

# Scientology makes it in classroom door

By ROBERT FARLEY

Published May 20, 2007

---

BATON ROUGE, La. - Inside

the industrial looking brick walls of one of Louisiana's poorest performing middle schools, Scientologists finally have achieved a longtime goal.

A study skills curriculum written by Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard is being taught as mainstream public education.

All the eighth-graders at Prescott Middle School are being taught learning techniques Hubbard devised four decades ago when he set out to remedy what he viewed as barriers to learning.

The curriculum and textbooks used by Prescott's 156 eighth-graders are similar to methods and books used among Scientologists worldwide. And teaching the children is a Scientologist hired by the school district.

Scientologists helped usher Hubbard's program into the school during the chaotic months after Hurricane Katrina. Celebrity Scientologists John Travolta and Isaac Hayes played key roles, as did a former Clearwater resident known for her persuasive voice.

The people who run the program say Hubbard's teaching technique is divorced from Scientology, that it is just a masterful way to learn. They note that it has won the support of many non-Scientologists, including a number of academics.

Other experts, though, question the quality of the program. And some church skeptics fret that it is an insidious plan ultimately aimed at promoting Scientology.

Prescott's principal had those same concerns. But after closely monitoring the program for more than a year, she is confident Hubbard's program is not teaching Scientology.

All she knows is that the school's long-dreadful scores have turned around.

\* \* \*

"Can you show me what 'squashed' looks like?" veteran educator Carol Woodruff asks a student.

The girl makes a sour face.

"Good, " Woodruff says. "Can you draw it?"

The girl draws a stick figure with a frown.

Woodruff nods. That's how you sometimes feel if you are learning something and you don't have "mass, " she explains.

Hubbard believed a key to learning is having the thing itself, its "mass, " in front of you.

A "lack of mass, " Hubbard taught, can cause physical reactions in a student, such as eye irritation or dizziness, or cause feelings like being squashed, bent, lifeless, bored or angry.

That's why students at Prescott often fashion objects out of clay and use small stones and common objects such as paperclips and rubber bands to represent what they are studying.

Hubbard identified two other barriers to learning.

The second barrier is trying to learn on "too steep a gradient." One must learn the fundamentals of ideas before moving on to more complex levels.

The third barrier is misunderstood words. When students don't understand a passage, it's because it included a word they didn't understand. Hubbard's curriculum teaches students to find the word and grab a dictionary.

Students who yawn or doodle are told to "find your misunderstood."

These concepts are hardly revolutionary. Teachers have long known the value of hands-on learning, the need to build new concepts on the foundation of prior knowledge, and that it is important to understand the meanings of words. Where study tech is different, proponents say, is that Hubbard identified specific and absolute physiological responses to his three barriers to learning. For example, if you yawn, it is always because you misunderstood a word in the last passage you read.

The Baton Rouge School District hired Woodruff, a Scientologist, to teach five 90-minute classes each day. Helping her are another full-time teacher and a half dozen unpaid teacher aides, mostly teenagers from a private school in Oregon that uses study tech. They volunteer for three weeks at a time, fulfilling a community service requirement at their school.

Their presence also assures that Hubbard's program has the advantage of student to teacher ratios of no more than 5 to 1. The program is self-directed, and students are broken into small clusters of desk. Kids work at their own pace and an instructor is available at each cluster to give one-on-one attention.

A science fiction writer, Hubbard created Scientology in the early 1950s. He taught that a person is a spiritual being called a Thetan, whose mind has a "reactive" or subconscious side that stores mental images and is not under a person's control. Through spiritual counseling called "auditing, " he taught, a person can solve personal problems by locating these images and addressing them.

According to Scientology literature, Hubbard began researching the barriers to learning when he noticed some Scientologists struggling with their courses.

Hubbard released his "study technology" in 1964, touting it as a way not only to help Scientologists, but also to solve the world's struggles with education.

In 1972, Scientologists founded the nonprofit Applied Scholastics to advance Hubbard's "study technology" outside Scientology. Nothing in its literature notes any ties to Scientology. Nor should it, they say; his study curriculum is secular and, therefore, appropriate for public schools.

