



Scholarship: Our Academic Birthright

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Sometime between my junior and senior year of college, in the middle of a pre-medical pathway, I caught the teaching bug. I signed up to be a teaching assistant in the human anatomy labs, and I discovered something important about myself. The thrill of being in the classroom and feeling like I was helping facilitate learning was, to me, what an adrenaline rush must be like to an adrenaline junkie. I was hooked! I set my eyes on a career in teaching, but I knew in order to do so at the university level, I needed a doctorate. After completing a bachelor's and master's degree, my wife and I headed to the East Coast and began a Ph.D. program in Maryland.

I was in my seventh year of that program when I heard about a faculty opening at Ricks College. Despite having grown up only two hours south of here and having several of my siblings attended Ricks College, I had never stepped foot on campus until the Spring of 1998 when I was invited to interview. The opportunity to be a faculty member at a teaching institution was incredibly appealing to me at that

stage of my education. 1998 marked the thirteenth year of an essentially non-stop sequence of bachelor, masters, and doctoral programs. I was exhausted. The crucible of a Ph.D. program in neuroscience, with its high octane research activities and expectations, while invigorating, had taken its toll on me and I was ready to get back into the classroom.

During my interview with President Bednar, he chided me with a tongue-in-cheek remark, questioning me as to why I would sacrifice my academic birthright by coming to a two-year college. His comment did not reflect his own belief that I was rejecting my academic birthright, but spoke to the academic world's perception of such a decision. Why on earth would someone with so much education and strong research background and training discard that to "just teach" at a junior college with no upper division courses and virtually non-existent research opportunities?

I doubt this experience or question from President Bednar was unique to me. The question, however, of rejecting my birthright has stuck with me over the years. We may view and value ourselves and our academic pedigrees differently from how much of the world sees them, but academic training does bring with it certain expectations in addition to the traditional trappings of academia. I want to address the idea of staying true to our academic birthrights.

In his 2001 address to the faculty, President Bednar challenged BYU-Idaho to engage deeply in scholarship, both in your content area as well as in the scholarship of learning and teaching (Bednar, 2001). In other words, being a faculty member of a primarily teaching oriented university does not mean that we cannot or should not be scholars. The need for our scholarship is paramount. In fact, President Bednar also stated,

"Will we as BYU-Idaho be engaged in scholarship? Absolutely yes. We must! If we are not engaged in scholarship, then we have no business being a university." (Bednar, 2001).

Similarly, in a recent address at the BYU Religious Studies Center, Elder Holland stated the following:

"There always has been and there always will be at universities an emphasis on doing research and

writing in order that our teaching stay fresh . . . You learn in order to teach and you teach in order to learn.” (Holland, 2015)

Applied to a broader context, I believe Elder Holland could be referring to scholarly pursuits in general and not specifically to traditional research. Given the charge that faculty at BYU-Idaho will be focused on the scholarship of learning and teaching, what does scholarship look like at BYU-Idaho? Again, drawing on President Bednar, quoting from Lee Shulman, he identified that “all scholarship

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consists of three distinct characteristics: 1) it is public, 2) It is susceptible to critical review and evaluation and 3) it should be accessible for exchange and use by other members of one’s scholarly community (Schulman, 1999). To this I might add, that at BYU-Idaho, scholarship needs to take on an additional “translational” component, which, while not unique to us, is certainly core to who we are. This translational component is that, (in so far as possible), our scholarly activities should return to inform our classroom activities. This is an aspect of learning and teaching scholarship that we often overlook. The scholarship of learning and teaching is more than understanding the processes by which learning and teaching occurs generally, but finds its real power as we explore how learning and teaching occurs and is applied in our specific disciplines. Even discipline specific scholarship can and should have direct impacts in the classroom. Lee Shulman makes the following observation:

Each of us in higher education is a member of at least two professions: that of our discipline, inter-discipline,





or professional field . . . as well as our profession as educators. In both of these intersecting domains, we bear the responsibilities of scholars— to discover, connect, to apply and to teach. (Shulman, 2000)

Each of us has felt this tension arising from the duality of our nature as professors. Do I spend my time in the classroom, or do I spend it engaged in scholarly pursuits? I would argue that at BYU-Idaho, the two are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they are so very complimentary. Refer back to Elder Holland’s quote: “We learn in order to teach and we teach in order to learn.” The need for this level of engagement both in scholarly activities as well as connecting those activities to our classroom could not be timelier or more urgent. The world of academia that we find ourselves in is vastly different from the academic environment our professors worked in. Digital access has created divisions within pedagogical approaches. Lecture

systems which have long been the mainstay of information transfer may no longer be the most effective mode for our students (McKee and Tew, 2013).

This digital divide is due in part to both the “digital natives” that now represent the academic clientele as well as the broad and readily accessibility to information. Transformative changes can be seen in every corner of higher education which are challenging and altering the traditional approaches of academic teaching. Thomas and Brown and others are championing approaches that “focus on learning through engagement within the world” rather than merely teaching about the world (Thomas and Brown, 2011).

Additional pressures are changing the academic environment as well. Corporate employers “recognize the shifting workforce and . . . understand their future productivity if not very existence as ongoing business

concerns [is] dependent on coming to terms with the distinctly new behavior patterns and work habits” brought about by the advancing digital world (Tapscott, 2009).

Stakeholders in higher education are calling for greater accountability and tying such accountability to learning outcomes and to marketability of graduates. The past few decades have seen “growing dissatisfaction with higher education. Legislatures insist on greater accountability, lower cost, and enhanced access while [other stakeholders such as] parents express their perennial concern, ‘Will little Johnny be able to get a job?’” (McKee and Tew 2013).

During my time at BYU-Idaho, I have heard the phrase, “Inspired Innovation” numerous times. This call for innovation resonated strongly with me and I feel like I’ve tried to be creative in the classroom and to think outside the box, but I’ve often failed to do so systematically and collect data on the process. In doing so, I realized that I couldn’t make any kind of judgments on how well the experiment worked because I had no real data to base that judgment on and relying on gut instinct just isn’t enough and certainly wouldn’t qualify as scholarly. Confronting this idea caused me to realize that my academic training did not entitle me to a robust and healthy research career for which a teaching career was less than a consolation prize. My doctoral education obligated me to a career of curiosity, data-driven improvement, education, mentoring, and engaging in all these activities rigorously and with scholarly enthusiasm. That was my real academic birthright! My graduate training was less about understanding how and why neurons migrate from deep within the brain toward the cortex during development and much more about training my own brain to think critically, to analyze data, and to solve problems systematically.

Applying these skills to discover more effective ways to teach my discipline and to integrate and explore the most current knowledge within my field into my classes is my current challenge. I firmly believe that the call for scholarly engagement, especially in traditional teaching institutions, is beyond rhetoric and must become our standard mode of educational activities. It may cause many, if not most of us, to redefine who we are, what we do, and how we do it, but I believe that as we do so, our capacity to enhance the real educational experiences of our students will literally transform each of us, our students and the landscape of learning and teaching in higher education. ❀

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