



The Necessity of Meaning

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It is obvious to everyone, especially to Latter-Day-Saints, that the Lord is hastening his work. We see it all around us, we hear it regularly from our Church leaders, and we feel the impact in our lives. Concurrently, events in the world and in this country are speeding up, constantly changing our environment (culturally, professionally, politically, etc.) and the conditions of our future. This fast changing world keeps presenting us with new demands and requires constant adaptation. This includes our teaching practices—the content of our teaching, but also the manner in which we deliver it to our students. Today, innovative teaching is not just an intellectual fad, it is a necessity. Further, since the unstable economy simply adds to the pressure, we have reached a time when we have to do much more with significantly less (as Henry B. Eyring had prophesied¹).

It is not surprising then that our University insists so much on the necessity of investing our time, mind, and creativity into innovative teaching practices. However, is there any limit to our teaching experiments? Are there safeguards that we should keep in mind? I was faced with these questions and had to try to find answers as I was

asked to create advanced multilingual classes. The idea was to offer classes for students who learned a language (typically on their mission) not taught in a regular program at the university to keep studying these languages. How do you have 20-30 students in one class, speaking all kinds of languages (I have had 39 different languages so far), working on language acquisition while still being taught together and working towards a common goal? As I pondered, I came to the conclusion that whatever subject we teach, there will always be at least one common purpose: good teaching brings meaning to light. Whatever content I was going to choose for these classes, whatever method I was going to use, I had to make sure that the teaching which was going to take place, coming from me or the students, would be meaningful.

From a young age, I have been fascinated with psychoanalysis and the works of the human mind. I was particularly inspired by the writings of Viktor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist. According to him, the main drive in anybody's life is the search for meaning (hence the title of his most famous book: *Man's Search for Meaning*²). Someone who has meaning in life will be emotionally and intellectually more apt to face any situation, will try to change one's attitude rather than events if that is not possible, and will, generally speaking, be more enduring. Now, as Viktor Frankl puts it, "...[M]eaning is something to discover rather than to invent." This idea should make sense to any believer in God and His plan. Meaning precedes our existence; it is the origin of our existence. But at the same time, we have to (re)discover this meaning through our existence (I am an existentialist in this sense). This is where our role as teachers is crucial: we have to make sure that through our teaching we bring meaning to light. If this meaning is in accordance with the principles of God, the Spirit will testify of its truthfulness, our students will receive a feeling of fulfillment and enlightenment, and their lives in turn will be truly enriched and strengthened.

So, to come back to my language puzzle class, I had to put together a system and curriculum that would not only provide a real opportunity for language acquisition, but would also offer a possibility for meaningful experiences individually and as a class. With that purpose in mind, I asked the students to read/listen to cultural material (literature, news, etc.), write research papers in their own

language, and then share with the rest of the class what they had learned. Then, as a class, we analyzed the different topics they had to study and present, drawing general conclusions, but with the advantage of having different perspectives provided by the various viewpoints. Many students have commented in their evaluation of the course that this course had been truly eye-opening to them, and had helped them not only better understand the language and culture they were studying, but also the world in which we live. Here is an example of an assignment that we do in the Language 400 class. The students have to read and watch the news in their language of study several times during the week. Then, at the end of the week, by a certain date and time, they have to post on the class “newsblog” a summary of the national and international news of their country for this week. Before the next session, the whole class has to read this “newsblog” and we discuss the news as a group. The students answer the questions of other students about what they posted or what is going on in their country of study, and I, as the teacher, also bring information to help them understand what is going on in this world more clearly. Thus the students work on reading and listening comprehension in their language of study, but also have an opportunity to share their knowledge, and last but not the least, we follow the admonition of the Lord in D&C 88:79 to study “things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land;

and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms.” Here are a few comments from the students’ evaluations about this assignment: “With culture and civilization we have a tendency to see things from one side or another on the news but rarely do we have the chance to see it from multiple angles. I really enjoyed that about the class.” “She really made us realize what is going on in the world and the consequences of each country’s action.” “The news blog was very interesting. I really enjoyed the discussions on the subjects in class, and the perspectives that different people incorporated and the connections that were made by them and through them.” “This class was a truly eye-opening experience for me.”

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We live in complex times which are becoming more and more challenging and demand constant adaptation. This has a direct impact on what is required from us as teachers. But whatever we come up with and try in our classes, we should ensure that it truly leads to the discovery of deeper meaning. Innovative teaching just for the sake of innovative teaching can turn out to be a true disaster. In other words, applying the letter of the Learning Model without understanding the spirit of it can have a worse result than having no Learning Model at all.

Innovative teaching is a necessity, but meaningful innovative teaching is an even greater necessity, especially in the times that we are going through. 🌻

Notes:

¹Elder Henry B. Eyring, A Steady, Upward Course, Brigham Young University–Idaho Devotional, September 18, 2001

²Frankl, V. E. (I. Lasch, Trans.) *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1963.