It's used in hundreds of after-school tutoring programs, but perceived ties to Scientology have slowed its expansion into the core curricula of public education. School districts in San Antonio, the St. Louis area and Nevada backed off the program after parents or educators voiced concerns.

In 2001, Applied Scholastics bought and renovated a former retirement home of the sisters of Notre Dame outside St. Louis. The building, on nearly 100 acres, became Applied Scholastics' headquarters.

Watching from afar was Clearwater's most prominent Scientology parishioner, Bennetta Slaughter. Time and again, the savvy coalition builder and respected community volunteer persuaded members of Clearwater's civic establishment to be accepting of volunteering Scientologists.

To Slaughter, Applied Scholastics' purchase of the St. Louis property signaled a commitment to serious expansion. She became chief executive in 2001 and in the years since, Applied Scholastics recorded dramatic growth.

\* \* \*

Prescott Middle is in a predominantly black neighborhood of small, aging homes with chain link fences and convenience stores with bars across the windows.

More than a quarter of its students have been held back at least two years. Another quarter are special education students.

Prescott was the first Louisiana school to be "reconstituted" two years ago as a result of enduring academic failures. Elida Bera was hired from Texas to take over the school and essentially start over.

"The school was horrible, " she says. She kept just 10 of the school's 75 employees.

And that was before Katrina.

Hurricane evacuees made their way to every corner of southern Louisiana. Prescott's classes swelled.

After Thanksgiving of 2005, Bera got a call from the office of Baton Rouge Mayor-President Kip Holden. He had a program he thought the school should consider. He had been visited before and after Katrina by Slaughter - the chief executive of Applied Scholastics.

Holden also had met Travolta and his wife, Kelly Preston, when the two actors came to Baton Rouge after Katrina. Musician Isaac Hayes, a longtime proponent of Hubbard study tech, also put a word in Holden's ear.

At Holden's suggestion, Bera met with two representatives from Applied Scholastics. She had done her homework on the Internet. Her first question: What does this have to do with Scientology?

"I'm so glad you asked, " Bera says she was told. "We want to put that on the table." They said the program has nothing to do with Scientology other than sharing a common architect.

Bera was sold. The Baton Rouge school district agreed to pay \$20, 000 a year to Applied Scholastics for a licensing fee and to hire a teacher from the nonprofit to help teach the course. Costs were offset by seed money that Travolta contributed and by donations from local businesses. Parents were enlisted to volunteer as tutors.

Bera rolled out Hubbard's classes as a pilot program for a small sample of students in grades six, seven and eight. She was impressed when Applied Scholastics reps asked her to put the most challenging students in the pilot classes.

Positive results came fast, astonishing Bera and district leaders. Absenteeism dropped. Students became more involved in their studies. But the real affirmation was in the LEAP test scores, Louisiana's version of Florida's FCAT. Every one of the 20 eighth-graders in the pilot passed in the spring of 2006. Among the Prescott students not in the pilot, 77 percent passed.

Bera decided to teach the program to all of Prescott's eighth-graders during the 2006-07 school year.

Last week, the LEAP scores came in. In English and language arts, the students performed just slightly better, with 78 percent performing at a level of "approaching basic" understanding or higher. That's an increase of one percentage point. But math scores increased from 52 percent competency last year to 59 percent this year.

Bera said last week she was "very happy" with the scores, though they remain well below district and state averages. Next year, in addition to teaching the program to all eighth-graders, she plans to make it available to all grade levels as an elective.

Several Prescott students picked by the school for interviews said they like the study skills program. They said when they find themselves struggling with a subject, now they know ways to identify and attack the problem.

Tanika McDaniel, 14, said she was skeptical at first, but it became fun. "You want to see how far you can get, " she said. "And the next day, you want to get even further."

Jonisha Williams, 15, said the program has given her "a whole new reading strategy." And it gave her a system to "find out what's wrong with me when I don't understand something. I know how to break down paragraphs and find the main idea."

It has helped her with her passion, writing poems. Now she knows and uses bigger words.

"It helps you out in other classes, " said Reginald LeBrane, 13. Before he took the class, he said, he got A's, B's and C's. "Now, " he said, "it's all A's."

None of the students said they know who L. Ron Hubbard was.

