

## LEARNING AND TEACHING AT BYU-IDAHO

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After I took the GMAT, an entrance exam for Master's in Business Administration programs, I was pleased and shocked to receive a letter from Harvard asking me to enter its Master's of Public Administration program. I took my letter to my husband and boldly told him that I wanted to enter the program. He coyly told me, "Massachusetts is a long commute from Rexburg!"

I entered Idaho State University's MBA program with the thought that my education wouldn't be as good as a Harvard education. I was pleasantly surprised, however, at the experience I had at ISU. Most of the students in my program were mid career. In other words, we were all older! We were going back to school because we could see that, in order to compete, we needed more education. Many of my classmates were professionals, vice-presidents of companies who recognized that they needed an MBA because they were hiring MBA graduates when they themselves did not even possess the degree. Most of the courses were taught using a case-study approach. Groups of students were given a case study and asked to analyze the case using problem-solving skills.

One of my classes, a business law class, employed one of my favorite methods. Each student was asked what her expertise happened to be. Once we articulated our expertise, we were to prepare a brief on the relevant laws and present our findings to the class. Through this and the case-study method, I found that my classmates were the best source of educational excellence available to me. Most of my professors were facilitators, letting us debate, banter, or hash the problem out amongst ourselves.

Was it better than a Harvard education? I will never know. My husband isn't budging from Southeast Idaho. I *can* say that my learning experience was worth far more to me than the tuition I paid at the University. Each member of each class contributed to my learning experience through his or her expertise, insight into business practices, and even through his or her failures. I still call on many of my classmates for information and guidance in my teaching, private business, and educational pursuits.

Now as a teacher at BYU-Idaho, I have looked back on that experience many times and wondered how well I am doing as a facilitator in the classrooms in my charge. Am I allowing my students to teach each other? Will they learn from a classmate something of greater value than what I teach them? After all, the students whom I teach are the future CEOs, the future economic strength of our nation, the future leaders of this country and of our church.

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Far too many times, however, when I try to get students to discuss concepts, I see them looking blankly at me. They want *me* to tell them the “right” answer. Many times the right answer isn’t possible to articulate. Problem-solving takes a concerted effort by those faced with the problem. Are these students so accustomed to being told what teachers want them to say that they can’t come up with new and better ideas? Are they afraid to voice their opinion because they have never been given the opportunity to do so? I realize most BYU-I students are not at the same experiential level as my MBA classmates; but shouldn’t they look at issues and say, “Isn’t there a better way?” Also, I am constantly asked by my students if they would be better off going to BYU-Provo because our programs are so new and our degrees not well established. Because of these perplexing questions, I have been urgently trying to find ways for them to teach each other and get the most they can from their time here at BYU-Idaho.

One method I tried in class worked quite well. I told the students about Charlotte Beers, former chairman of WPP Group’s J. Walter Thompson and Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide, two of the top 10 U.S.-based advertising agencies. She was appointed approximately one year ago to be the Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs for the U.S. Government. Her charge is to improve the nation’s image beyond our borders and to rebuild our country’s overseas public relations and education efforts, which have largely atrophied after the cold war. As one advertising executive noted, “The U.S. is the greatest country in the world at marketing. Yet, we *cannot* market the values and beliefs of our own people to those living outside our borders.” This is probably why Charlotte Beers was chosen to do this job. Her background is advertising—to communicate the benefits of brands.

I asked my students to break into groups and assume the position of Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs—assume they have Charlotte Beers’ job. They must, as Colin Powell announced, “change from just selling the U.S. ...to really branding foreign policy.” They must also, as one senior U.S. State Department official described, try to “build a level of understanding so that despite policy differences people aren’t going to come and kill us.” They must communicate our values and beliefs to the world—not an easy job.

How did they do? They are still working on it. From what my students presented, our basic gospel beliefs and teachings of our church play a large part in their design for communicating our values and beliefs to the world. Was it an easy assignment? Hardly. This is one of the greatest challenges our country faces today. But what greater group of people to solve such a problem than BYU-I students. They are the cream of the crop. I have faith in them.

During their presentations and subsequent discussion, I could see that they were very concerned about this issue and wanted answers. Do I as their instructor have the answers? I wish I did. It was difficult for me to stand back and let them contest each other's ideas. But once presented and discussed, most of the students saw merit in their classmates' comments. These students might have been sitting in a room on the Harvard campus. I realized that day that it really didn't matter that they were sitting in a very hot room in the Clarke building in Rexburg, Idaho. Through such a process these students were learning from each other. I overheard one student say after one such discussion, "I want to keep talking about this." Imagine, at 50 minutes past the hour the students wanted to stay! They wanted to hear what their classmates had to say.

We as instructors can instill in our students the sense that their opinions, their solutions, their ideas could be the answers to the problems of today and the future. If we allow them to voice their opinions and discuss difficult subjects, they may devise feasible and possibly brilliant solutions. If they learn from each other through the process, we will have done our part. They can walk away from their education at BYU-Idaho with a greater understanding of their various disciplines and the power they possess to affect their classmates, their country, and if we are open-minded enough, even their teachers!

#### REFERENCES

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