

Getting a teaching job in the United States while working as a teacher in China was no easy task. My wife and I had been teaching English there for a year and a half when I became aware of an opening in the Oregon Conference. After spending a month's salary on phone calls (equivalent to \$125.00 U.S.), I had an interview with the administrators of Livingstone Junior Academy in Salem, Oregon (the school has since become a senior academy). One of the topics they discussed was my familiarity with the ideas of William

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CHOICE THEORY IN THE CLASSROOM

Glasser and his approach to learning. It became apparent to me that if I was to work at Livingstone, I would need to read William Glasser's *The Quality School*¹ to see why others saw value in his ideas. That was my introduction to the philosophy of Choice Theory.

Choice Theory

As I studied the concepts of Choice Theory, they really made a lot of sense to me. Not only did they clarify reasons for human behavior, but they also seemed to explain from a biblical perspective how and why we behave as we do. In Choice Theory, we behave based on what we want, compared to what we see and know. This necessitates the power of choice. Linked to every choice is a natural consequence, which produces accountability.

The Book of Genesis gives us a glimpse of God's style of government for humankind, which emphasizes the power of choice. God provided the option for humans to choose to listen to Him or not. When Adam and Eve decided to disobey, they had to face the natural consequences of that choice. What a tough situation for God, who loved

them and wanted only the best for them. But instead of immediately rescuing the pair, God allowed the natural consequences to occur. However, in His infinite love, He provided redemption through His Son, Jesus, if they chose to accept it.

What Makes It Effective

More than any other idea or educational strategy, Choice Theory has changed not just how I teach, but also how I conduct my personal life. However, before discussing how I use Choice Theory in my classroom, let's take a look at what makes it so effective. In Glasser's book, *Choice Theory: A New Psychology for Personal Freedom*,² he compares the progress in science and technology with the advancements in human relationships. He explains that while science and technology have consistently improved, the same cannot be said of human relationships. In fact, the quality of these relationships may have worsened. Glasser believes this deterioration is due to our dependence on what he calls *external control psychology*, in which people try to control others by using one or more of the *seven deadly habits*: criticizing,

BY CHRIS SEQUEIRA

Seven Deadly Habits

- Criticizing
- Blaming
- Complaining
- Nagging
- Threatening
- Punishing
- Bribing or rewarding to control

Seven Caring Habits

- Supporting
- Listening
- Accepting
- Respecting
- Encouraging
- Trusting
- Negotiating differences

blaming, complaining, nagging, threatening, punishing, and bribing or rewarding to control. For relationships to be successful, especially over the long term, these habits need to be replaced by the seven *caring habits*—supporting, listening, accepting, respecting, trusting, and negotiating differences.

Learning to Trust

Many people, often for valid reasons, have learned not to

trust others. Because they believe they cannot count on anyone, even people close to them, they try to satisfy their needs through drugs and alcohol, acts of violence, or promiscuous behavior. It's understandable from a Choice Theory perspective why they behave this way. If we want the students who are disconnected from us and focused on self-medicating and pleasure seeking to re-connect to the important people in their lives, we need to help them learn to trust again. To do this, we must concentrate on building relationships based on respect and dignity. This will encourage them to work for long-term happiness in their lives, rather than opting for short-term gratification.

Now let's move to the fundamentals of how Choice Theory works in the classroom. As Glasser states, a non-coercive structure is vital to an effective school. Two ingredients that contribute to this structure are *intentional friendships* and *relevant curriculum*.

Intentional Friendships

Choice Theory helps teachers to foster friendships and



Photos in this article were taken in the author's classroom. Shown above, several of Sequeira's students compile a list of ways they can have **POWER**.

Basic Needs

- Survival
- Love/Belonging
- Freedom
- Fun
- Power
- *Worship*

build a sense of community in the classroom. At its core is the idea that almost all behavior is chosen, and that we are driven by our genes to satisfy five basic needs: survival, love and belonging, freedom, fun, and power. The most important need is

Choice Theory helps teachers to foster friendships and build a sense of community in the classroom.

