventh-day Adventist education is to be accomplished.

God strives throughout Scripture to convince us that He

knows us. David’s insight in Psalm 139:1: “O Lord, you have searched me and you know me” (NIV) echoes the deep desire of our students to be known and understood. An experience I had a few years ago reminded me of this need.

I was eating breakfast at a hotel when a young man spotted me and yelled, “There you are; I’ve been looking for you for years. I’m so grateful for what you did for me.” He explained that many years before, when he was taking a class from me, I had called him into my office and asked about his career plans. I then counseled him to consider a career in my field because of his success in my class. We ended the brief encounter with prayer. I quickly forgot the incident. But he remembered our exchange and eventually followed, with considerable success, the career path I had recommended. Despite the many hours I spent teaching this young man skills and concepts, it was a few moments of personal attention and recognition that made the greatest difference in his life.

My own experience upon receiving my Master’s degree from an Adventist university illustrates the same point. The commencement speaker had taught one of my undergraduate classes some years before. While challenging us to master the material, he also did his best to learn who we were. He had invited us to his office and his home. By the end of the course, we knew the material. Equally important, we knew that he knew us.

The evening before my Master’s degree graduation, we met at a reception. I was encouraged to note that after all those years, he still recognized me. We spent the better part of the evening renewing acquaintances. The next day, when I received my diploma, he came down to where I stood and offered congratulations. I doubt that anyone else understood how much that simple act meant to me. His action affirmed and validated me—and inspired me to pay more attention to the students in my own classroom.

No matter what happens, short of eliminating the teacher from the learning process, students will need teachers to know them, to remember them, to guide them, and to affirm them. And teachers, pressed to accomplish so many other important



Archway on Union College campus.

goals, must remember that the encouragement they offer may be the greatest influence in their students' college experience.

Sometimes, when I forget the truth of this, my students remind me. Recently, I was attending a meeting when a man ran up to me and asked, "Do you remember me?" With a little prompting, I did recall that he had been a student in one of my first classes. I had not seen him for 30 years, yet he expected and needed me to remember him.

### Validating Identity and Significance

Why? I am not certain. Somehow this knowing and remembering validates people's identity and affirms their personal significance. While class content is important, students may find the learning process even more formative. In the Christian classroom, they not only learn about themselves, they also learn about others, and most importantly, they learn about God. Jesus' prayer in John 17:3 seems particularly instructive: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (NIV). Salvation depends upon relational knowledge. If we are to accomplish our mission of leading our students to Jesus while teaching them academics, we must nurture and reinforce this higher knowledge.

Teachers in the Adventist colleges and universities are committed to mentoring, guiding, counseling, and nurturing their classroom charges. But their ability to accomplish the mission of Adventist education, to mold and prepare young people for a future on Earth and for eternal life, will be compromised if they surrender their role as "knowers."

Knowing students helps create the relational chemistry that produces true higher education. It is what our students most want and need. ✍



**David Smith** is *President of Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska.*



UC students and staff get better acquainted at the campus deli.



UC President David Smith shares time with students at his home.