



The Scope of Our Reach

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Not long ago, I found a copy of a paper I had written as a new graduate student preparing to teach first-year writing at BYU. In this paper I described what it was like to be a new freshman jumping into college for the first time. I recalled my fear and excitement about living on my own, meeting new friends, and encountering new things. I also described the challenges of learning the foreign language of academia. Fortunately, I found teachers that year whose individual attention made a big difference in my college experience. Their willingness to tutor and encourage me laid the groundwork for my success as a student and in my career farther down the road. In addition, their enthusiasm for what they taught infused my own life with new light and meaning, giving me the desire to “pay it forward” to future students. I believe that this desire to reach out to individuals and to bless their lives with opportunities for enlightenment motivates most of us here at BYU–Idaho. According to the university’s mission of creating disciple leaders, we have a great opportunity to impact those we teach for a lifetime.

In his all-employee meeting earlier this year, President Clark Gilbert invited us to “realize the extraordinary potential of our everyday students.” He suggested four

approaches to do this: keeping in mind our own humble beginnings; helping students recognize their potential before they see it themselves; holding them to high standards and expectations; and involving capable students in helping and building others. As a graduate student looking back, I could already recognize some of these elements in the ways my most effective mentors had helped me.

For instance, my most influential undergraduate professors were willing to help me recognize potential I didn’t know I had. As is true for most of us, we don’t know what we don’t know until someone opens our eyes to new possibilities. In my naïveté, I hoped that I could convince my professors that I knew what I was talking about mostly by sounding like I did. Instead of dismissing my sophomoreic efforts with the grades they deserved and moving on, however, those teachers gave me explicit feedback and invited me to come talk to them about how I could improve. One religion professor went line by line through my paragraphs and showed me how to make my ideas more coherent and focused. I remember him sitting at his desk with a red pencil, patiently drawing lines and explaining how to create effective transitions. I had thought I was an adequate writer, but his detailed instruction helped me see how I needed to improve. Not only this, though: his concern for my growth and the interest he showed in my welfare outside of the classroom helped me to value even more what he was teaching in the classroom. His class provided a revelation about The Book of Mormon and how it could rank as truly great among all of the other great books I was reading in college. The insights he helped me to discover still resonate with me.

You challenge them to re-read texts; to re-examine an argument’s assumptions; to re-think their relationships, biases, and politics.



In a similar situation, another teacher wrote copious feedback on a short story analysis I had turned in. My attempts to give my paper credibility and authority continued to result in excessively complicated language. He showed me how my flowery, imitative style tended to multiply words and obscure what I really wanted to say. After providing guidelines for improvement, he invited me to revise and resubmit my paper. I still remember the spot I was sitting in the Harold B. Lee Library as I contemplated my revision. Enlightenment expanded my mind as I gazed over the quad from the window where I sat. A new vista opened to me as I discovered these tools and began to use them. I have saved that paper revision as well as the first draft with its feedback because they marked a turning point in my college career; I occasionally share them with my own students to show process. My professor was willing to hold me to a high standard, even though he could have accepted my mediocre results and not taken time to mentor me. His influence continued across semesters, and he later advised me as I grappled with changing my major. His willingness to share personal insights from his own undergraduate experience again made an important impression, supplying helpful guidance.

As he observed my academic development, he recalled his own humble beginnings and considered how sharing them with me might be helpful. Neither of these professors was ever too busy or self-important to meet with me and answer my questions.

The result of the individualized attention and concern I received as a student planted in me a wish to be the kind of teacher that could in turn cultivate the desire for lifelong learning in others. When he met with our college to discuss his vision for BYU–Idaho, President Gilbert described the fact that it was his undergraduate experience at BYU that made him want to become a college professor so he could help students have the same kind of spiritual and intellectual transformation he had experienced. Likewise, in a Campus Conversation Lecture sponsored by the Faculty Association, David Pulsipher depicted his joy in new discovery as a student:

[A]s I entered BYU, it was as if someone suddenly turned on the lights and threw open [the world of academic possibility]. It was a spiritual and intellectual wonderland, as I was introduced to spheres of language and ideas and truths that I, to borrow a phrase from Moses, “never had supposed.”

Desirous to continue to experience the excitement of academic engagement, Brother Pulsipher came to BYU–Idaho where he could continue to engage in learning and teaching. “Joy and wonder are infectious things... [A]s I shared what I was studying, and even recruited a few students to help with the research, I watched as many of them experienced similar ‘revelations’ of truth, which merely added to my joy.” In taking the transformative experiences of his “humble beginnings,” Brother Pulsipher now gives individual students opportunities to have the same kind of educational development that he had and continues to nurture through his own example of life-long learning. Having tasted of the fruits of learning by the Spirit, which have “enlighten[ed] [our] minds... fill[ing] [our] soul[s] with joy” (D&C 11:13), as faculty we naturally want to help our students to taste of this fruit as well.

I am certain that these patterns of reaching out to “the one” continue regularly here at BYU–Idaho, so I asked my students to supply some examples from their interactions with their professors. One student reported that her health teacher would take time to explain how his course content could help not just the body, but also the spirit and the mind. She felt that he cared for her well-being as an individual and wanted to see her grow in all ways, not just academic. “I have learned that I can do hard things and that when I have a goal, it is so much easier to make improvement. My outlook on life has changed because of [this teacher],” she said. Another student said that he had felt inadequate at the beginning of one of his classes, but that with the professor’s individualized help, he now countered his fears of failure with confidence. He felt he had become not only a better student, but a better person. Suffering from a debilitating health problem, another student said that she appreciated her instructor’s support through the semester and knew she truly cared about her success, which convinced the student not to give up. I’m sure we could all add many more examples of professorial care and individual concern to this list.

As teachers at BYU–Idaho, we describe our roles in different ways—as educators, facilitators, nurturers, guides, shepherds. Dee Fink (2003) suggests another metaphor we might use to consider our teaching goals, that of helmsman*, guiding a raft of students (who are also the oarsmen) through the rapids of exhilarating learning. In order to do this successfully,

“everyone needs to discover one another’s spirit in the process of learning and to discover the subject and what is to be learned about it. The helmsman in particular must discover what each individual is capable of and what the group is capable of collectively. The rowers (students) must discover what they themselves are capable of, what the others are capable of, what the leader is capable of, and how they can increase all those capabilities by working together as members of a spirit-discovering team with faith in one another.”

The efforts we pour into our individual students can expand into an integrated effort on the part of the entire team as all members take renewed responsibility to learn,

lead, and serve in the educational experience. Here at BYU–Idaho, that means that students can also learn the role of becoming disciple leaders, learning by the Spirit, reaching out to lift and lead others, and going forward to take the place at the helm of their own rafts of learning and responsibility.

Showing love to those we teach is perhaps the best way we can inspire them to reach the potential they bring with them. We can teach them to be disciple leaders by doing as Christ did. President Uchtdorf said in the October General Conference, 2010, “Christ did not just speak about love; He showed it each day of His life. He did not remove Himself from the crowd. Being amidst the people, Jesus reached out to the one.” As we teach at this student-centered university, “reaching out to the one” can inspire students to become those who will guide and serve a new generation of God’s children. Jacob Spori prophesied that “The seeds we are planting today will grow and become mighty oaks, and their branches will run all over the earth.” We never know the scope of our reach when we reach out to the one.

* Fink apologizes for the masculine title and acknowledges that it could be made more gender-neutral, but then it would no longer be the term that is actually used on the water and therefore, to his mind, not as effective.

References

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