

TEACHING LOADS IN STRESSFUL TIMES

Randall Miller—Chair, Department of English

I appreciate the ideas on faculty load shared by Rod Keller with the faculty of the College of Language and Letters last fall and printed in the last issue of *Perspective*. Because Rod himself exemplifies productive hard work, what he says about faculty load demands serious consideration. For example, I personally credit him with the quick progress the English Department made in the transition to four-year programs.

Of the five principles Rod presented to us for dealing with faculty load, I find his second, “We can receive divine guidance and strength as teachers,” and his fifth, “Self-evaluation brings solutions to problems,” the most practically useful to me. (Although his method for self-evaluation—teacher portfolios—seems involved and time-consuming, more weight on my teaching load.)

I worry that his first principle, “We are led by a living prophet,” as well as some of his other comments may cut off discussion of load because of the implication that the 15-credit load is a revelation from God.

When we shop for clothing, many of us discover we do not fit the standard mold. For me the worst are the one-size-fits-all items. The one-size-fits-all bathrobe fits around me about three times. From my many years of dealing with teaching load both as a teacher and as an administrator, I recognize that one size does not fit all. No simple number or formula will do.

These are stressful times. We need teachers and administrators to be continuously sensitive to what is happening with individual teachers and classes. We need to be sensitive to when a faculty member will need extra time to prepare to teach a new class. Not all faculty members have the same energy level or time management abilities. Such things must be taken into account.

In actual practice I have found Rod Keller, as a college dean, and Kip Hartvigsen, my department chair, both flexible regarding to workload. The University administration has expressed policies on leave-of-absence and released-time that are clearly steps in the right direction.

I hope we continue to discuss workload. We probably will, since we always have, and it seems to be a concern of almost all of us. All elements of the issue, including the number of credit hours, should be open matters of discussion. As Rod said, we like to feel we have some power over our own lives.

ROD KELLER'S "CHARTING COURSE": TEACHING LOADS

By Mark Lovell—Department of Geology

The article, "Charting Course: To Do What Only a Teacher Can Do" by Rod Keller, published in the last *Perspective*, (Volume 2 Number 3), provided many insights and suggestions to help BYU-Idaho faculty work through the challenges associated with the prescribed 15 load-hours/semester. As a new department chair in January 2002 and looking ahead as our bachelor degree programs were coming online, I found that dealing with loads was a major concern.

I do not believe that a discussion of loads represents a lack of faith or a lack of willingness to be obedient. Before continuing with my comments, I want to express that my love for this institution is as old as I am. My parents loved living in the "lambing sheds" and valued the friendships they developed at Ricks College. My personal relationship with this school began in the early 1970s when I first attended as a student. Returning after my mission, I still remember the first day that I met my wife-to-be in the McKay Library. This institution has a sacred mission, and my desires are to help in whatever capacity the Lord will accept.

Surely geologists are not unique in loving their discipline. Extra time spent in field trips and summer projects has been a trademark of our department, and I am grateful to those who came before me and established these traditions. We leave our families, the comforts of being home each night, and the accommodating confines of the classroom to witness the joy of discovery in our students' eyes as they comprehend aspects of the Creator's handiwork.

Our department is experiencing tremendous change as seasoned faculty retire and new, more recently trained faculty are hired. It has to be more than mere coincidence to have so much transition of faculty occurring at this time. The workloads under which we operate make it difficult to become sufficiently acquainted with recent discoveries, new techniques of investigation, and the tremendous amount of new information required to teach at the upper-division level.

It has been exciting to serve as bishop in my home ward and accept the renewed emphasis placed on bishops for missionary work. As leaders of the Church recently removed this responsibility from stakes and placed it directly upon bishops, they also instructed the bishops to delegate all responsibilities not specifically tied to the calling of bishop. They did not assume that if bishops were more faithful or more obedient they would be able to do all the work themselves.

My discussions with other faculty about workloads have been limited, but it seems there are issues to be recognized and worthy of discussion. For example, in the junior college the number of class preparations was limited because our programs consisted of freshman and sophomore-level

courses. The opportunity to introduce students into current applications or research activities within those courses was limited because we were so busy establishing a solid understanding of fundamentals. From the experience of teaching upper-division courses last year, I know that the amount of work and time required to teach upper-division courses is greater than that needed for introductory-level courses. My concerns for fairness among faculty and for the quality of our programs have caused me to try to learn to address loads relative to individual courses.