\* \* \*

The folks at Prescott Middle School aren't the only ones buying in. Diola Bagayoko, a professor at nearby Southern University and CEO of the Timbuktu Institute, a nonprofit think tank on teaching practices, has become a cheerleader for Hubbard's program.

Study tech puts knowledge into a hierarchical order, one idea building upon another, he said. Students pass tests before they move on to the next ideas, so "progress is assured, not assumed."

It's the best program he has seen, he said. "I would like to see this in many more schools."

The obstacle is money. The program requires lots of one-on-one instruction. Next year, Bagayoko has arranged for student teachers from Southern to be the teacher aides at

Prescott, replacing the teen volunteers. But that model is too costly to be expanded beyond Prescott, district officials say.

Slaughter also provided the Times a letter of enthusiastic endorsement from Venetta Whitaker, a University of Missouri professor and former assistant superintendent for the Los Angeles United School District.

"This application allows students to become more accountable, self-directed and self-advocating," Whitaker wrote, "while teaching them strategies and skills to help them think, learn and develop more of their potential over an entire lifetime."

The Times asked two independent academics to review the study tech text used at Prescott. Both were underwhelmed.

"It's hard to believe that someone is putting stock in this," said Linda Behar-Horenstein, a professor and distinguished teaching scholar in the department of educational administration at the University of Florida. "I'm a little stunned. It ignores everything we know about brain-based learning."

She criticized the concepts as overly simplistic and the activities "moronic."

"I can't imagine kids sitting still doing this," she said.

Also alarming, she said, is that there is no research to back up whether the concepts work, whether the program is cost-effective and how students fare over time.

The lack of peer-reviewed research was also of concern to Michele Gill, assistant professor of educational psychology at the University of Central Florida.

If used as an after-school program, Gill said it would be "fairly harmless and could be somewhat helpful." But, she said, "I would not want to be taught this way."

The text is prone to overstatement, she said, like the idea that if you are bored it is always because of a misunderstood word. That may be a good first place to start, but sometimes kids know the words, "but they are hungry or their parents are getting a divorce."

So how to explain the success at Prescott?

Both said a likely key is the low teacher-student ratio. It also could be attributed to the quality of the instructor.

"There are other things at play," Behar-Horenstein said. "It may not be the curriculum at all."

While critical of the program, neither of these experts saw any hidden Scientology agenda or proselytizing in the text.

According to one of the program's harshest critics, Dave Touretzky, a research professor at Carnegie Mellon University, that's only because the academic experts don't know the intricacies of Scientology.

Study tech is "covert religious instruction" and therefore unconstitutional to teach in public schools, said Touretzky, who has studied Scientology and written extensively about Hubbard's study skills curriculum.

The vocabulary used in Hubbard's texts echoes the language of Scientology, he said. For example, using "misunderstood" as a noun - as in, "Find your misunderstood" - is part of the argot of Scientology. He also calls the physiological effects attributed to various barriers to learning "nonsense" and "like believing in Bigfoot."

Scientologists will use the program at Prescott to sell the program to other struggling communities, Touretzky said, and to promote the image of Scientology.

The idea, he said, is probably not to convert people directly, but rather to establish Scientologists as "do-gooders" and then to "slip in more Scientology down the road."

That's essentially how it worked for Tom Cruise. The actor has said Hubbard's study tech helped him improve his reading and writing - and piqued his interest in Scientology.

Slaughter said it's absurd to characterize study tech as a recruitment tool for Scientology. Sure, she would love for people to check out Scientology, she said, but the study tech program is purely secular. The only fair criticism is that she has been slow to get it peer reviewed.

"I don't have to justify this, " she said. "What I care about is that it is working and making a difference for children. I don't need to care about anything else."

*Robert Farley can be reached at [farley@sptimes.com](mailto:farley@sptimes.com) or 727 893-8603.*

### **Fast Facts:**

#### **CEO gives Applied Scholastics a boost**

L. Ron Hubbard's study skills program is advanced worldwide by Applied Scholastics, a nonprofit organization that Scientologists created in 1972. It has racked up impressive growth

since former Clearwater businesswoman Bennetta Slaughter became chief executive six years ago.

