

TEACHING, LEARNING, AND INQUIRY

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As we move away from being an exceptional private two-year college to becoming one of three campuses within a major university system, we may, like an adolescent youth caught off guard by a changing body, wonder just exactly what is happening to our little campus in the Upper Snake River Valley. And even though we may have begun to grapple with the change personally, gaining a degree of peace, there is still the issue of our students, who must see us for what we are and accept us in our new role. Like an emerging adult, our university must earn respect from the world into which we are entering. What we used to be and what we hope to become, while similar in many ways, will in the end be very different. Will the name change, several new buildings, and keeping our students around for an additional two years make us a university? Perhaps track admissions, the 120-credit limit, or the combining of majors and clusters will make us a university?

How are we going to become the institution President Bednar suggested would be “renowned for its understanding of teaching and learning?” For certain, in our efforts to rethink education we cannot lose sight of the distinguishing feature that has set us apart for over one-hundred years—our ability to nurture students. Maintaining genuine concern for students while at the same time requiring more work will prove as difficult as making innovative adjustments to instruction models. If we abandon our traditional environment for enhanced academic rigor, teaching wouldn’t be much of a challenge at all. But increasing academic rigor while being true to President Hinckley’s plea “to reach a little lower to lift a little higher”—there is a challenge. I understand President Hinckley’s charge as a suggestion that we become renowned for our abilities to reach out to students in ways other universities do not—reaching lower, so graduates of BYU-Idaho are able to perform tasks other graduates can’t—lift a little higher. Seeking increased student output at the expense of high student evaluation scores is not for the faint-hearted.

Our success as a teaching institution will be achieved in an appropriate blend of lifting students while holding up a higher standard of inquiry. As we find this balance, we should begin to hear what Elder Eyring suggested employers across the country would one day say about our graduates:

“Where did that come from? I’ve never had such a person. Why people just flock around that person. And they want to follow. They don’t have to be led; they’re seeking to go where that person wants to go. And they come up with new ideas. I don’t know where that comes from. They seem to find a better way, and the budget doesn’t go up. I can’t understand it” And I’ll smile and say, “Well come

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with me to Rexburg.” And I may not be able to show it to you, and I may not be able to prove it to you, but you’ll feel it.¹

What is needed to create this charismatic, self-motivated student and leader? I do not propose to have the answer. What I have are observations and frustrations born of efforts to introduce a higher expectation in my classes. One thing is for sure: inquiry and innovation must play a much bigger role. I like what President Bednar suggested to the faculty on teaching and learning:

In my mind the overarching theme for all of our scholarly work at Brigham Young University-Idaho should be inspired inquiry and innovation. Let me repeat that: inspired inquiry and innovation. We are not like other institutions of higher education; we have access to the gifts of the Spirit, which cannot be quantified nor counted. There are simply things we cannot adequately define and describe about the process of teaching with the Spirit. But, nonetheless, we should be excellent scholars, and our scholarship should be focused on the processes of learning and teaching. We will not be a recognized and highly regarded research institution in the traditional sense of that term. We will, however, emphasize a wide range of scholarly endeavors and *excel in and play a pioneering role in understanding learning and teaching processes with faith and hard work, and in the process of time.* (Italics added)²

According to President Bednar, we are not to be an obscure university, but rather a leader in our innovations to teaching and learning—inspired inquiry. This kind of instructional change must occur not only through innovations to programs, buildings, and curriculum, but also through scholarly endeavors to pioneer better ways of learning. In the end, I believe, we will find we have worked across the educational grain to fulfill the destiny of BYU-Idaho. Just as abandonment of intercollegiate athletics (another across-the-grain idea) led to creating a one-of-a-kind student activities program, are there academic adjustments to create a one-of-a-kind community of learners, which could prove equally innovative? As we act on President Bednar’s charge concerning inspired inquiry, will we find ourselves creating a one-of-a-kind learning pattern? Pondering on learning and teaching with an eye to increased student involvement in the learning process, I recognize a need to better understand the role inquiry can play in the instructional model.

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THE ROLE OF INQUIRY

The quality of our instruction can be measured by the level of inquiry it produces in our students. One way to measure the quality of inquiry is to observe the depth of the questions that flow from our teaching and assigned work. Knowledge gained through our own inquiry is more

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likely to facilitate understanding than learning not preceded with similar effort. Understanding born of inquiry generally produces longer-term growth. Learning that results from inquiry is not necessarily measured by having access to the right answer. What is the value of knowing the right answers to the wrong questions? Rather it is recognizing the correct question to ask at the right time. More often than not, the question that needs answering is not the one being asked. When inquiring, we must discern the right questions. Learning how to ask and answer inspired questions at truly inspired moments enhances our students' ability to become inquirers. Richard Paul notes: "Every intellectual field is born out of a cluster of questions to which answers are either needed or highly desirable. Furthermore, every field of study stays alive only to the extent that fresh questions are generated and taken seriously."³ In addition, the goal of inquiry must be to obtain accurate and unbiased understanding of eternal principles as aided by the Holy Ghost.

