

## LEARNING BY FAITH, TEACHING BY FAITH: SIX APPROACHES

Rhonda Seamons—Department of English

In October 2005, the BYU–Idaho academic vice president, associate academic vice presidents, and college deans went to Salt Lake City and visited with David A. Bednar. It was an informal gathering which included a good deal of laughter, an impromptu tour of the room where the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles meet, and a powerful apostolic blessing.

During the hour we spent together in the Church Office Building, someone asked Elder Bednar what he had meant by a comment he had made earlier that month at the Inaugural Luncheon for President Clark: “The creation of BYU–Idaho is one of the most important educational events of the restoration.”<sup>1</sup> Elder Bednar’s response was quite intriguing.

As I later noted in my journal, the newest Apostle explained that the institutional Church had spent considerable time and energy preparing materials about “teaching by the Spirit,” but that we had not given equal treatment to “learning by faith.” He then said that our becoming a university was a “signal event in the restoration because we will begin to address this.” As Elder Bednar spoke, I received an undeniable witness of the Spirit that this was so—for the University *collectively* and for those of us who work here *individually*.

Shortly after that conversation, I decided to respond to the promptings of the Spirit by embarking on a self-directed study of the learning process. Over the next two years, I searched the teachings of our latter-day prophets, engaged my colleagues in a variety of discussions and projects, and experimented with my students. I thoroughly enjoyed myself.

In the spring of 2008, I decided to summarize what I had learned. Including photographs, charts, and appendices, the finished report was about 75 pages long. Toward the end of the summer, I invited Scott Samuelson to read it. Since Scott is on the editorial board, he asked if Chapter 2 might be published in *Perspective*. I agreed. However, in order for the chapter to stand alone, I had to make a number of changes. I hope the result is satisfactory...

At BYU–Idaho, we have dozens of departments preparing students for literally hundreds of careers. In the different programs, we learn and teach through experience, research, discussion, lecture, projects, and/or skills. Each of these approaches has a different purpose and focus. However, as the scriptures abundantly attest, all of these approaches were used successfully by the Master Teacher.

**At BYU–Idaho,  
we have dozens  
of departments  
preparing students  
for literally  
hundreds of careers.**

Because my professional training is in education, I can easily identify lessons I have *taught* in each of the six approaches. However, due to the focus I had chosen for my self-directed study, I decided that I would identify lessons which I have *learned* through each of the six different approaches instead.

#### EXPERIENCE: GO AND DO

The Lord has often used experience as a school for his disciples. In 1834, the Lord instructed the Prophet Joseph to recruit a company of 500 men, if possible, to march to Missouri in what became known as “Zion’s Camp.” On the day appointed to begin the thousand-mile march, only twenty people headed west. However, by the eighth of June, the company numbered 207 men, eleven women, and eleven children.

In many respects, the daily routine of Zion’s Camp was similar to that of other armies: the able-bodied men walked, the wagons were heavily loaded, the food portions were limited, the trails were dusty, and the heat was oppressive. In other respects, Zion’s Camp was unique. There was a “great emphasis upon spirituality”: the men were admonished to pray, the company halted on the Sabbath, and the Prophet often taught the doctrines of the kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, the men in Zion’s Camp were not asked to take up arms against the mobs in Missouri—and some, being frustrated, apostatized. Others, however, were refined and polished by the experience. They went on to serve in positions of leadership and trust and to receive an endowment in the temple. This was experiential learning at its finest; it provided “priceless schooling in obedience to God and His prophet.”<sup>3</sup>

Experiential education is a method in which teachers “purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values.”<sup>4</sup> The experiences are structured so as to require the learner to take the initiative, make the necessary decisions, and be accountable for the results.

When learning through experience, students frequently go to off-campus sites where they complete academic travel programs, internships, student teaching, clinicals, and service learning opportunities. Learners begin their preparations as soon as their destination is determined—though preparation often continues *during* the experience. Prior coursework certainly provides foundational knowledge, but only gradually do learners become aware of what it will take to succeed in the specific experience at hand.

Early in the process, the learners meet a new support group of colleagues and mentors, whom they will grow to love as they serve. Soon the students are presented with issues and problems that must be solved. Experiential education takes work, and it is frequently quite

**The experiences are structured so as to require the learner to take the initiative, make the necessary decisions, and be accountable for the results.**

unpredictable for both the learners and the teachers, with moments of failure, adventure, risk-taking, and uncertainty. The students must learn to be willing to ask questions and seek help—and they must be receptive to the answers that come.

In the spring of 2006, Jeff and Lynda Hawkes invited me to accompany them to retrieve their younger son, Cody, from his mission in Peru. Another friend of mine, Lidia Toscano, and one of my sisters and her husband, Taunya and Justin Nelson, joined us. I made the travel arrangements and sent out reading assignments. Everybody received the necessary shots, and we packed our bags—taking extra clothes to leave with the Saints, as per Cody’s request. When we met in the Salt Lake airport, we began to learn which travelers were worried about safety, which were prone to motion sickness, and which had health concerns that would require the rest of us to make accommodations.