- Hubbard's study tech now is licensed for use in 738 private schools, community centers and after-school or tutoring programs, more than twice the participation levels from when Slaughter took over (many other programs use its ideas). Florida has 24 such programs, 23 of them in Clearwater, the church's worldwide spiritual headquarters. The other is in Miami.

- Applied Scholastics has significantly increased its training of private and public school educators. It reports training 45, 000 since 2001 at its headquarters outside St. Louis, compared with 50, 000 trained in the three previous decades.

- Applied Scholastics has licensed 112 private schools to use study tech. Another 3, 500 schools use study tech in some way, Slaughter said.

- Globally, Applied Scholastics has made its biggest strides in Africa, where it claims to have taught thousands of educators who are exposing study tech to hundreds of thousands in Nigeria, South Africa and other nations. Slaughter said 2.6-million worldwide were taught study tech last year.

[Last modified May 24, 2007, 14:51:26]

#### Share your thoughts on this story

First Name (only)

Location

Comment (May be published online and/or in print)

You have 250 characters left to comment.

#### Comments on this article

by **Cari**

**05/24/07 06:46 PM**

Don't drink the Kool-Aid!

by **Rebecca**

**05/24/07 03:26 PM**

Don't children have enough trouble with grammar and comprehension already? I fail to see how "nouncing verbs," and turning "squashed" into an emotion can help the learning process.

by **Diane**

**05/24/07 12:52 PM**

Stay away from this cult as it will strip you of your money , dignity and self respect. I was once a member for many years before I saw the light and escaped from their clutches



**by Maurice**

**05/24/07 12:48 PM**

I was a member for many years , please believe me , it's the biggest deception out here, They are trying to revolutionize the world by stripping away Christianity

**by John**

**05/24/07 12:47 PM**

This cult is of Satan

**by Linda**

**05/24/07 12:46 PM**

This is not spiritual at all but about brain washing, be careful educators I know they scammed me . This world needs more love and compassion for others in order to benefit those less fortunate.

**by Bob**

**05/24/07 12:44 PM**

Stay away from this so called church of Scientology , it is psychotic at best , made up of people who are after personal power leaving God out of the equation

**by David**

**05/24/07 12:44 PM**

This is the biggest scam out there , they will take all your money and leave you high and dry . They care not for the suffering poor of the world. Don't be deceived by them as they are out to get money from the rich in order to control our world

**by Karen**

**05/24/07 12:35 PM**

This so called cult is distributing false hope and I believe Satanistic as I was once a member . They worship LRHubbard and also live without morals or decency to others.This tech is rubbish and will not help students but confuse them more.

**by Audrey**

**05/24/07 12:32 PM**

Scientology is based on a man with mental disorders. They believe in past lives and hope to take over the world , I was involved but escaped by the grace of God after many years .It is anti Christianity and personal power , taking power away from God

**by Cheryl**

**05/24/07 12:28 PM**

After scamming me out of all my retirement at a low time in my life ( divorce)I feel an obligation to tell others to stay away from this organization . It will rob you of your sanity and money . Study tech is a crock of bull, at best .... stay clear

**by Jeannie**

**05/24/07 12:28 PM**

LR Hubbard is saluted and worshiped by his followers that have a lack of faith . Many of the celebrities are fallen away Catholics that have no regard to morals in order to live with their errors. This I know as I was once brain washed by them myself

**by Candy**

**05/24/07 12:25 PM**

This so called church is about power and control in order to deceive Christians and take over the world .I was into this scam for several years before I woke up to it's falsehood , please stay away from it . The tech does not work but confuses you.

**by Marie**

**05/24/07 12:19 PM**

This cult almost cost my daughters life . It is made up of fallen away Christians trying to overcome the world in deception.This study tech is absurd and false confusing the student later . I know I was involved for many years but lucky to escape.

**by Jean**

**05/24/07 11:53 AM**

Scientology is the biggest scam out here today . It is all about brain washing and self assertiveness yielding power over others without regard to the sensitivity of another person . I was involved for 7 years scamming over \$70,000 its from the devil

**by Kevin**

**05/24/07 11:16 AM**

How can anyone license "study tech"? Using a dictionary to define words you don't understand has been around for well over a century. Gradients to learning are obvious and have been known about for a long time. Where is the value to the public?

