

## BYU-IDAHO—A TEACHING UNIVERSITY

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While Ricks College has always been a teaching-centered school, President Gordon B. Hinckley's announcement about BYU-Idaho has sparked a greater emphasis on teaching and learning. As part of that announcement, President Hinckley said: "BYU-Idaho will continue to be teaching oriented. Effective teaching and advising will be the primary responsibilities of its faculty, who are committed to academic excellence." In the faculty meeting on August 16, 2000, Don Bird said: "We need to be scholars in the art of teaching and learning." One of the assumptions stated for the transition to BYU-Idaho is that the school will "emphasize the scholarship of learning and teaching." This paper will examine common practices of teaching, the methodology of question-based teaching, and recommendations for adopting this and other effective teaching methodologies.

### COMMON TEACHING AND LEARNING PRACTICES

For Fall Semester 2000, Ricks began offering a number of classes over the Internet. We can learn a great deal about our current methods of teaching, and ways to improve them, by observing the actions of students in these online classes. They have been taken out of the "traditional" learning environment and placed in an environment where there is no classroom experience, no lecture, no due dates, and little or no face-to-face interaction with the instructor. Most of the external forces of motivation are removed.

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When students are taken out of this traditional learning environment, the motivation to learn declines. Thirty-five percent of students do not complete any assignments before midterm. Twenty-four percent of students drop after the semester starts. It should be noted that although motivation is isolated here, it is only one of many factors that determine the success of an online learner.

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Very few of these students are self-motivated learners, most being products of a traditional lecture-based, teacher-centered educational environment. Most of us were taught in a teacher-centered environment, and consequently this is how we often teach. This traditional method of teaching and learning puts the learner in a passive position. President Bednar has said: "much of the traditional pedagogy and methodology... is students who are acted upon rather than acting" (Faculty Meeting,

16 August 2000). For an instructor, this is an inherently satisfying experience—to be the fount of knowledge to which the unlearned turn for understanding and guidance. However, at this institution our mission is not necessarily to provide satisfying experiences for instructors, but to “provide a quality education for students of diverse interests and abilities” and to “prepare students for further education and employment, and for their roles as citizens and parents” (Ricks College Mission Statement). While being the fount of wisdom and knowledge is a satisfying experience, the satisfaction that comes from being a participant in an individual’s learning is exponentially greater.

#### QUESTION-BASED TEACHING AND LEARNING

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The most effective learning experiences are individual. In the faculty meeting at the beginning of the year, President Bednar reiterated the fact that effective learning takes place “one-by-one.” Each one of us is an individual, with a unique background, a unique understanding, even a unique way of learning things. The best way an individual can learn something thoroughly is one-on-one with an instructor. However, since most classes are organized in groups, individualized teaching becomes a challenge.

The Holy Ghost is the most efficient and effective teacher, and the Holy Ghost teaches at the individual level. With the right preparation, the Holy Ghost can teach an individual any subject matter in any setting, small or large. In essence, the instructor is not the one teaching the class, but the one who helps promote an opportunity for the students to learn from the greatest teacher, the Holy Ghost.

Questioning is one way to promote an individualized learning environment, where students are internally motivated and learn by the power of the Holy Ghost. In one sense, questioning involves the teacher asking questions of the student. More importantly, though, questioning involves helping the student to ask the right questions. Revelation comes as we ask questions: “Ask, and it shall be given unto you” (3 Nephi 14:7). What is revelation? One definition is “an increased understanding.” The process of asking questions to gain spiritual understanding can also apply to gaining secular knowledge, since all truth emanates from God.

Typically, the Lord does not give an increase in knowledge or understanding until a person asks a question and makes an effort to find the answer. Effective educational experiences will occur when the learners are in an environment where problems are presented that encourage them to ask questions and seek answers, where resources and guidance are

made available to assist in answering the questions and comprehending the answers.

The teacher's primary challenge will be: 1) choosing the right problems to present to the learner, 2) organizing the effective presentation of those problems, and 3) presenting those problems in a way that is clear to the learner. These should be problems and questions that are "stinging" enough to move to action, problems and questions that sufficiently motivate learners to seek answers.