The missionaries met us in Lima late that night. After the normal hassles getting through customs, we settled into our hotel and fell into an exhausted sleep. The next morning, we arose and dressed for church only to discover it was election day, and all churches were closed by government order. So, we changed our plans—and our shoes! The Hawkes went with Cody to visit members in their homes, and the rest of us did a walking tour of the city. At the end of that first day, both groups had delightful adventures to share. Jeff and Lynda were deeply touched by the love their son had developed for the Saints in Peru. I noted in my journal that evening what a powerful thing it is to see a missionary complete his service honorably.

The next day we headed for Cusco, where we spent a few days visiting sites high in the Andes. We found that Machu Picchu was everything any of us had ever dreamed it would be. Truly, the Incan people created a majestic monument to their existence in that place where (as our tour guide put it) “you can’t take a bad picture.” Lidia was completely enamored of the experience; due to her heritage, she has always felt an affinity for the ancient inhabitants of this land. Justin spoke in awe of the stonework; the perfect fit appealed to his accountant’s mind.<sup>5</sup>

After a few days of oxygen deprivation, we took an hour bus ride to Puno, a city on the shores of Lake Titicaca. I had asked a church member in Cusco who had helped me with some of our hotel arrangements if there was something special he thought we might want to do. Javier had recommended a trip to the floating islands of the Uros. Javier said he knew some church members there, and he made a few calls to set things up for us. We took a small boat out to the reed islands they had built. We visited their schools. We sat in their homes, hugged their children, and looked at their well-loved scriptures. Taunya explained that meeting the Saints there left her feeling:

**What a powerful  
thing it is to see  
a missionary  
complete his  
service honorably.**

Rich and blessed. I was humbled by the gospel—by seeing the picture of the Savior in the red robe hanging on the wall of a reed hut. The Spirit impressed upon me again that the simple things of the gospel are enough. It makes me ask, “What is expected of me?”<sup>6</sup>

And then, a little more than a week after we arrived, we headed home. Naturally, our trip had not been without mishaps. During our travels, we had had tainted food incidents (I cannot imagine what possessed Lidia to eat raw alpaca...or guinea pig, for that matter), inadequate heating complaints (Cusco is, after all, one of the highest inhabited places on earth), and lack of air issues (since Justin’s oxygen machine required a different voltage). But we had worked out each problem. We had even survived a pick-pocketing fiasco.

All of us had expected to discover new things about the Peruvian people and culture, but none of us had completely anticipated the powerful learning experiences we would have. In looking back over my journal entries, I found a recurring theme in my musings: “I have spent many hours on this trip pondering the situation of our youth—especially in terms of education.... I know we cannot accommodate all of our youth at the Church schools, but there MUST be a way to reach out and touch more lives.” I know, I know. Always the teacher!

#### RESEARCH: SEEK FOR WISDOM

**Research is a powerful learning and teaching strategy.**

Research is a powerful learning and teaching strategy—and it is one the Savior employed with great skill. When Jesus Christ appeared to the Nephites, He delivered unto them the “joyful account of gathered Israel as Jehovah had given it aforetime through the mouth of His prophet Isaiah.”<sup>7</sup> The Lord specifically charged the Nephites to search the words of Isaiah *diligently*, “for great are the words of Isaiah” (3 Nephi 23:1). For added emphasis, the Lord reiterated the point, inviting the Nephites again to “search the prophets” (3 Nephi 23:5).

Since the Book of Mormon record was actually written and preserved for *us*, we, too, should respond to the Lord’s invitation to search Isaiah’s writings—which aren’t always easy for those of us living in the modern-day, western culture to understand. Interestingly, our scriptures from this dispensation indicate that Joseph Smith and Elias Higbee had questions as they diligently searched the words of Isaiah. In what is now in Doctrine and Covenants 113, the Lord provided answers to their queries about the Stem of Jesse, the rod, the root, the command to “Put on thy strength, O Zion,” and the loosing of the bands on Zion’s neck.

Learning through research focuses on developing within learners the ability to ask good questions—the types of questions that will lead to new frontiers. While many courses include an inquiry-based activity or two,

a few actually use undergraduate research as the main thrust—allowing students the opportunity to make “an original or creative contribution to the discipline.”<sup>8</sup>

Frequently teachers enhance their own scholarship by engaging in the research process with their students. Teachers can model how to organize a study, participate in gathering data, and review progress with colleagues. At a church-sponsored school where the Spirit prevails, teachers can also show how the search for truth encompasses all branches of learning. The most powerful research programs include interdisciplinary courses and assessment practices that allow students to meet in learning communities and to present their findings to appropriate audiences.

One wintry day in February 2007, Lynette Robertson and I were browsing in Barnes and Noble (a favorite get-away) when we stumbled across a book called *The Top Ten: Writers Pick Their Favorite Books*. It was a compilation of 125 authors’ lists of their top ten favorite books, edited by J. Peder Zane.<sup>9</sup>

We were fascinated. As we sat in the café sipping our hot chocolates with whipped cream, we discussed *our* favorites. At some point, Lynette mused, “Wouldn’t it be interesting to know what the faculty’s favorite books were?” I agreed that it would be—and suggested that we ask them!