Instructional models designed to inspire inquiry and questions are dependent on the exercise of students' agency. Agency coupled with inquiry will always produce greater understanding. In inquiry-based instruction, a student's inspired question becomes a summation of understanding as well as an invitation to expand understanding. I cannot expand that which I don't understand in the first place. All too often we want new knowledge without any effort on our part. This seems to be a universal characteristic of too many of our students. Perhaps we should share in the lesson Oliver Cowdery received from the Lord: "Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right... Now, if you had known this you could have translated"(Doctrine and Covenants 9:8-10).

The prerequisite to asking an inspired question in any content area is sufficient understanding to begin expanding knowledge in that area. The question itself, while inviting new knowledge, is a statement of understanding. I like to think of this as the inside, safe boundary or parameter of learning. Oftentimes our present knowledge is biased with self-deceit, and challenging it can be difficult. I cannot even ask an inspired question until I possess enough information or willingness to challenge this safe, inside boundary. A person's bias might be as simple as: "This information isn't that important." Or it might be more complex: "If idea x is true, then I must be wrong about y." This, I believe, is one of the major duties I have as an instructor of the scriptures—motivate students to ponder and search the scriptures sincerely enough to willingly make adjustments as a result of inquiry. (See one approach at the end of this paper).

At the moment my inquiry produces new and exciting questions—inspired questions—I am inviting new knowledge; I am willingly expanding

the old, safe boundary. The extent to which my inquiry invites new knowledge determines just how far out I push the old boundary. I am now exercising my agency to learn. The learning that follows has more staying power than if the same knowledge were received without any effort on my part—effort expressed through inspired inquiry. It is true that the Holy Ghost can bear witness to truths received on a silver platter. However, learning born of inquiry receives a double witness from the Holy Ghost as it confirms truth and also the effort to understand truth. There is advantage for all who diligently participate in the process (Doctrine and Covenants 130:18-19). The new knowledge gained as a result of inquiry becomes the outward, or growing parameter of my understanding. Old thinking is upgraded and inappropriate biases are dropped. However, over time this outward boundary eventually atrophies to become the inner boundary and remains so until challenged through inquiry, new knowledge, and understanding. Exercising my agency to learn, as demonstrated by a willingness to challenge old thinking, results in greater understanding and growth (Doctrine and Covenants 50:24; Abraham 1:2)⁴. Long-term growth occurs when I act on my new understanding born of agency and inquiry (James 1:22-25). My own willingness to stretch and challenge my own boundaries leads to greater understanding. Agency, inquiry, knowledge, and understanding comprise learning.

Because I exercised my agency and gained new knowledge, I experience growth. This growth, because it was genuinely sought for and found, gives me confidence to seek for more knowledge. There is no place on this earth where this pattern is more evident than in the holy temple. We attend the temple out of an exercise of our own agency—it truly is one of the few freewill offerings in this church. We gain understanding as we inquire into the endowment diligently; in fact, it is the only way we truly come to understand the endowment. Our ability to keep sacred covenants increases as we participate and grow in our understanding of the significance of the temple.

We also see the elements of agency, inquiry, knowledge, and understanding at work in the life of the boy prophet, Joseph Smith. Exercising agency and inquiry, he said:

At this time of great excitement my mind was called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness; but though my feelings were deep and often poignant... While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of James, first chapter and fifth verse, which reads: If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him (Joseph Smith—History 1:8,11).

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Then followed inspired questions:

In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it? (Joseph Smith—History 1:10)

Understanding was gained and present biases were challenged; he said:

My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. No sooner, therefore, did I get possession of myself, so as to be able to speak, than I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong) —and which I should join. I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong (Joseph Smith—History 1:19).

As our students bridge the gap between present understanding and new knowledge through participation in the inquiry process, they, like the prophet Joseph Smith, will begin to stretch the boundaries of their understanding and discover what the Lord has in store for them.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS REGARDING INQUIRY