(2) power with, and (3) power within. On a chart, my students and I write down each kind of power, and then brain-



Chris Stevenson reads about JOY in Matthew 22:36-40.

love and belonging, since positive relationships are necessary for satisfying all the other needs. (In my classroom, I have added a sixth need, *worship*. As a Christian working in a Seventh-day Adventist school, I believe that God designed us to seek Him.)

Three Avenues of Power

Though “love and belonging” is of vital importance, in my classroom we spend a lot of time trying to understand what I feel is the most character-shaping need—the need for power. One can have three kinds of power: (1) power over,

storm a list of descriptive words for each. From that list, we work on definitions. For instance, *power over* is how we behave when we consider only our own needs. (This would involve the application of the seven deadly habits and external control psychology.) *Power with*, on the other hand, means considering others’ needs as well as our own. *Power within* is putting others’ needs before our own.

The last two types of power—power with and power within—use Choice Theory and the seven caring habits. My students have concluded that the best way to use power within is to use the J-O-Y principle of Matthew 22:36–40.

That is, people can only experience true JOY in life when they put Jesus first, the needs of others second, and their own needs last.

JOY Principle

1. Jesus first
2. Others second
3. Yourself last

This leads us to an important question: “Does this classroom (and life in general) operate best by using rules or principles?” Whereas rules require an “enforcer,” principles reveal inner character. Ultimately, we conclude that we need to discover why we choose to do things—that it’s important to have a reason for our actions and behavior. We can evaluate them using the WDEP tool. We ask ourselves four questions:

Want – “What did I want?”

Do – “What did I do to get what I want?”

Evaluate – “Did my behavior get me what I wanted?”

Plan – “How could I have acted differently to get a better result?”

The principles that are posted to guide our classroom combine the Agreements from Jeanne Gibbs’ *Tribes: A New Way of Learning and Being Together*,³ which emphasize mutual respect, attentive listening, appreciations/no put-downs, and the right to pass; and the Lifelong Guidelines from Susan

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Kovalik’s *Integrated Thematic Instruction*,⁴ which promote active listening, appreciations/no put-downs, personal best, trustworthiness, and truthfulness. These principles provide the daily structure necessary for a well-run classroom.

Control vs. Influence

To illustrate why principles are more valuable than rules, we create a *Control vs. Influence T-Chart*. Under the *Control* column, we brainstorm, using red marker, looking for words that describe how we attempt to control others. In the *Influence* column, we write words in green that describe how we try to influence others. The goal is to pull *from*, not push *to*. Ultimately we ask, “Is what I’m doing moving us closer to-



Blake Houser lists words he associates with CONTROL.

gether or farther apart?” We find ourselves replacing the red (“enforcer”) Control words to green (“principle”) Influence words.

Since it is my job as a teacher to influence rather than control students, I must keep asking them to challenge themselves, learn more, and move forward in life. Conversely, it is not the students’ job to try to control anyone in their lives, either. They can influence by listening, telling their story or opinion, and sharing what they know.

Time and Place

This leads to the principle of “Time and Place.” As King Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 3, there is a time and place for everything. So as we conduct the self-evaluation process, we think about, “Where am I?”; “What type of behavior is acceptable?”; and “How do I want to represent myself?” Rather than lecturing students about inappropriate behavior, I simply redirect them by asking, “Time and place?”