So, about a week later, we went to dinner at the Lost Creek Steak House and drafted a little e-mail requesting that our colleagues provide us with a list, ranked in order of what they considered to be the ten greatest books they had read. Other than *not* including the scriptures (since we all love those), we set no limits. They could choose fiction or non-fiction, any work, any writer, and any time period.

When we finished dessert, we drove straight to my office and sent out the message to about 150 colleagues who we hoped wouldn’t be too shocked to get such an unusual e-mail from us. We sent the request on a Saturday evening, and by Monday morning (at 8:06), the answers started coming in.

Most of the faculty couldn’t just send us a list. No, that would have been too easy. We got all sorts of interesting commentary and complaints, apologies and appendices. Many wanted to explain how they had defined “greatest.” Others noted that their lists had kept changing. One lamented that “this was like trying to pick which child is a favorite.”<sup>10</sup> Amusingly, some people seemed worried that we would psychoanalyze their lists. Frankly, we didn’t have to; most of them did it for us! Take, for example, this reply:

I feel a little guilty about this list. All of the authors on my list are American (how ethnocentric!). All of them are men (how sexist!). And five of them are still alive (how shallow and contemporary!). Mea culpa—mea maxima culpa. (Name withheld to protect the guilty)

**Frequently teachers  
enhance their own  
scholarship by  
engaging in the  
research process  
with their students.**

During the three-month period we had given everyone to respond, we decided to build an annotated bibliography of the books being recommended. Lynette and I persuaded my mother to help, and the three of us would sit for hours looking up the books online. Once we reached the deadline, we began the work of tallying the lists, using the formula J. Peder Zane had developed for his book.

By early summer, we sent out a notice inviting the 100 participants to come hear the results. We met in a lecture hall one evening and spent a delightful hour together. Lynette and I began our presentation by reviewing the reason for the “unusual request” we had sent out. We read excerpts (some rather humorous) from the e-mails we had received. At one point, I quoted Brian Merrill, who captured many of our feelings when he wrote that the books he had chosen were: “Books that have engaged, troubled, challenged, or changed me in valuable ways both because they are beautifully written and because they profoundly affected my mind and heart.”<sup>11</sup> We next showed J. Peder Zane’s “Top Top Ten” list. Lynette and I mentioned our surprise (and pleasure) in discovering that not even one book overlapped our list and J. Peder Zane’s. Our faculty’s top top ten list was uniquely Mormon:

**Our faculty's top  
top ten list was  
uniquely Mormon.**

1. *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor E. Frankl
2. *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* by J. R. R. Tolkien
3. *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo
4. *Jesus the Christ* by James E. Talmage
5. *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee
6. *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen
7. *The Hiding Place* by Corrie Ten Boom
8. *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis
9. *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis
10. *King Lear* by William Shakespeare

Before the meeting, we had invited someone to explain reasons for selecting one of the top top ten titles. The “book shares” were fascinating. I remember the spirit that was present as Rudy Puzey described reading *Les Misérables* with his children and as T.L. McRae introduced *Man's Search for Meaning* by talking about his visit to the concentration camps in Eastern Europe. Dawn Anderson brought her *Lord of the Rings* action figures, while Rebecca Jorgensen shared a powerful testimony of *Jesus the Christ*. We had a wonderful time together, with much laughter and quite a few tears.

## DISCUSSION: REASON TOGETHER

Discussion methods were utilized by the Lord with dramatic results. When the Savior appeared to the Nephites, he asked for their written records to be brought forth so that he might “cast his eyes upon them” (3 Nephi 23:8). The Lord then proceeded to have a discussion with his disciples about the contents of the records. He explained that Samuel had been sent to testify of the reality of a resurrection. He asked, “Was it not so?” (3 Nephi 23:9). After their affirmative replies, the Lord continued His probing, “How be it that ye have not written this thing, that many saints did arise and appear unto many and did minister unto them?” (3 Nephi 23:11). Nephi, the senior apostle, acknowledged this had not been done—and “therefore it was written” (3 Nephi 23:13).

The Lord then proceeded to suggest another text for inclusion in the Nephite scriptures: a passage from Malachi. The Lord quoted the words to the Nephites, who wrote them down. The Savior then “expounded them” (3 Nephi 24:1). We do not have the details of that discussion, though, certainly, we are blessed to have the text from Malachi, with its many thought-provoking questions.

Discussion-based strategies are heavily utilized in practices such as literature circles, the case method, and Socratic dialogues. In these methods, the teacher typically assumes the responsibility of developing readings which cover a rich landscape of issues. This material is provided to learners before class (in either traditional or electronic formats), and preparation is essential. The students must read and study the materials—alone and in small groups. They must also listen to the Spirit as they seek to understand the issues.