To the prophet Joseph Smith, the Lord said, “As often as you have inquired, I have given you knowledge.” (Doctrine and Covenants 6:14). If we are not actively seeking all knowledge, we become careless and casual in the inquiry process. Over time we become too much like the individual Winston Churchill spoke of when he said: “Occasionally he stumbled over the truth, but hastily picked himself up and hurried on as if nothing had happened.”⁵ Too many of our students have become casual truth seekers. I am fearful that Latter-day Saint culture has become one of talking, talking, and still more talking, but little or no inquiry. We read the scriptures a half-hour each day, but do we take time to study them? Can we resonate with Nephi’s rejoicing: “For my soul delighteth in the scriptures, and my heart pondereth them, and writeth them for the learning and the profit of my children ... and my heart pondereth continually upon the things which I have seen and heard” (2 Nephi 4: 15-16). Technology has made it far too convenient to gather and organize information for dissemination. Perhaps this is the downside of technology. Bring on another PowerPoint presentation that I can listen to and take notes on, and call it learning. But is listening and taking notes learning? Or is this the beginning of learning? I have made my share of these kinds of presentations and watch with interest the intensity my students display to catch every slide I present. But it usually stops there. Rarely do they study the slides, which are the result of my inquiry, and return with

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engaging questions of their own to further their own understanding. I have a name for this type of education—it is spectator learning.

Unfortunately, it is not only our students who are guilty of spectator learning. Isn't there a tendency for many of us to attend sacrament meeting with an attitude of "we have probably heard the talks before." Perhaps my observation is really only a confession, but it seems to me that we attend church as listeners more than we do as hearers. "Therefore speak I to them in parables; because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither to do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear [listen], and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive" (Matthew 13:13-14). The Apostle John taught, "blessed are they who read, and they who hear [as opposed to listen] and understand" (JST Revelations 1:2).

What would happen if we turned our worship meetings into weekly revelatory sessions where, because of our preparation and inspired questions, the Holy Ghost taught us according to our present needs? What would happen if before entering the chapel we had firmly in our minds an inquiry, an offering, we had prepared for the Lord? Sacrament meeting would take on greater meaning as we accepted the tokens of His suffering in exchange for our sincere efforts to inquire after Him. But this requires work, hard work. It is too easy to just show up, engage in idle chatter right until the meeting begins, and with equal casualness partake the emblems of the sacrament. Should we really be so disappointed in our students when they do the same for class?

WHERE DO I BEGIN—SCRIPTURAL INSTRUCTIONS ON INQUIRY

I can change myself by an act of will; changing my students is less direct. If I with dedication seek change for myself, I believe I can more likely help my students. Reflecting on what is needed for BYU-Idaho to become a university renowned for learning and teaching, I need answers to the following questions:

1. Can I rethink teaching and learning, having as my goal innovative instruction, without being prepared to question in inspired ways the very models and approaches I have used in the past?
2. How can I motivate my students to want to inquire after new information, especially when they know it isn't going to be on the test?
3. What pedagogical adjustments can I make to foster an environment of inquiry?
4. Is it even possible in an environment where students learn for credit and grades to expect them to learn for much nobler aspirations?

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5. Is it possible to take passive pupils from public education and turn them into inquiring students who will lead out in the coming century as Elder Eyring has suggested.⁶
6. Even if I could inspire students to raise their sights, how do I sustain an atmosphere of inquiry for fifteen weeks?
7. What other adjustments, as major as they might be, in addition to abandoning intercollegiate sports, could we make that might enhance the learning environment at BYU-Idaho?
8. At what point does the whole discussion of asking questions and developing an atmosphere of inquiry become the end instead of the means to an end?

The Lord speaking to Joseph Smith said: “As often as thou hast inquired thou hast received instruction of my Spirit ... thou knowest that thou hast inquired of me and I did enlighten thy mind; and now I tell thee these things that thou mayest know that thou hast been enlightened by the Spirit of Truth.” (Doctrine and Covenants 6:14-15)

An interesting pattern emerges in scriptural text with the word “inquire.” Consider just a few from the Book of Mormon:

1. Words are hard to understand save a man *inquire* of God (1 Nephi 15:3).
2. Have ye *inquired* of the Lord (1 Nephi 16:23-24)?
3. As Jacob *inquired* of the Lord, his word came (Jacob 1:11).
4. Ammon *inquired* of the Lord (Alma 27:7).
5. Alma has *inquired* diligently of the Lord to know concerning resurrection (Alma 40:3, 9).
6. Moroni asks Alma to *inquire* of the Lord (Alma 43:23).
7. Mormon *inquires* of the Lord regarding the three Nephites (3 Nephi 28:37).
8. Jared asks his brother to *inquire* of the Lord (Ether 1:38).
9. Mormon *inquires* of the Lord regarding baptism (Moroni 8:7).

Now, from the Doctrine and Covenants:

1. He who *inquires* shall know the mysteries (6:11).
2. As often as thou hast *inquired* thou has received instruction (6:14).
3. You are left to *inquire* (30:3).
4. In cases of difficulty regarding doctrine the president may *inquire* for revelation (102:23).
5. Ends of the earth shall *inquire* (122:1).

