



Principles from Jacob 5 for Improving Campus and Online Courses

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While innovation can lay the foundation for tremendous success, it can also pave the way for some spectacular failures. This becomes painfully apparent when we attempt a new and innovative approach in a course only to discover that despite our passion, planning, and earnest efforts, our ideas turn out to be more lackluster than brilliant. At the end of Winter Semester this year I found myself pondering that very predicament. I had attempted a new approach in one of my courses only to realize, near the end of the semester, that this new approach eventually seemed to inhibit rather than elevate my students' learning and success. Quite frankly, it hurt to feel like my heartfelt efforts were wasted, and I mentally lamented like the Lord of the vineyard in Zenos' allegory, "What could I have done more for my vineyard?" (Jacob 5:41). This question led me to study this allegory from the Book of Mormon again and to consider some principles for improvement that I could glean from the strategies the Lord of the vineyard employed to produce a more bountiful harvest. What follows is not a comprehensive discussion of those lessons, but it does highlight some of the more significant

lessons that helped me think about the steps to take in order to improve that particular course.

Lesson One: It's All About the Fruit! (The Students)

Within the allegory, the Lord of the vineyard explains to his servant, "The tree profiteth me nothing, and the roots thereof profit me nothing so long as it shall bring forth evil fruit" (Jacob 5:35). The tree and the roots were truly essential to create good fruit, but if they failed to bring forth good fruit, they were ultimately meaningless. This led me to ponder whether I had been focusing on the ultimate fruit of my vineyard – my students – or whether I was being distracted by the trees and roots of my classes. There is a real temptation to focus on our course's content, or our I-learn course design, or on our outcomes and assessments. While each of those elements is truly essential, they must not be allowed to overshadow the real focus of our efforts – helping students become disciple leaders. When considering efforts to improve we can begin by making sure our focus is on the fruit.

Lesson Two: You Need to Taste the Fruit to Know if it is Good (Outcomes and Assessments)

At one point in the allegory, the Lord of the vineyard goes throughout his vineyard to assess his fruit and “[he] did taste of the fruit, every sort according to its number” (Jacob 5:31 emphasis added). This implies that the vineyard was organized in a manner that allowed the Lord of the

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vineyard to systematically check for quality. Additionally, while color, ripeness, size, and yield may outwardly indicate a good harvest, the only way to accurately gauge the quality of a fruit harvest is to actually taste some of the fruit. This led me to consider whether I was basing all of my judgment of student success on external factors that are easy to measure and whether I had a legitimate method of measuring what matters most in the lives of my students. It also made me question whether I based my assessment of a class on a gut feeling of how things went or whether I had demonstrable evidence of what students were learning and experiencing. In either case, I realized if I wanted to improve I had to find a way to taste the fruit of student success within my discipline.

Lesson Three: Sometimes Grafting is Required

Grafting is a drastic measure to take in a vineyard, but sometimes drastic change is necessary. When the Lord of the vineyard realizes that his tried and true methods of bringing forth fruit are no longer proving to be as effective, he orders innovation, telling his servant, “Take thou the branches of the wild olive tree, and graft them in, in the stead thereof; and these which I have plucked off I will cast into the fire and burn them, that they may not cumber the ground of my vineyard” (Jacob 5:9). Here the branches

may be wild in that they are unproven, untested, and will yield an uncertain result. Innovation is by its nature risky, but perhaps not as risky as continuing an approach that is proving to be ineffective. It is important to note that this does not imply that what was done in the past was wrong or ineffective. It may simply mean that conditions within the vineyard change over time. The adoption of four new

cornerstone courses for Religious Education is a good example of this type of a change. The religion courses that used to be required in the past are still all excellent courses, and the students who took them were greatly blessed. However, conditions in the world and demographics among our college-aged students have changed, so this new approach was designed to better address the needs of our students today. If our real

focus continues to be on our students, we must be willing to recognize when large scale adjustments in content, approach, or delivery may be necessary in order to more effectively bring out the best in our students and help them to achieve their full potential.

Lesson Four: Handling Setbacks with Understanding and Perspective

Despite digging, pruning, fertilizing, grafting, and tenderly nourishing the vineyard, all of the Lord of the vineyard’s fruit grew bitter, rendering it worthless. We can feel something of the Lord of the vineyard’s anguish when he cries out “But what could I have done more in my vineyard? Have I slackened mine hand, that I have not nourished yet? Nay, I have nourished it, and I have digged about it, and I have pruned it, and I have dunged it; and I have stretched forth mine hand almost all the day long, and the end draweth nigh.” (Jacob 5:47). The Lord of the vineyard understood the painful lesson that every teacher eventually comes to know: genuine positive growth is not something that can be forced. As teachers, we can provide an environment, the conditions, the atmosphere and culture that are best calculated to foster learning within our students’ minds and hearts, but ultimately learning is something that must be chosen. It can be

deeply disappointing to work so hard and feel unsuccessful. However, the Lord of the vineyard remained undeterred. Rather than letting his bitter fruit lead to pessimism, derision, or a slackening of his efforts, he instead allowed his love to motivate him to continue his earnest exertions to bring forth good fruit. As I considered this scene, I realized that at the end of a tough semester, I could either slacken my hand and let discouragement stifle my efforts to improve, or I could let my love for my students continue to motivate me to humbly be better and to do better. Handling setbacks with understanding and perspective is essential for teachers who care.

Lesson Five: Go Back to What Has Worked Well in the Past

In response to widespread problems with his fruit, the Lord of the vineyard employs an interesting strategy by quite literally going back to his roots. He takes the branches that were removed from the tame olive tree that previously produced good fruit and grafts them back into the tame olive tree. In other words, he goes back to an approach that worked well in the past. Innovation may at times unnecessarily cause us to drift from effective methods employed in the past. When innovation seems stymied or

ineffective, returning to practices that have worked well in the past may, at times, be the best way to move a course forward in its progress.

Lesson Six: The Wisdom of Incremental Improvement

When the Lord of the vineyard is working to heal some bitter fruit trees, he also counsels his servants to “clear away the bad according as the good shall grow, that the root and the top may be equal in strength, until the good shall overcome the bad, and the bad be hewn down and cast into the fire” (Jacob 5:66). Here the Lord of the vineyard recognizes that clearing away everything bad about a tree all at once can destroy a tree. The same can be true at times with our courses, particularly in the online venue where we need to continue to have an operational course while improvements are being made. Clearing away bad components of a course as positive changes are implemented is often the wisest approach to course improvement.

Lesson Seven: The Lord of the Vineyard Labors with Us

A final lesson I learned while pondering this allegory is that the Lord of the vineyard labors with his servants. “And it came to pass that the servants did go and labor with their might; and the Lord of the vineyard labored also with them; and they did obey the commandments of the Lord of the vineyard in all things” (Jacob 5:72). In the allegory, it is clear that no one works harder, is more engaged, or cares more deeply about producing an abundant harvest of good fruit than the Lord of the vineyard. He works right alongside his servants. I know the same is true here at BYU-Idaho, which is a fruitful part of the Lord’s vineyard. No one cares more about the students, or puts in more hours, or is more intricately involved in the details of everyday operations at BYU-Idaho than the Lord Jesus Christ. As we humbly obey the inspiration we receive from Him and the guidance of our university leaders, we will be blessed to help develop disciple leaders whose positive influence will eventually extend to every corner of the vineyard. Then, when the final harvest is measured, we will enjoy the Lord’s promise: “behold ye shall have joy with me because of the fruit of my vineyard” (Jacob 5:75). ♦