When the actual class begins, the teacher opens the discussion with a provocative question posed to ignite thinking and then orchestrates a rapid-fire discussion full of analysis, argument, insight, and persuasion. The students must be accountable for the “talk” they contribute to the discussions, and other students may challenge their thinking directly.<sup>12</sup> In a very real sense, the class members work together to seek answers, and all must participate. Approaches like the case method create “a classroom in which students succeed not by simply absorbing facts and theories, but also by *exercising* the skills of leadership and teamwork in the face of real problems.”<sup>13</sup>

Some of the most provocative discussions I have had in recent years have been with my colleagues who were pursuing doctoral degrees. The first to involve me in his doctoral work was Greg Williams. Back when the campus was preparing for the accreditation visit from the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, I did a series of faculty in-service courses on the foundations of American education. Greg had been intrigued with a presentation I had done on Jesus Christ being

**Students succeed not by simply absorbing facts and theories, but also by exercising the skills of leadership and teamwork in the face of real problems.**

the “life, truth, and way” and how that addresses a uniquely Mormon ontology, epistemology, and axiology. At some point during his studies, Greg decided to use the ideas I had taught as the conceptual framework for his dissertation, so he came to me one day and asked if I would serve as an “outside auditor” for him. I had no idea what that meant, but I told him I would be happy to help.

In early 2004, Greg brought me a copy of his dissertation. He asked if we could get together in a few days to discuss his work. So I got out my red pen and started reading. I found the study to be quite fascinating. When we met a few days later, Greg and I took turns asking and answering questions. We each sought to clarify points, deepen our understanding, and determine a course of action for strengthening the piece. It was a lively discussion lasting well over an hour. A few weeks later, we repeated the process...and again a few weeks after that, until Greg’s work was polished and ready to submit.

**We each sought  
to clarify points,  
deepen our  
understanding**

I had such a positive experience serving as Greg’s “auditor” that I was delighted when other graduate students approached me for input on their various studies and projects. My colleagues usually apologized for troubling me, but I always assured them that, *honestly*, it was my pleasure. I truly enjoyed learning about nursing education from Donna Funk; it was a field I had never studied. I was fascinated by Kendall Grant’s creative writing piece; I’d never seen such an innovative approach to a dissertation. JoAnne Kay’s study on the effects of No Child Left Behind was professionally stimulating. Ah, and then I’ve learned, among other things, about the power of cooking from Jeff Hamblin, the learning style of the Prophet Joseph from Greg Wightman, the growing problem of aliteracy from Lynda Hawkes, the effective practices of early interventionists from David Allen, the impact of the Learning Model from Larry Thurgood, and the value of wilderness programs for developing leadership skills from Josh Holt.

I have found it incredibly rewarding in the past few years to spend time with my colleagues talking about topics that have deeply engaged them. I have learned much at their feet, and I have wished that all of us had more time and opportunities to discuss one another’s scholarly work.

#### LECTURE: SHOW THE PATTERN

Near the time of the ordination of the twelve apostles, Jesus delivered a “remarkable discourse” which has come to be known as the “Sermon on the Mount.”<sup>14</sup> While some portions were expressly directed to the disciples, other parts were of general application. A parallel sermon was given to the Nephites when the Lord appeared to them following his resurrection, so, clearly, the lecture contains elements which merit careful consideration.

In *Jesus the Christ*, James E. Talmage explained that the opening section of the sermon was “rich in blessing.”<sup>15</sup> The Lord then instructed the apostles about purity with “particular directness.”<sup>16</sup> The next section dealt with the “superiority of the gospel of Christ over the law of Moses.”<sup>17</sup> The Lord then taught about almsgiving, prayer, and the “enduring riches of eternity.”<sup>18</sup>

In a brief and powerful commentary, Matthew noted that the Savior’s discourse was met with astonishment, for He had taught “as one having authority” (Matthew 7:29). In our dispensation, Harold B. Lee referred to the sermon as a “blueprint” for perfection.<sup>19</sup> Inspired lectures given by the Lord’s servants today can also serve as blueprints for our lives—and they can leave us, the listeners, yearning for more.

The lecture format is a powerful method “to transmit information, to create interest, and to promote understanding. . .when the facts or problems are conflicting or confusing in nature [and] the experience of the speaker will contribute to clarification of the issues.”<sup>20</sup> Preparation for a lecture often involves reading assigned chapters in a text or reviewing online materials. By asking the right questions, learners and teachers begin to see patterns, such as cause and effect, process and sequence, comparison and contrast, definition and description, and problem and solution.

The teacher, of course, must focus the actual lecture presentation, choose an effective organizational format, select appropriate graphic organizers, and synchronize any multi-media devices. As the lecture is delivered, the teacher imparts and also models a creative mind at work—inspiring a reverence for learning, challenging beliefs and habits of thinking, and providing motivation for future action. A good lecturer utilizes strategies to keep listeners actively engaged, such as rhetorical questions, surveys, story-telling, partnering with a peer, and quizzes.<sup>21</sup>

In 2006, my life became a “perfect storm.” There were disasters and crises at work, church, and home. By December, I was exhausted. As the fall semester drew to a close, I decided to skip graduation and just go to Idaho Falls for the day. For several hours, I poked around the mall and finished up my Christmas shopping. Although I enjoyed the “alone time,” I couldn’t shake the feeling that I needed to go back to Rexburg for Jeffrey R. Holland’s commencement address. I had been praying for guidance, and I had the impression that I would receive answers through his words. I finally heeded the promptings and headed home.

I arrived too late to run to the office for my cap and gown, so I just sat in the audience with the parents. Elder Holland spoke about the Lord’s newest experiment to create a Zion here in southeastern Idaho. He talked about the struggles of the Saints and of the “trail of tears” that marked our early temples. He then said:

**As the lecture is delivered, the teacher imparts and also models a creative mind at work—inspiring a reverence for learning...**

You are making your own inspired, pioneering journey and you will have some Kirtland's and Jackson County's, and some Nauvoo's along the way... The children of Israel have always undertaken quests, journeys if you will, that have required tremendous faith and divine direction. So as the modern bearers of that covenant heritage, I ask you to believe.... Believe in what God intends for you personally and for this university. If you will persevere as you have begun and be true to what LDS temples and universities stand for, what "Zion" stands for, I promise you your future will take care of itself and will be very bright indeed.<sup>22</sup>

**I was grateful  
for the message  
of hope and  
inspiration, and  
I found an inner  
peace which lasted  
for quite some time.**

I was grateful for the message of hope and inspiration, and I found an inner peace which lasted for quite some time. However, the storm did not abate.

Several months later, I attended the BYU Women's Conference with Lidia Toscano and a group of sisters from her ward. I was pleased to discover that Elder Holland and his wife, Patricia, were the keynote speakers. With their characteristic humor and charm, the Hollands delivered a beautiful lecture. They spoke about the convergence of an important woman with an important moment. They stressed that this is a time to be grateful and optimistic, pointing out that we have a responsibility that no other dispensation has had: preparing the Church for the arrival of the Lamb. Elder Holland then closed with an apostolic blessing, saying, in part:

I bless you that with His unfailing companionship you will find your way through your most difficult days and receive answers to your earnest prayers.... I bless you to know that there are good days ahead, always, that the darkest clouds always part and the most fearful days always flee before the beneficent face of the Father, the redeeming grace of the Son, and the sweet influence of the Holy Ghost in our lives.<sup>23</sup>

Again, I felt uplifted and encouraged by Elder Holland's words. And, again, the challenges continued. Frankly, I was beginning to feel quite fragile. I honestly didn't know if I had enough strength left to weather the storm.

A few weeks later, Elder Holland was the visiting general authority for the Rexburg Idaho East Stake Conference. At the Adult Session Saturday evening, Elder Holland complimented us for being one of the strongest stakes in the Church. He then announced that "somebody is struggling." He reminded us that we came to earth knowing there would be trials (and wryly remarked that Elder Maxwell often wondered what we were all shouting about in the pre-existence). He then explained that the Lord knows what it is like to have dark nights and offered some counsel:

1. Remember that God loves broken things.
2. Endure, and save yourself for days of happiness ahead.
3. Follow the first rule of seamanship: In the midst of a storm, stay in the boat!

In less than six months, I had received counsel directly from an apostle three times. Though I have quoted primarily from the printed versions of the discourses here, my personal notes reflect the powerful whisperings of the Spirit that accompanied each sermon. Elder Holland’s lectures were inspired, and his words have sustained me through some very difficult times.

#### PROJECTS: LISTEN TO COUNSEL

The Lord has frequently invited his Saints to take part in grand projects. After spending eight years in the wilderness, Nephi was called unto a mountain where the Lord instructed him “to construct a ship” (1 Nephi 17:8). After coming to a general understanding of what the project entailed, Nephi asked the Lord where he should go to “find ore to molten, that I may make tools” (1 Nephi 17:9). Nephi went to the place the Lord named, and he soon made a bellows and tools (1 Nephi 17:11 and 16).

Two of Nephi’s older brothers were reluctant to assist with building the ship—until the Lord shocked them (literally) into a realization of the power He had bestowed upon Nephi (1 Nephi 17:54-55). At that point, Laman and Lemuel humbled themselves and offered their strength—laboring with their younger brother to “work timbers of curious workmanship” (1 Nephi 18:1).

At frequent intervals, Nephi returned to the mount so that the Lord could provide additional instruction. During his “Inaugural Response,” David A. Bednar commented on that building process:

The phrase “time to time” suggests to me that Nephi perhaps did not receive everything he needed to know about shipbuilding as he began his task. Apparently he received the necessary knowledge line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little as it was needed. This may be one of the first recorded instances of a Just-In-Time learning process.<sup>24</sup>

We have no real sense of the months (or perhaps years) involved, but, when the ship was finished, the entire family saw that “it was good and... exceedingly fine” (1 Nephi 18:4). It is always good to rejoice when a large project has been completed!

The project method requires students to collaboratively solve practical problems: “This model of instruction allows the opportunity for students to work autonomously over significant amounts of time and often culminates in realistic presentations or products.”<sup>25</sup> Project work focuses

**The project method requires students to collaboratively solve practical problems.**

on applying specific knowledge or skills and on fostering self-confidence and social responsibility.

Innovation is highly prized in group projects, so learners should be encouraged to contribute their best thinking and creative efforts. At the discretion of the teacher, direct instruction may either precede or be integrated into the project—and often comes at the request of the learners. Therefore, students need to be actively involved with their groups, monitor their own progress, and reflect upon their work. Often when students believe they are “almost done” with a project, they realize that more instruction and preparation are needed to truly “finish” it.

**Often when students believe they are “almost done” with a project, they realize that more instruction and preparation are needed to truly “finish” it.**

In the spring of 2003, I agreed to serve on the newly created Rexburg Children’s Museum Board. We didn’t actually have a museum, but we had plenty of vision and enthusiasm—and a lot of willing hearts and hands. Then, in 2006, Stephen George, the board president, became unexpectedly ill. Shortly before Stephen’s death, his wife, Rebecca, called to ask if I would handle some correspondence with the Idaho Community Foundation. It was at that point I became aware that we had received a \$10,000 grant that was supposed to have been spent the year before.

I contacted the Foundation and persuaded them to give us one additional year to either spend the money or return it. Fortunately, the Foundation also agreed to allow us to put an exhibit into an already existing facility. I visited museums within a 30-mile radius, asking about possibilities. Other board members spread out looking at schools and libraries. In January 2007, we met to counsel together.

As the newly-elected president, I presented the pros and cons of putting our exhibit into each of the places we had scouted out, calling for input at appropriate moments. As a board, we carefully considered each option—including just sending the money back. Eventually, we began to lean towards putting the money into the Children’s Room at the Museum of Idaho in Idaho Falls. Then Shawn Larsen spoke up.

Mayor Larsen simply declared that, if at all possible, he would like to see us keep the money in Rexburg. He said the city owned the Teton Flood Museum and that he would talk to the chairman of that board, Chris Fox, about allocating us space there. A few weeks later, the City Council approved our proposal to create a children’s museum inside the Teton Flood Museum. At that point, the *real* work began!

With Michael Bone’s help, we soon secured permission from the Madison School District to salvage the wainscoting and flooring from Toai Gakuen (an old Japanese language school) before it was demolished. We had no idea how to lift a wooden floor, so I called Gifford Flooring for help. The owner, Mitch, happily came and taught us how to pry up the boards with crowbars—and he stayed all day to assist! Mitch then described for us how to clean the wood with steel brushes, too, a task

which took dozens of volunteers the whole summer to complete. The entire crew from Gifford Flooring showed up in the fall, donating their time to help us lay the floor in our room in the basement of the Tabernacle.

When we were ready to install the wainscoting, I sought advice from BMC West. Boyd Weatherston loaned us a nail gun with a compressor and showed us how to use it. We had a fun-filled evening putting up the walls.

As we moved to the activity areas, Gary Benson designed and directed us in building a tree. Jim and Kathleen Gordon guided us through assembling a “tree house” loft. A group of bikers that I pulled in from the parking lot helped install a blackboard and display cases. We added old-fashioned desks, and, slowly, a one-room schoolhouse emerged. In less than a year, the \$10,000 was gone and the project was finished...or should I say it was ready to begin?!

During the opening month, over 1400 children and parents came to see the Rexburg Children’s Museum’s “Back to School” exhibit. During the remainder of the time while I served as president, Steve Stewart’s writing classes helped create several exhibits: “Around the World,” “Dinosaurs and Fossils,” and “Holiday Traditions.” Other members of the community contributed to “The Sounds of Music,” “Rock Hounds,” and “Our Heritage.”

Creating the Rexburg Children’s Museum was a challenging and rewarding project. It provided me with an unparalleled opportunity to see the difference that a small group of enthusiastic citizens could make. Furthermore, I truly learned to value the counsel of my Board members, to seek help from those with unique skill sets, and even to listen to interested parties who offered unsolicited advice.

**This project provided me with an unparalleled opportunity to see the difference that a small group of enthusiastic citizens could make.**

#### SKILLS: PERFORM WITH EXACTNESS

At certain pivotal times, the Lord used skill-based methods to train his disciples in the proper manner to perform various ordinances. For instance, at the conclusion of the Lord’s final Passover meal in Jerusalem, “while Jesus with the twelve still sat at table,” the Lord instituted the ordinance of the Sacrament.<sup>26</sup> He carefully demonstrated for His apostles how the bread and wine were to be blessed and sanctified. He reverently instructed them as to how the emblems of His body and blood were to be eaten and drunk.

When the risen Lord appeared to the Nephites, He instituted that ordinance among them, as well, showing them exactly how it was to be performed—and reinforcing the procedure on the second day of His visit. In our dispensation, the Savior has again revealed the set prayers and procedures for administering the sacrament.

Skill-based education is “focused on outcomes.... Large skill sets are broken down into competencies, which may have sequential levels of mastery.”<sup>27</sup> The chosen skills, knowledge, and attitudes are bundled together by the teacher to provide the optimal grouping for performing the assigned tasks.

**The learner  
is often given  
guided practice,  
with feedback  
at appropriate  
intervals.**

Usually, the teacher (or another person who has mastered the skill being learned) demonstrates the necessary steps. The learner is often given guided practice, with feedback at appropriate intervals. The culminating activities involve performances or competitions before expert juries, where scores are typically reported using rubrics or checklists.

For several years, I served as the dean over the College of Education, and Military Science was one of the programs under my stewardship. In the spring of 2005, Jon Harris graciously asked me if I would like to learn more about the ROTC program. Naturally, I said, “Yes!” Captain Harris quickly arranged for me to make an “Educator’s Visit” to Fort Lewis, Washington, to see Warrior Forge, where our cadets learned leadership skills between their junior and senior years.

I knew that David Magleby had made an educator’s visit to West Point prior to his assignment with a military history course, so I asked him what I should expect. His glowing reports of the field trips his group had taken to the various battlefields left me reassured that I was in for a treat.

I was collected at the airport by a uniformed soldier, who drove a group of educators to the base. We had a lovely reception the first evening, and I was excited by the brief introduction we received.

The next morning, we started out by watching the cadets on the confidence course. To complete the circuit, the cadets had to scramble over, under, and through a variety of obstacles—and these were not the typical old-rubber-tire kind of obstacles. They crawled under yards of barbed wire, scurried up exceedingly high walls, and crossed anxiety-producing platforms and beams. It was fun to watch the teams encouraging one another and working to beat their previous times.

Our second stop was a shooting range. As we stepped off the bus, a soldier handed us ear plugs and Kevlar helmets. I thought the “safety first” attitude was commendable, and I quickly put on the gear. When we got to a small set of bleachers, the colonel proceeded to demonstrate how to use an M16A2. He showed us how to sight the gun, exhale, and squeeze the trigger. Since it was rather hard to hear with the earplugs in, I was impressed with the clarity of the presentation. The colonel then showed us how to insert a magazine and turn off the safety feature on the rifles. I watched these unfamiliar maneuvers with considerable curiosity. When he began to explain the different kinds of targets and how to position the sandbags to steady the rifle, I wondered whether we were going to

actually shoot the M16s. Then he numbered us off and told the first group to get into the foxholes, confirming my suspicions.

I was in the second group, so I got to watch the first shooter from the next-in-line position. The woman before me jumped into our foxhole, waited for instructions from the man in the tower, and commenced firing. When all of the bullets were used, the commander asked the first group to set their rifles on the ground, walk down range, and write their names on their targets. He wanted to see which university did the best job. About then, my adrenalin started going!

I had never handled a rifle before, but I knew that Captain Harris had scored a perfect 300 on his fitness exam at boot camp. Our cadets were always superb. I couldn't embarrass our university by failing to hit the target! I closed my eyes and pictured the demonstration the colonel had given on how to site, breathe, and squeeze. After taking a deep breath to calm my nerves, I stepped up to the firing line.

The young lieutenant asked if he could help me into the foxhole. Not wanting to be molly-coddled, I declined his assistance and carefully slid into the pit. I tugged at the sandbags and decided they would be just fine where they were. I was able to clip in the magazine by myself, but I had to ask the young soldier to help me "turn the gun on." He smiled knowingly, squatted down, flipped the safety switch, and neatly stepped back. I mentally reviewed the colonel's instructions a second time, hunted down range for my human-shaped target, and began firing. I got the gun stuck once, but my attendant jiggled some lever which made the bullets click into place. I then resumed firing. Frankly, I liked the feel of the M16. Maybe I've watched too many cowboy movies with Dad, but I was expecting a bit more kick. It had a very smooth action.

When everyone was out of ammunition, the voice from the tower instructed us to set our guns on the ground. I hoisted myself out of the foxhole and brushed off some dirt. As we started down range with the big black magic marker, the lieutenant who was attending me said, "I *think* you might have hit the target a few times." I chuckled and admitted that was a relief because I didn't want to embarrass our captain. He laughed. As we approached the half-way mark, I realized he was squinting at my target. With wonder in his voice, the lieutenant exclaimed, "I think you might have hit it with all 20 shots!"

As we took the last step, the lieutenant put out his hand and admiringly rubbed the target with its 20 holes, all tightly clustered (some overlapping) on the bull's-eye. "Wow!" he said. "You *definitely* passed marksmanship! This is awesome! The last lady didn't even hit the paper!"

When the colonel saw my target drilled full of holes, he held it up for all to see and announced, "Now this woman's home is *secure*!" His words struck me as funny since I'd never fired a rifle before and certainly

**I mentally reviewed  
the colonel's  
instructions a  
second time.**

didn't own a gun. But I had passed marksmanship. And rappelling down a 40-foot tall building without "going possum." And shimmying up logs. And tying knots. Yes, I learned a lot about the military. And I am ever grateful that we have *young* people willing to put themselves in harm's way to safeguard our freedoms.