And, lastly from the Bible:

1. People came unto me to *inquire* of the Lord (Exodus 18:15).
2. Beauty of the Lord, and to *inquire* in his temple (Psalms 27:4).
3. They returned and *inquired* early after God (Psalms 78:34).
4. I will yet ... be *inquired* of by the House of Israel (Ezekial 36:37).

5. Have not sought the Lord, nor *inquired* of him (Zephaniah 1:6).
6. They began to *inquire* of themselves (Luke 22:23).
7. Of which salvation the prophets have *inquired* (1 Peter 1:10).

A brief study suggests that as often as we, or someone else, will sincerely inquire of the Lord, according to our assigned stewardships, we will gain understanding. “That they may be perfected in the understanding of their ministry, in theory, in principle, and in doctrine, in all things pertaining to the kingdom of God,” (Doctrine and Covenants 97:15) is the wish of the Lord.

AN IMPOSTER TO INQUIRY

The Book of Mormon provides a wonderful key to recognizing instruction born of the spirit (see also 1 Corinthians 2:10-14). The ideal teacher/learner relationship was described in this manner: “The priest, not esteeming himself above his hearers, for the preacher was no better than the hearer, neither was the teacher any better than the learner; and thus they were all equal” (Alma 1:26). That is, equal in the process of inquiry, each is able to expand or stretch the boundaries of his or her learning according to the several abilities and desires for learning. As we prepare for class, we may find ideas or concepts that are personally exciting or of particular personal significance. But these may be beyond the preparation and understanding of our students. Scripturally we refer to this as needing milk before meat (1 Corinthians 3:2). Some principles that are no longer new or relevant to the teachers may still be especially relevant to the students. Student inquiry keeps instruction driven by the students. This of course presupposes the students are ready and have prepared. Perhaps the superb teacher has the ability to motivate students to inquire beforehand, allowing marvelous, student guided, growth-oriented learning to take place. Or to be bright enough or enough in tune, whichever comes first, to know how to handle an audience where some are ready and some not quite ready to hear the message—thus not overwhelming those who are not fully prepared.

A danger we all face in the classroom is setting ourselves up as a light unto our students, that we may get their praise—that is for money, or as the scriptures teach, “for gain.” “And he had gone about among the people, preaching to them that which he termed to be the word of God, bearing down against the church; declaring unto the people that every priest and teacher ought to be popular; and ought not to labor with their hands” (Alma 1:3). The fact that I am paid to teach the gospel puts me at a huge disadvantage. Priestcraft thrives on the energy teacher popularity produces. For this one reason alone, I should guard against being the only one in the classroom offering insight.

Teaching inquiry or any variety of truth at this university in a gospel context is the Lord’s work, and he wants us to succeed in it. When teachers

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and students inquire after him daily, they will feel help come. He gives us a promise when we do it His way:

Therefore, verily I say unto you, lift up your voices unto this people; speak the thoughts that I shall put into your hearts, and you shall not be confounded before men; For it shall be given you in the very hour, yea, in the very moment, what ye shall say. But a commandment I give unto you, that ye shall declare whatsoever thing ye declare in my name, in solemnity of heart, in the spirit of meekness, in all things. And I give unto you this promise, that inasmuch as ye do this the Holy Ghost shall be shed forth in bearing record unto all things whatsoever ye shall say (Doctrine and Covenants 100:5-8).

Who will feel the Holy Ghost shed forth, the teacher or the students?

And now, behold, I give unto you a commandment, that when ye are assembled together ye shall instruct and edify each other, that ye may know how to act upon the points of my law and commandments which I have given (Doctrine and Covenants 43:8).

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CONCLUSION

What must we do to become a university renowned for teaching and learning? Surely we must elevate the level of inquiry. A university should be a laboratory to pursue inquiry into all areas of truth, established for students and teachers alike, where both can practice good thinking born of the Holy Ghost, where growth, both short and long-term, and an increase in wisdom and learning are the final product. To the degree that this is accomplished, our lives will be blessed for many generations. I am eager to stretch myself to be a better inquirer of truth. It is both rewarding and overwhelming, but the gains more than compensate me for the efforts. It is a great blessing to be associated with Brigham Young University-Idaho at such an exciting time. May all our efforts to be more innovative fall into line with what the Lord has in store for this institution.

NOTES

1. Elder Henry B. Eyring, "A Steady, Upward Course," *Brigham Young University-Idaho Devotional*, September 18, 2000.
2. Ibid.
3. Richard Paul and Linda Elder, *Critical Thinking*, 113.
4. Both these scriptures point to the tender relationship of obedience and conformity to present knowledge and a desire for more knowledge being followed with greater desire to be even more obedient.
5. *The Irrepressible Churchill Stories*, ed. Kay Halle [1966], 113.
6. Elder Eyring, "We Must Raise Their Sights", *CES Scripture Conference*, August 2001.