**by Bob**

**05/24/07 10:59 AM**

I have some wonderful teaching methods derived from the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas. So can I teach them in public school? People would have a fit even though they would work. Scientology is just using this as a wedge. Hail Xenu!

**by anonymous**

**05/24/07 10:57 AM**

Study Tech conditions the mind from being able to think abstractly- it fosters concrete thinking. This builds excellent future cult members.

**by Mozzer**

**05/24/07 12:44 AM**

Sorry, but am I the only person on the planet who finds Scientologists funny? I mean, hobbies such as Christianity and Islamism are fairly strange, but believing in a schizophrenic science fiction writer as god - that just DEMANDS the biscuit!

**by Michael**

**05/23/07 05:57 PM**

Study tech is Scientology doctrine. Go to studytech.org, learn what study tech and Applied Scholastics are all about. Get the information then go to the school boards, and ACLU,... ask them why they're indoctrinating your children into the CoS.

**by Brownjedi**

**05/23/07 04:50 PM**

The use of study tech limits higher order thinking skills and the development of logical thinking. There is NO research behind this, tax money should not be used to fund these programs. Hubbard lied about his war record and his academic record!

**by Matt**

**05/23/07 03:14 PM**

I am both appalled and horrified that this cult has been unleashed on our most fragile citizens. Having worked as a film maker for this so-called church ,i can attest to this fact. This is nothing more than a youth recruiting ploy. Hilter did the same!

**by Matty**

**05/23/07 03:02 PM**

Don't let them prey on our kids, someone has to stop this sick cult

**by James**

**05/23/07 02:42 PM**

Fantastic article! This is outrageous and must be stopped. Separation of church and state must be upheld. This is a front for eventual injection of scientology to kids. ACLU... where are you. Help!

**by www.studytech.org**

**05/23/07 01:19 PM**

Yes, ignore the 100k pound elephant in the room, don't say CULT. You've hit the nail on the head "study tech" teaches these kids how to be proficient in learning scientology. The 3 principles of ST are "mass", "gradients", and "misunderstood"...

**by Mya**

**05/23/07 11:47 AM**

Study tech works. The Scientology agenda is to let people see that it works for themselves. Curiosity will lead a percentage to check out Scientology. So the ultimate goal of the Scientologist - to expand Scientology - is realized, little by little.

**by Skip**

**05/23/07 10:19 AM**

Once they get them sold on that, then they'll get \$300,000 out of each one of them to learn about Earth being a prison planet and the evil emperor Xenu. (Not kidding.)

**by Sam**

**05/23/07 09:41 AM**

I did the Study Tech and it worked wonders! It helped make me more aware of what a scam \$cientology is and how dangerous these people are. These poor kids are getting screwed but the world needs drive-thru employees too.

**by Jackie**

**05/23/07 09:01 AM**

I do believe this is a ploy to further advance the Scientologist belief. It appears to be genuine now but later I think they will try to use study tech to convert others.

**by Jose**

**05/23/07 02:29 AM**

Scientology's study technology does work, I have personally experienced it. for those who criticize what they don't know TOO BAD FOR YOU! Let this kids learn and judge by the king of all measurements...RESULTS!!!

**by Greg**

**05/23/07 12:28 AM**

The study tech works! The tutors basically volunteer for free. They care! Enough about it being a cult. Give me a break.

**by Matt**

**05/23/07 12:00 AM**

A favorable public image and the tax money are favorable byproducts of this study tech, but the real agenda is to teach children how to be proficient in learning scientology ways. Every scientology course uses this same study plan.

**by Roger**

**05/22/07 11:12 PM**

I am a member of several religions, including Scientology. The study tech has helped me to study 10X better and with the confidence that I can apply whatever I learn. My non-Scientology nephews also have used and benefitted from the basic books.

**by Julian**

**05/22/07 10:17 PM**

Thanks for reporting on something that helps our kids. The statistics speak the story and this method improved test scores. Maybe this is the method that all schools could use instead of the drugging of kids who may have a study problem.

**by Steve**

**05/22/07 07:22 PM**

We now have a study technology that works and gets results. If you really want to see why some of these "research professors" don't like these techniques, just have to look at all the drug company executives that sit on the college regent boards.