

“PROVE ALL THINGS, HOLD FAST THAT WHICH IS GOOD”

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Coming to BYU-Idaho has led me to rethink education and what it means to succeed as an educator. My introduction to the scholarship of learning and teaching set that rethinking in motion, and reading on the subject has produced both a fresh enthusiasm for scholarship in my field and a new interest in how students learn language, culture, and literature. As I have turned my attention to these questions, I have concluded that the scholarship of learning and teaching is in large measure the scholarship of assessment—the scholarship of learning how I can best help students to learn.

While I was teaching elsewhere, a steady stream of flattering student evaluations seemed to indicate that I was succeeding. High ratings and comments such as “I love Professor Hunsaker,” “He is very knowledgeable,” or “He is one of my favorite teachers” kept me happy. Buoyed by these comments and by similarly cheery reviews from administrators, I considered myself both effective and successful. I naturally worried and did things differently when students didn’t learn, but it had not yet occurred to me that I cannot separate my success from that of my students. It was time to rethink education.

Prior to President Bednar’s pre-semester speech to the faculty on August 21, 2001, I didn’t even know that there was a scholarship of learning and teaching. Nonetheless, as I listened, I recognized something that I needed to understand and something to which I wanted to contribute. Subsequent study has confirmed those early impressions.

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The scholarship of learning and teaching is, as Lee Shulman puts it, a matter of “taking learning seriously”⁽¹⁰⁾. It happens when scholars turn their energies and their time to the questions of how, why, when, and where learning occurs. Learning to view those questions as serious and intellectually challenging issues has energized me and deepened my commitment to the success of my students. I have come to see my work in the terms proposed by Robert B. Barr and John Tagg—

To say that the purpose of colleges is to provide instruction is like saying that General Motors’ business is to operate assembly lines or that the purpose of medical care is to fill hospital beds. We now see that our mission is not instruction but rather that of producing learning with every student by whatever means work best. (13)

Finding those means that best produce learning is the scholarship of learning and teaching, and more specifically, the scholarship of assessment.

The Apostle Paul urged the ancient saints to “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (1Thessalonians 5:21). Paul’s admonition can guide us as we seek to improve the rate and the quality of our students’ learning. Assessment is one of the tools that will help us realize the prophecy of a modern apostle. In his September 18, 2001, devotional address, Elder Eyring prophesied, “[BYU-Idaho] will become a place that people know of because of the insights that will come as we come to understand the teaching and learning process” (*A Steady, Upward Course*, 9). Effective assessment will help us toward that end as we prove all things and then hold fast, promote, and disseminate those things that lead to increased learning.

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Assessment is a tool to measure the effectiveness of our work. Assessment inspires innovation when it shows us that we aren’t producing the learning that we seek. Importantly, assessment isn’t about satisfying the external demands of an accreditation agency. Assessment is about an internal desire for continuous improvement.

K. Patricia Cross observes, “We assume that what we say is heard accurately and retained by students, despite consistent evidence to the contrary.” She continues,

We assume that students can connect thoughts and write or communicate ideas and knowledge, and we are perpetually shocked at the consistency with which this turns out not to be true. But as naive observers, we don’t question what we don’t understand. Were we astronomers or oceanographers, we would pursue with great interest something that challenged our expectations or predictions. Are we curious about why students don’t learn, why they come up with distorted ideas about what we thought was perfectly clear, why they fail to hear or follow the simplest directions? Well, maybe, fleetingly. But by and large, we don’t set out to investigate these common departures from what we know should happen in class. We are soon on to other things, and the opportunity to learn from the experience is lost.

I must admit, of course, that even academics don’t have to make everything into a learning experience. There are times when we want simply to relax without feeling an obligation to analyze, to understand, or to improve ourselves or others. I can probably afford to be a naive observer of the nighttime sky, despite my recognition that some knowledge of astronomy would almost certainly add to my enjoyment.

But the college classroom is not the place for relaxed naiveté for either students or faculty. The experience would be far richer and more enjoyable if both teachers

and students were more curious and more sophisticated about the effect of teaching on learning. But even more important, as educators, we have an obligation to understand the teaching/learning process well enough to improve it. (10, emphasis added)

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I believe that assessment will help us better understand and then improve the teaching and learning process, but it isn't a silver bullet, and it won't answer all our questions or solve all our problems. Beyond the programmatic evaluation we usually think of in connection with assessment, we will need to turn to classroom assessment techniques and classroom action research to answer our central questions: What and how are they learning? How can I better assist them?

Judith E. Liskin-Gasparro notes that "The real value of assessment ... is to motivate change and to serve our educational vision" (311). Our educational vision includes Elder Eyring's prophecy cited earlier and this charge: "The phrase 'rethinking education' is not to be only a slogan for the transformation from a two-to four-year status. The school is to be a place of educational innovation—permanently" (6). My individual rethinking of education has led me to assessment. As we rethink education collectively, I believe that assessment will help us prove all things and hold fast that which is good. By so doing we will be better able to recognize, implement, and disseminate effective innovation. We will be better able, in short, to bless students and to fulfill prophecy.

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