The University has established guidelines for determining the number of load hours a teacher should be credited for teaching a certain type of course. It is not my purpose to discuss the specifics of the guidelines, but I feel it is important to emphasize the flexibility that is conceptualized for the system. After spending many hours (probably too many) reviewing each course offered in our department, the teaching methods employed, and what we accomplished relative to the guidelines given to departments, I felt that there were inconsistencies compared to our traditional loads. Our department was introducing new courses in piecemeal fashion. Comparing all the classes in our new programs, I could easily see that we had not maintained consistency in assigning loads.

After summarizing loads as they stood and writing a proposal to establish more consistent assignments, I met with members of our department, our dean, and several members of the administration. All the administrators with whom I met were genuinely concerned, open to discussion, and very helpful, providing insights to help me wrestle with the loads. Most recently, I have met with our dean again and recommended, within the established guidelines, increased loads for some classes and reduced loads for other classes. We have not yet achieved the perfect balance of workloads within the Geology Department, nor have we completed all the development that the transition to BYU-Idaho will entail, but we are pressing forward.

When Elder Haight met with us, he taught that we don't have a problem we can't solve. I believe this counsel. In a recent stake fireside for youth, President and Sister Bednar emphasized to the youth the importance of "acting, rather than being acted upon." That same counsel is applicable in all we do. In the devotional address on September 11, 2001, President Bednar taught the importance of learning "line upon line, precept upon precept" and also our need to be able to answer the question, "How can I tell the difference between my emotions telling me what I want to hear and the Holy Ghost telling me what I need to hear?" Constructive dialogue about how we can better accomplish our mission, combined with the bending of our wills to coincide with direction revealed from the Holy Ghost, should allow us to collectively move forward as this institution fulfills its destiny. ☺

DECONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION:
A RESPONSE TO LYLE LOWDER’S “SCIENCE AND THE SOUL”

John Rector—Counseling Center

I enjoyed reading retired biology professor Lyle Lowder’s paper entitled “Science and the Soul” in the Late Fall *Perspective*. In his article Professor Lowder reviews classical philosophic arguments regarding the existence and nature of the soul. He mentions recent scientific studies that imply that the animated character of living organisms comes from functions of the body rather than from a soul. Professor Lowder then discloses his personal creed: “I decided early in my career as a scientist that if knowledge gained by scientific investigation was not consistent with the revealed word, I would accept the revealed word instead.”

Professor Lowder’s announcement comes late in his article and is not his main point for explanation. However, I would like to follow its implication a bit further, as LDS scholars inevitably run up against contradictions (or apparent contradictions) between science and theology. Experience has shown two ways that Church members respond to the dilemma: absolutely and tentatively.

First Absolute Response: Denial of the Data

This alternative consists of rejecting data or refusing to acknowledge its validity because of perceived conflicts between the data and one’s current religious perceptions or beliefs. Although this approach may be quite common and may help believers to weather the storms of discrepant information while remaining active in the Church, ultimately I do not believe denial to be conducive to healthy community nor to a mature, authentic faith because such an approach refuses to acknowledge or integrate the realities of experience. Since the first principle of the gospel is faith (not knowledge), and since questions ignored never become questions answered, absolute responses do not seem productive. Church leaders, for example in the First Presidency’s “The Origin of Man,” are circumspect in refraining from denials of scientific claims.

Second Absolute Response: Denial of the Faith

This contrasting alternative consists essentially of “throwing the baby out with the bathwater”—that is, rejecting one’s religious tradition because of conflicts between data and aspects of one’s faith. Given the high proportion of inactive church members, this alternative may be more prevalent than the former. In many cases, I believe denial of the faith represents a premature foreclosure: conflicts remain unaddressed or are not fully worked through.

Unfortunately, Mormon culture makes little room for people who, because of life experiences of various sorts, struggle to remain orthodox in their beliefs or to accept certain aspects of the faith. (When was the

last time you heard someone publicly acknowledge in church that they had doubts?) I believe many of our inactive or disaffected members would still be meeting with us if we made a place in our religious community for those who harbor doubts, large or small.

Tentative Response: Deconstruction and Reconstruction

This final alternative gives credence to conflicts between data and beliefs, acknowledging that our assumptions and interpretations of both data and doctrine may be inaccurate or incomplete. When data do not conform to the revealed word, the invitation is to deconstruct and reconstruct rather than abandon the belief or deny the data. This process involves reanalyzing both data and beliefs, separating revelation from interpretation, changing the interpretation based on the new information, and then integrating the two again to form a new synthesis—a stronger testimony can result, one built on new revelation as well as new evidence. If a synthesis is not forthcoming, judgment can be suspended. Shelving momentous conclusions until we have enough information to reconcile data with our beliefs allows our understanding to change without jeopardizing the fundamentals of faith.