One of the best ways to help our students ask good questions is to ask questions ourselves—questions we do not know the answers to, questions we struggle with, questions we can work together with students to find answers to. This gives the students a model to follow—a model of how to go about learning in a specific discipline.

The primary questions educators at a teaching-centered college should ask, then, are not "What is it?" or "How does it work?" or "How can we make it more effective?" These questions are appropriate for those with a research focus. The question that should be asked by student-centered teachers is: "What process does an individual go through to come to a knowledge and understanding of 'What it is' or 'How it works' or 'What is most effective?'" An effective teacher continually asks what steps or processes are involved in helping or guiding a student in developing an understanding of those things that have already been discovered through research—but have not yet been discovered by the student.

## A TEACHING ORIENTATION

How do we at Ricks College effectively answer this central question of learning? How do we guide the learner in coming to an understanding? To successfully go somewhere we've never been before on this "ship of curious workmanship," we must do things differently than we've done them in the past. At this time of transition to BYU-Idaho we must consider ways to adopt better teaching and learning practices.

As teachers at a teaching-oriented school, we have always had to wear at least two hats. We have had to be experts in whatever fields of study we are associated with, and we have had to be experts in the field of teaching and learning. Given that teaching and learning is a field of study all its own, teachers need to "have a double-major."

Like the earth upon which we live, an effective learning experience is a work of creation. "For I, the Lord God, created all things . . . spiritually, before they were created naturally upon the face of the earth" (Moses 3:5). Like the creation of the earth, an effective learning experience must be

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planned first, then carried out—created spiritually, then naturally. In my experience as a student at Ricks and elsewhere, the emphasis was usually on *what* was being taught and not on *how* it was being taught. The design of the instruction was carried out haphazardly or on the spot. Whether they are good or not, educational experiences will occur as learners interact with the subject matter and an expert teacher. The effectiveness of those experiences will be greater if they are planned for and designed in advance. The goal is to make each moment of the learner's interaction with the subject matter deliberate so that the learning experience is effective and efficient.

All educational experiences, simple or complex, are composed of different functions. These functions are defined below by the names of the people who would carry out that function.

*The Subject Matter Expert*—has a clear understanding of the content the learner is seeking to comprehend.

*The Instructor*—seeks to help the learner in his quest for understanding of the content.

*The Instructional Designer*—plans what interactions and experiences will occur between the learner, the content, and the instructor to provide for maximum understanding.

*The Developer*—constructs any physical pieces of the instructional experience required by the design.

*The Evaluator*—points out areas of the instruction that are incomplete or breakdown in the process of a learner coming to an understanding of the content.

In most educational settings, one individual carries out all of these functions. In most cases the instructor is a subject matter expert in his or her discipline, but not specifically trained as an instructional designer, an instructor, or in any of the other roles that are involved in a successful learning experience.

There are two approaches to making instruction more effective. First, a *team approach* to teaching—with an expert filling each of the roles listed above. This team approach is often used in a distance education environment, which requires more technological tools and more precise advance planning of instruction than is typical in a traditional classroom. This distance education approach can benefit educators in any setting. In arenas outside education, a team of inventors, engineers, and builders combine their unique skills to give us a quality product—a Pentium processor, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Conference Center. Within education, a team of instructional designers, subject matter experts, instructors, and developers can also combine their unique skills to provide a quality learning

experience for college students. This is an approach to learning that is not common in colleges.

The second approach to making instruction more effective requires the college instructor to be *multi-talented*. The educational roles and functions listed above are still met, but by only one individual. In addition to the formal training already received (i.e. Physics, Sociology, etc.), the instructor must gain the skills to fill each of the instructional roles. In any educational experience, each of these functions is carried out, deliberately or not. Effective instruction occurs when each of the functions is carried out with deliberation, care, and skill.

We are at an exciting time of transition as we become BYU-Idaho. By evaluating our current teaching practices, researching more effective ways of teaching and learning, and implementing those methods, we can help our students to be better prepared as they leave this school. ☺

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