



Regeneration and The Faculty Learning Fellowship

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In September of 1066 A.D., French Normans, led by William the Conqueror, invaded England. Only days before, the English King Harold had defeated Norwegian invaders to the north. Leaving most of his army behind, Harold travelled south to meet the Norman forces and was killed in the Battle of Hastings taking an arrow through the eye, so the story goes. William was crowned king of England on Christmas Day; for the next 200 years, Norman French was the language of legal and political affairs in England bringing thousands of French words into the English language. Latin held its place as the language of religion and education, while English survived through the speech of the illiterate lower classes.

Today, this period is called The Dark Ages of English Literature because relatively little English writing remains from that 200-year period. By the time English was once again on top by becoming the language of government, law, and literature, it had transformed significantly into the

form we now call Middle English, best known to us in the language of Chaucer and his *Canterbury Tales*.

My interest in the history of the English language was sparked at BYU in the early 1990s, when I took a required undergraduate course on the subject. Sadly for me, the course was held during a shortened summer term, and the teacher had other business during the first two weeks of class. I learned enough, however, to realize that the history of the English language—or any language, for that matter—is deep and complex, sufficient to occupy a lifetime of study. Soon after taking that course, I was off to grad school at Illinois State University, studying composition and literature, and a few years later I was hired to teach English at Ricks College. Though I was still fascinated by the history of English, for many years I did not find further professional justification to study the subject in any depth.

That situation began to change in 2006, when the English Department was short on teachers for English 325, Grammar and Usage. I signed up to teach the class. It was hard work gearing up to become adequate for the task, but I loved it. The more I taught students about transitive and intransitive verbs, phrases and clauses, and the ten sentence patterns in the Reed-Kellogg diagramming method, the more I wanted to learn the history of how English got to where it is today as a global lingua franca. When the opportunity came to apply for a Winter 2019 Faculty Learning Fellowship, I wrote an proposal to study the history of English and to take a three-week trip to England, to visit for the first time a country I had only read about in my 24 years of teaching at BYU-Idaho.

The BYU-Idaho Faculty Guide explains that Faculty Learning Fellowships and Professional Development Leaves are provided to “promote growth and content depth.” PDL and FLF projects should give faculty members “opportunities to develop as teachers and scholars.” The Guide further states that “Such projects both directly and indirectly bless students who are instructed by accomplished, skilled, and knowledgeable faculty members” (“Professional,” 2019).

At other institutions, a professional development opportunity such as this is commonly called a “sabbatical.” Though this term is not used at BYU-Idaho, we can learn much from that word and its biblical origins. The word

“Sabbath” came into Old English from Late Latin, and Greek before that, originating in the Hebrew word Shabat, meaning “to rest.” In Exodus 31:13 God says to the Children of Israel, “Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the Lord that doth sanctify you” (italics added). The Children of Israel were sanctified (set apart and made holy) by the fact that were commanded not to work all the time. Instead, they were to rest on the Sabbath and take care of themselves spiritually as well as materially. Not only does Sabbath observance set a people apart from the world, it also provides an opportunity for greater strength and productivity in consequence of the rest and spiritual outpouring it offers.

In Leviticus 25: 3-4, God further commands the children of Israel to institute a sabbatical year: “Six years thou shalt sow thy field . . . and gather in the fruit. . . . But in the seventh year shall be a sabbath of rest unto the land.” This same biblical concept later inspired colleges and other institutions to provide sabbatical leaves of varying lengths for faculty and employees (Kimball, 1978). These verses in Leviticus speak of a rest “unto the land,” a phrase repeated in verse 5. If the land was not in constant production, it would have the chance to regenerate, making it ultimately more productive. For those working the land, a period of rest and renewal encouraged reflection and humility, reminding them that they must not boast in their own strength. They must not become prideful in their ability to work, work, work; but must instead remember that their strength comes from God.

Speaking of the connection between biblical and university sabbaticals, Bruce Kimball (1978), writing in *The Journal of Higher Education*, said that sabbaticals involve “important spiritual and intellectual goals which higher education must pursue . . . in order to effectively educate students.” Kimball further states that the Sabbath and sabbaticals provide “time for rest and renewal of the individual, a time to ask ‘Who are we?’ and ‘Why are we here?’ and ‘Why does our work have meaning?’” The same goals inform BYU-Idaho’s PDL and FLF policies.

Much can be said about educational quality in terms of good curriculum, good textbooks, and good facilities, but nothing can beat a passionate teacher.

My own semester-long FLF study began with an exploration of the origins of writing itself, which developed around 4000 B.C., and marked the distinction between recorded history and “prehistoric” time. Early writing followed a course through pictographs, logograms, and syllabaries, and finally into an alphabet. Created among Semitic-speaking slaves in Egypt around 1000 B.C., the Proto-Canaanite or Phoenician alphabet was later borrowed by the Greeks, the Etruscans, and then the Romans. All known alphabets today spring from these sources, except the Korean Hangul alphabet, which was built from scratch in the mid-1400s A.D. Today three-fourths of the world uses alphabetic writing—mostly in the form of the Roman, Cyrillic, and Arabic alphabets—while the rest of the world uses non-alphabetic systems, such as in China and Japan (Sacks, 2004).

My study also introduced me to the Proto-Indo-European family of languages, including Proto-Germanic, and ultimately English. Old English, which is essentially a foreign language to modern English speakers, developed around 600 A.D.; Middle English around 1150 to 1500; and Modern English after that. (Of course, all the above dates are approximations.)

My semester-long study did not make me a master the thousands of years of language history associated with English. However, I did acquire an invaluable gathering of knowledge that I am sure will make me a better English teacher for years to come, no matter what classes I am assigned to teach.

The things I learned though books and Internet resources were brought to life by a three-week trip to England, where I visited libraries, museums, and historical sites in London, Portsmouth, Oxford, and the Lake

District. I visited Stonehenge, attended a performance of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* at Stratford-Upon-Avon, and saw the musical *Hamilton* in London. Among the most regenerative of my experiences was a half day of writing at a beautiful bed-and-breakfast called High Park Farm in the Lake District. Even the drive north on the M6 motorway, passing towns with names like Penkrige and Hanchurch while listening to a podcast on the Great Vowel Shift, were made richer by the fact that I had immersed myself in English history and the English language in preparation for the trip.

When the university offers a Faculty Learning Fellowship, it has one primary concern: “How will your project bless your future students?”

In the course of my FLE, I created lesson materials that will be useful in my classes for years to come, materials I can share with my colleagues. Later this semester I will do a presentation for the English Academic Society on highlights in the history of English. In addition, I am now tolerably prepared to teach English 327: History of the English Language, should the department call on me to do so. But I suspect that the most frequent return on the university’s investment will occur in those ordinary moments of teaching when a student asks about a quirk in the language, or asks, for example, why a word like know is spelled with a silent k and w. Rather than saying, “I don’t know—it’s just that way,” I can explain something about the reasons behind the many peculiarities of English—reasons that, once learned, make the language more endearing and less frustrating.

Much can be said about educational quality in terms of good curriculum, good textbooks, and good facilities, but nothing can beat a passionate teacher. In the world our Heavenly Father has provided for us, nothing is boring. The naturalist Charles Darwin spent years studying earthworms and their effect on the English soil. (He found it to be groundbreaking!) His book *The Formation of Vegetable Mould Through the Action of*

Worms, With Observations on Their Habits, published in 1881, sold more copies in his lifetime than *On the Origin of Species* (Palca, 2009). Even something as lowly as the earthworm can be exciting and inspiring in the hands of a master imbued with passion about the topic.

I don’t know if I can match Darwin’s enthusiasm for the earthworm, but I am very excited to once again be in the classroom teaching English after my 2019 Faculty Learning Fellowship. I am excited to teach writing and grammar and help students appreciate the God-given miracle of language. I hope in some measure to fulfill the university’s invitation to “directly and indirectly bless students” through continued professional development. ❖

References

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Home of Jane Austen. One of the visited locations during the international study for history in the English language