Understanding and using Choice Theory has led to a



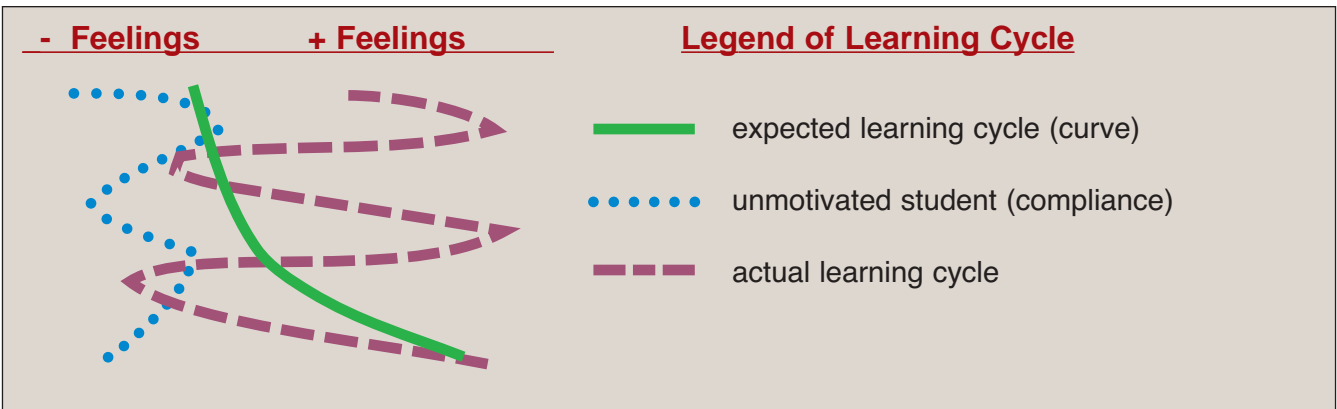
Ali Patterson and Megan Ahlquist create a list of words that compare CONTROL with INFLUENCE.

shift in my thinking, as well as in my students' thinking. They have begun to view life from outside the box. Choice Theory provides them with tools to use in considering other people's perspectives, as well as to make personal improvements. An activity that promotes this kind of thinking is called a "plus delta" (+ D). When students leave my classroom at the end of the day, they share either a + D, a positive change they have made, or a "keeper" for the day, an academic nugget worth coming to school to learn.



The author facilitates a discussion of the JOY principle.

Task in thinking outside the box:
Without lifting your pencil, connect these nine dots with only four straight lines.
(Answer on page 41.)



Relevant Curriculum

In order for us as teachers to provide academic “keepers,” we need to make the curriculum relevant so that students view the assignments as useful and applicable to their lives. To help my students understand what learning should be like, I schedule a sharing activity. I start out by describing a skill I have acquired, such as snowboarding. I then ask students to pair/share on “What is needed for learning?” When they report back, we discover that desire and usefulness are high on the list. Then students pair/share a recent learning experience.

After they have shared their stories, we list the activities on the board. Next, I ask for one-word descriptors of “Learning: What is it really like?” We chart the words in two columns; negative feelings and positive feelings (see chart on page 40). We discover that learning goes in cycles. As we learn, we tend to move from desire to frustration to excitement, etc. This cycle continues back and forth as we plateau and then move forward in our skills. I wrap up by asking, “What would be different if we all used this type of learning instead of conventional schooling?” We conclude that this struggle, or grappling as Sizer and Sizer⁵ like to call it, is part of the learning process.

When learners cannot see any gains, or in other words, spend too much time on the left side of the chart, they lose the desire to learn. If there is no grappling, they spend too much time on the right side of the chart, and learning be-



Jon Yarlott thinks he has the answer to thinking outside the box.

To illustrate why principles are more valuable than rules, we create a Control vs. Influence T-Chart.

ask them to analyze, evaluate, create, suppose, apply, implement, put into practice, and show use.

We Practice . . .

As I use Choice Theory in the classroom, I also encourage my students to apply its principles at school and throughout their lives. Together, we seek to influence and not control. We try to base our decisions in class, as in our spiritual lives, on principles, not rules. When we have a conflict, we work it out without hurting others. Thinking outside the box and working on continuous improvement are two of our goals. We seek to be lifelong learners.

As an Adventist teacher, my purpose is not only to grow responsible citizens, it is also to help my students be successful and happy now and throughout eternity. Choice Theory provides me with a biblical model to achieve these goals. ✍



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3. Jeanne Gibbs, *Tribes: A New Way of Learning and Being Together* (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Center Source Systems, 1995).
4. Susan Kovalik and Karen Olsen, *ITI: The Model—Integrated Thematic Instruction* (Kent, Wash.: Books for Educators, 1993).
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Answer:

