



Lead, Guide, Walk Beside: Mentoring Student Research with a Busy Teaching Schedule

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In an address to the faculty, President Clark (2013) emphasized the importance of the faculty using both scholarship and teaching to produce learning resources and, ultimately, high-quality alumni. While this did not include a substantial shift in resources or focus, it did emphasize the need to do more in the way of combining our research and teaching activities. President Clark indicated that two key ways for this to occur are 1) using the classroom as a laboratory to increase our scholarship of learning and teaching and 2) developing mentored research to include students in the research process. The recent creation of the position of Dean of Faculty Development and Mentored Research is meant to support this type of activity and to simplify the process of gathering the necessary funds. This article addresses several of the challenges of the process and highlights some of the activities I have pursued in trying to meet these challenges.

We often hear that there is a divide between teaching and research, and PhD candidates face pressure to decide between the two. Intuitively, many of us balk at that suggestion, asserting that research should enhance teaching. If we aren't researching, we get stale and are less effective in our efforts. However, teaching undergraduates involves a different set of expectations than teaching graduate students. Students generally come to us with limited understanding of the basic knowledge required to form questions and very few skills required to conduct research. They come to us with fairly naïve notions of what people in our fields of expertise actually do.

Perhaps the biggest constraint we face is time. Even with the improvement of an additional 3-credit load hour reduction a year, we at BYU-Idaho still teach about two to two-and-a-half times as many classes a year compared to our typical colleagues at other universities. This significantly influences what we can do. As a trade-off for the extra teaching load, we are spared the “publish or perish” pressures common elsewhere. If we are going to do both teaching and research, we need to combine the two in a way that focuses on teaching students to research.

How can we construct our teaching so that it builds the basic fluency in content and skills needed to help with research? Although I am by no means an expert in this, I have had some success in inviting students to share in my research in different ways. In many ways, this could be patterned after the EDGE method (Explain, Demonstrate, Guide, Enable) advocated by the Boy Scouts of America or the request in “I am a Child of God” to lead, guide, and walk beside.

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Lead

Faculty frequently express concerns about the “teach one another” part of the BYU-Idaho Learning Model (2007), worried that it can become “the blind leading the blind.” I experienced this early in my teaching career,

and motivates them to ask for clarification. While I don't have systematic evidence of the difference in learning outcomes yet, it certainly has decreased levels of anxiety and increased expressions of enthusiasm.

In my introductory classes, I've decided that learning the basics of a discipline is much like learning a foreign language. It is unfair to ask a student just beginning a new language to review a novel; it is just as unfair to ask inexperienced students to conduct sophisticated research. However, it is fair to give them a sample poem or short piece, and lead them through an analysis, helping them check their ideas along the way.

Guide

At the intermediate range, the emphasis can shift from leading students through prepared examples of research to guiding them as they make their way through a project. For example, my Politics of Advanced Industrial Nations Class will research topics concerning religious liberty. They need guidance on how to effectively take notes so they can construct a literature review and develop strong research questions. They will also be required to present their work at the Research and Creative Works Conference. At this stage, there are fewer right-or-wrong exercises, but more evaluation of the quality of reasoning and argumentation.

Students laugh guiltily when I describe what they think of as a research paper. We wait until a day or two before it is due. We do a quick internet search and take the top X articles, where X equals the number of citations our professor told us we need. We glance through the first one, summarize it briefly, and forget about it. Repeat with two through X. Then we conclude with what we thought of the issue before we started the project, and *viola* there's the paper! There has to be a better way; with the tight schedule and tendency to work only on the next thing due, they need structure and guidance on how to break the research down into steps that fill the semester. It is important to have them check their work at several points along the way.

The Research and Creative Works Conference, held on campus every semester, is an excellent opportunity for students at this phase. Bringing the research or other work out of the classroom, and knowing they will be judged by someone other than the professor enhances the importance of the project and increases the level of commitment on the part of the student. The conference also enables the students to practice their skills

of visually and verbally communicating what they have learned and how they learned it. This is another way to help guide them as they develop into professionals.

Walk Beside

At the more advanced stages, students are ready for more autonomy in their research. The capstone classes are often this type of activity. Time restricts what they might accomplish in one semester. To overcome this at my previous university, we required them to have already completed a capstone research proposal with a designated mentor by the start of class. Here, our department has a bit of a mix between senior seminar and capstone paper, so there is a bit less time to focus on original research and revision of the writing. I require my students to present their work at the Research and Creative Works Conference. paragraph, it should be I tend to allow more autonomy in topic selection and methods than I do at less advanced stages.

Last semester, four students decided to work together on a paper. I insisted that they actually write it together, not just have each do a part and slap it together. The first part of the class focused on learning about psychological profiling of political leaders using several different methods. The students decided to focus on the profiles of leaders in Israel and Egypt, with the objective of testing whether leaders' personalities might be linked to the level of hostility or cooperation among states. To improve the students' understanding of politics in the area, David Peck, of the History Department, presented additional information to the class. As a mentor, I helped them make decisions along the way, such as recognizing that adding the Syrian leaders would be too much for them to accomplish in a semester. I also worked carefully with them on their interpretation and presentation of the data resulting from the content analysis they conducted.

Collaborating on their research taught them a great deal, including how to better employ various computer programs and internet technology. Class periods were often spent reviewing their analysis to help them make sense of the data and figure out how best to organize and present their findings. They were required to present their reviews of journal articles throughout the semester, and we discussed such issues as the publishing process and how to write literature reviews. I thoroughly reviewed the draft of the paper using turnitin.com. They also presented the completed



project at the Research and Creative Works Conference and received first place in their session. At the end of the semester, they indicated that it was the hardest and best thing they had accomplished as students.

There are many non-class opportunities for mentoring research. For example, I had a second-year student who wanted to go above and beyond the classroom and work on a project. He didn't know what was involved or even have an idea for a topic, so he asked me if he could help me on a project. I was working on a project involving the use of Question Period in Canada to develop personality profiles of party leaders. This project was time-intensive, so we worked together. For over a year, we confronted challenges to our assumptions and learned more about my field of expertise. We received money from our department, our dean, and from the Thomas E. Ricks Foundation to pay for the student to attend an international conference at which we presented our findings (Carter and Bell 2012). This student did an excellent job presenting our research, and several faculty members at the conference were asking him about his plans for graduate school.

As I was working on that project, I became involved as a mentor for a topic about which I know nothing (software design). I was frustrated with the time it took for me to get the data I use for the content analysis. I was convinced there had to be an easier way. I contacted the Computer Science Department for help. I was invited to submit a proposal to the class CS 246: Software Design and Development. For several semesters now, I have acted as a client as students in this class have worked on software that will allow me to easily collect the data I need to conduct my analysis. It took a few

semesters to get a product I'm happy with, but the results have greatly expedited data-collection. I plan to continue working with CS 246 students on these programs so that I will be able to create an on-going project that will provide many research opportunities for future Political Science and International Studies students.

At a more advanced level, I am a member of a doctoral dissertation committee. Here my role is similar to that of a colleague, reviewing what the student is doing and offering helpful suggestions. It is much closer to a pure walk-beside approach. It is interesting to watch the project evolve.

By way of conclusion—or commencement

With our limited time and resources, we can do much to enhance the education of our students by teaching them “all that [they] must do” to excel in their chosen professions. My view of the process is that the particular political facts of the day are temporary. Our understandings of human behavior vary from one theorist to the next. We struggle with complex causality of social interactions. The best we can do for them is to help them develop the skills they need to research, understand, and act on their findings with confidence. ❁

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