But the most thought-provoking learning came when I reported back to Captain Harris and Sergeant Petzinger at BYU–Idaho. When I related the story of my stellar marksmanship performance, Sergeant Petzinger commented, without the least bit of surprise in his voice, "Oh, you must have followed instructions." And I had. I was able to perform well precisely because I had remembered the demonstration of the colonel who had shown me how to shoot that M16—just as I listened to those who held my life in their hands as I stepped backward off that tall building or as I teetered on a log far above the earth. Those soldiers knew *why* they had invited me to the Warrior Forge, they knew *what* they wanted to teach me, and they knew *how* to present it in a way that would develop skill while inspiring trust and confidence.

And so I ended the body of my chapter on pedagogy. Of course, that was just Chapter 2 of a much larger study. My report went on to look at lesson planning, peer interaction, questions, personal revelation, assessment, and technology. My personal research into the scholarship of learning and teaching has reinforced in my mind the importance of seeking light and truth. It has enhanced my efforts to follow the Savior and truly become one of his disciples. Furthermore, it has blessed the lives of my students. I close with a sentiment expressed by President Gordon B. Hinckley:

In speaking of the highest academic standards, has anyone a more inspiring yardstick by which to measure the acquisition of learning than that given by the Lord himself? "The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth" (Doctrine and Covenants 93:36). Is not that what we are after? Light and truth become the *summum bonum* of all true learning.<sup>28</sup> ☪

## NOTES

- 1 David A. Bednar, "Brigham Young University–Idaho Inaugural Luncheon," 11 October 2005, Brigham Young University–Idaho, 1.
- 2 Church Educational System, *Church History in the Fullness of Times, Student Manual*, (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003), 145.
- 3 *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young*, (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 4.
- 4 "What is experiential education?" Association for Experiential Education, 2008, <http://www.aee.org/customer/pages.php?pageid=47> (accessed 26 March 2008), 1.
- 5 Justin T. Nelson, interviewed by author, 17 April 2008, Phone conversation.

My personal  
research into  
the scholarship  
of learning and  
teaching has  
enhanced my  
efforts to follow  
the Savior and truly  
become one of His  
disciples.

- 6 Taunya S. Nelson, interviewed by author, 17 April 2008, Phone conversation.
- 7 James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1951), 734.
- 8 “Learning through research.” Council on Undergraduate Research, 2008, <http://www.cur.org/about.html> (accessed 26 March 2008), 1.
- 9 J. Peder Zane, *The Top Ten: Writers Pick Their Favorite Books* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).
- 10 S. Holman, e-mail message to author, 23 March 2007.
- 11 Brian Merrill, e-mail message to author, 26 April 2007.
- 12 A. Le Schack, “Facilitating accountable talk in your classroom,” Teachers Network, [http://teachersnetwork.org/NTNY/nychelp/Professional\\_Development/talk.htm](http://teachersnetwork.org/NTNY/nychelp/Professional_Development/talk.htm) (accessed June 8, 2008).
- 13 “The case method,” Harvard Business School, 2008, <http://www.hbs.edu/case/index.html> (accessed 26 March 2008), 1.
- 14 Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 230 n. 7.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid., 232.
- 17 Ibid., 234.
- 18 Ibid., 242.
- 19 Church Educational System, *Book of Mormon, Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1996), 117.
- 20 Grayson H. Walker Teaching Resource Center, “When to use lecture v. other strategies,” *Lecturing with style*, 1997, <http://www.utc.edu/Administration/WalkerTeachingResourceCenter/FacultyDevelopment/Lecture/index.html> (accessed 26 March 2008), 20.
- 21 T. Drummond, “A Brief Summary of the Best Practices in College Teaching: Intended to Challenge the Professional Development of All Teachers,” 1991, <http://www.fctel.uncc.edu/pedagogy/basiccourse/develop/BestPractices.html> (accessed 7 April 2008), 1995.
- 22 Jeffrey R. Holland, “Zion Revisited,” Brigham Young University–Idaho Commencement, 20 December 2006, 4.
- 23 Jeffrey R. Holland, “What Time Is This?” Brigham Young University Women’s Conference, 4 May 2007, 8–9.
- 24 David A. Bednar, “Inaugural Response,” 27 February 1997, Brigham Young University–Idaho, 6.
- 25 Houghton Mifflin, “Project-based learning,” (2008), [http://college.hmco.com/education/resources/res\\_project/students/c2007/background.html](http://college.hmco.com/education/resources/res_project/students/c2007/background.html) (accessed 26 March 2008), 1.
- 26 Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 596 n. 7.
- 27 “Competencies and learning objectives,” Council on Education for Public Health, 2006, <http://www.ceph.org/files/public/Competencies.pdf> (accessed 26 March 2008), 1.
- 28 Gordon B. Hinckley, “A Unique and Wonderful University,” Brigham Young University Devotional, 11 October 1988, 3.