

## “THE SAME OLD THING IS DUMB”

by Lorella Rouster

### Topic: Planning for variety of methods in teaching

“I don’t want to go to Sunday school anymore!” Tommy grumbled as he threw his take-home papers on the kitchen table. “We always do the same old thing, Mom. It’s dumb.

When Tommy’s teacher came to visit, his mother confided, “Tommy says he doesn’t want to go to Sunday school anymore. Do you have any idea why? Has there been any trouble?”

“I’ve noticed that several of my students seem a bit restless lately,” the teacher replied. “I wish I could think of something different for them to do.”

Most teachers have asked at one time or another, “How can I get out of the rut?” All of us should ask it. How can we give our students the variety they savor?

I found I had to learn new teaching techniques, the only teaching method I knew was lecture. I have learned new techniques by reading books about teaching, subscribing to teacher’s magazines, watching other teachers at work. I get ideas from children’s programs on TV and radio. Occasionally I visit another congregation to observe a teacher who teaches the same age-group as I. I have also observed in public and private schools. What techniques were used I ask myself. Were they effective? Why or why not? How could I adapt these techniques to a Sunday school situation? Sunday school conventions and conferences also offer opportunities for instruction in teaching techniques. Many of my best ideas come from such sessions.

Since my memory is short, I keep a notebook of teaching techniques. When I read of one or see it in operation, I write it down! Later, when I am racking my brain for a new idea, I turn to the notebook.

### Acting

Highly versatile, acting can be used with any size group, with any age. It can be used to teach the entire lesson, one point of the lesson, or as a review. It can be done with no props and costumes, or with an elaborate setting. It can utilize speaking, reading, or pantomime.

Acting gets people involved. People remember best what they see, hear *and DO*. Action helps release the wiggles and relax the tired sitting muscles.

One person can act. A small group can act. Or they may pantomime the parts while I tell the story. Some students are freer than others in acting, but a little experience soon teaches me which ones to call on and how.

Group acting is excellent. One day the lesson was on the story of the Israelites crossing the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land. Before class I laid out the equipment we would use: 12 fairly large stones covered by two blue bed sheets folded lengthwise in half. When we came to the part of the lesson in which the Israelites stood before the Jordan, I asked a group of students to pretend that a cloth-covered box was the ark of the covenant. Carrying it on their shoulders on broomsticks, they stepped into the “water” (the blue sheet). Instantly, as their feet were about to touch it, my helper and I whisked the sheets up to form two walls of “water.” The remainder of the class, the Israelites, walked through the open Jordan to the Promised Land on the other side. With the “priests” still holding the ark in the middle of the Jordan, I named representatives of each of the twelve tribes and asked them to take a stone for the memorial on the other side of the Jordan. As they piled the stones up, I read brief portions of scripture telling about the erection of the altar.

Group acting works especially well with young children. Each child can “sweep God’s House” to help Josiah’s men clean it. Each can make a big round sun with his arms as the teacher talks about the creation, or walk with the Bible children into Jerusalem shouting “Hosanna!” and waving his arms. Young children’s attention is so much better when they are doing then when they are merely sitting and listening!

Our primaries used another version of acting one year. Costumes and props were made for a Bible story, and each child was photographed on slide film in one of the scenes of the story. At the Christmas program, the slides were projected in sequence, and the parents were delighted as they saw their children acting out the Bible story as the teacher narrated.

Because acting is an exceptionally effective and versatile teaching tool, I have tried it in many forms and used it often .

### **Buzz groups**

This useful teaching tool is best for older pupils with a good foundation in reading. I occasionally use buzz groups when I want to convey a lot of similar or repetitive information. For instance, when my class studied Judges, I filled in the background information between outstanding events by having each of several buzz groups look up information about one judge. At the end of five minutes, I called for reports from each group. We covered a lot of information in that 10 minutes, and the pupils told me the facts rather than my telling them. I like buzz groups because they directly involve students in the Bible study. The teacher and helpers serve as guides to answer questions, help locate verses, and keep each student involved.

### **Reports and Projects**

Reports and projects are far more than busywork! While studying the wilderness wanderings, we colored and cut out a model of the tabernacle in the wilderness. The students enjoyed the craft work, and it gave them a look at the tabernacle that they will long remember. If you feel that your class time is too short for such a project, do the project at a party!

Some students like to work on reports. I make an assignment to one student, or to two students who live close together. I tell them what information I want them to find, and where to look for it. For instance, if I know a student has a Bible dictionary in his Bible or home, I may ask him to look up information on a topic relevant to the next week's lesson.

At other times I assign a short passage of scripture to be read by everyone during the week and ask each student to look for the answer to one particular question.

### **Circular Response**

A simple teaching method that gets all the students involved and calls for no outside preparation by them is circular response. It is effective except in very large classes where the number of students makes even a short response from each prohibitive. My minister has used this method effectively in our staff meetings. Once he wanted to emphasize the importance of calling on our absentees. He began by pointing to each of us in turn, naming several of our students and saying, "Mary wasn't in class Sunday. Where was she?" Everyone got the point.

Another time when he was talking about teaching techniques, he had each of us name one technique we had used. We were involved; we were thinking; we were listening; we were realizing how small a variety of techniques we had been employing.

Circular response does not take much time. Everybody sits in a circle, and each gives a response to a question. "What pops into your mind when you think of love?" "What are some specific sins mentioned in the Bible?" or any simple question related to the lesson.

### **Puppets**

Children love puppets and respond to them as to nothing else. Puppets may emphasize the main truth of the lesson or apply it to areas of the children's lives. Last year at vacation Bible school a puppet cried because he had heard someone use God's name in a bad way. Recently I used puppets to point out some areas of racial prejudice I had noticed among the children. Sometimes my puppet whispers to me, and I tell the class, "Friskie says someone in the second row isn't saying her verse." Puppets may be easily and inexpensively made from old socks and scraps. They provide variety and make Sunday school fun.

### **Mock Television**

Mock television is fun. I made a TV by cutting a hole (for the screen) in the front of an old box and decorating it to look like a television set. The children step inside the box to quote memory verses or to answer review questions. They love being "on television," and their classmates love to watch them. This same box may be used as a puppet stage.

Most teachers know more teaching techniques than they use. They intend to make class sessions varied and interesting; but they keep falling back on one or two favorite

methods, usually lecture or storytelling, with a question here and there. I have found that unless I deliberately plan to use different methods, I slip into a rut.

I plan for varied methods by preparing a chart for each series or unit of lessons. I list the lesson title, scripture text, lesson aim, and memory verse. Then I list several teaching techniques I can use with that lesson. Looking at such a list forces me to think up new methods and gives me the opportunity to decide which techniques will work best with which lessons. I can juggle and rearrange the chart until I have an effective method listed for each teaching session yet provide variety in the overall plan. Since I have these plans several weeks or even months in advance, I can prepare ahead, gathering necessary materials, and practicing untried methods.

How can a Sunday school teacher get out of the rut? I got out of mine by learning new teaching techniques through reading, observing, and attending conferences; by keeping a notebook to help me remember the new techniques; and making a chart listing the methods I would use for particular lessons. Since I've tried these things, I've found that teaching can be fun. I never want to go back to my old rut again. The same old thing, as Tommy said, is just dumb!