Data/belief conflicts are inevitable for each of us. When these occur, the tendency of most is to rush toward closure in an effort to minimize dissonance and ambiguity. However, I believe such an approach is rarely productive. A healthy, mature, first-hand faith comes from being open to experience, facing discrepancies squarely, tolerating ambiguity, and striving for integration.

INDEPENDENT THINKING AND VALUING TRADITION:
“DISMANTLING A THEME PARK” WITH CARE

Diane Hendricks—Alumna

While reading Dawn Anderson’s article “Dismantling a Theme Park” in the last issue of *Perspective*, I identified with her concerns. For the past three years, my husband and I have served in the Alaska Anchorage mission. An integral focus of our calling was fostering the development of young missionaries—developing their testimonies, developing their ability to think, developing their ability to work. Many of the objectives we had in the mission field corresponded to the goals outlined in this article. “Now more than ever, [missionaries] need to understand what they believe and why they believe it” because the mission field is one of those places where “independent thinking is necessary for [missionaries] to defend their values and beliefs.”¹ However, we were also commissioned to teach missionaries faith in their leaders and faith in the mission rules. Unfortunately, some missionaries saw these two goals—independent thinking and faith—as contradictory, and challenging the directives of

the scriptures and the “white Bible” (the missionaries’ handbook) became a dangerous pastime for these few missionaries.

Perhaps because we felt we played similar roles, Vance and I often found ourselves identifying with the Alaskan Native Elders, who also felt concern and frustration regarding their own youth. Throughout our three years in Alaska, we heard variations on the question, “How do you foster independent thinking *and* faith in your traditions, culture, and religion?”

“Learn the old ways.” “Respect your elders.” “Value subsistence living; value your heritage.” We heard these phrases repeatedly. At first, we didn’t fully understand this strident emphasis on the past. White culture, while not necessarily rejecting heritage and tradition, seems to privilege the individual above the community and the benefits of progress over the traditions of the past. Alaskan Natives have also embraced this focus:

Since the early 1960s, Native people have seen their material lives improve. They are no longer hungry, they are well clothed, and they now live in comparatively warm, comfortable homes. This has largely been achieved by the anti-poverty programs which were instituted in the years before and after the Great Society. Being by and large unemployed in the cash economy, Native people benefited greatly from the civil rights and anti-poverty programs of the 1960s and 1970s.²

Compared to many of the Native American tribes in the “Lower 48,” the Alaskan Native tribes have flourished because of this progressive attitude. Due to the Settlement Act of 1976, the Alaskan Natives have established corporations, adopting a business mentality that has provided financial security missing in Native American tribes.

Yet, as their physical lives have improved, the quality of their lives has deteriorated. Since the 1960s there has been a dramatic rise in alcohol abuse, alcoholism and associated violent behaviors, which have upset family and village life and resulted in physical, psychological injury, death and imprisonment. Something self-destructive, violent, frustrated, and angry has been set loose from within the Alaska Native people. And it is the young that are dying, going to prison, and maiming themselves.³

The Alaskan Native Elders are trying to counteract this destruction by giving their young people some roots: a return to native languages and subsistence living, a respect for religion and history. The Elders hope to provide a foundation for their youth. This revival, and through it developing a sense of cultural identity, is working in some ways. Nearly 80 percent of the Yu’pik Eskimo people can speak at least some Yu’pik. A large percentage return from Anchorage and other cities to the summer fish camps, preparing for the winter as families and communities.

However, many youth reject this revival. Like teens anywhere, they say they want to think for themselves. Ironically, these young men and women think for themselves by immersing themselves in popular culture. In fishing villages where there are few roads, fewer cars, and only one store, satellite dishes abound. Opinions ranging from the right brand of beer to the right Mullet hairstyle that will ensure instant popularity are determined by the media and their friends. Immersed in a desire for independence, many people—teens, missionaries, Alaskan Natives, and students are only a few—believe that thinking independently cannot coexist with “respecting your elders,” a belief that merely reflects their poor thinking skills.

So how do we teach people to think critically? How can we be independent thinkers and followers of tradition? President Howard W. Hunter offers this suggestion, “Measure everything against the teaching of the Savior. Where you find a variance from those teachings, set that matter aside and do not pursue it. It will not bring you happiness.”⁴

For Alaskan Natives, this advice creates a great dilemma. Many want to adhere to their traditions; however, sometimes their reasons for continuing with their traditions are similar to those of Sister Anderson’s students who continue with their inadequate degree of thinking skill. They may believe these traditions have value. They may confuse faith in the benefits of tradition with blind acceptance of every tradition.

Perhaps some follow tradition because of a desire for emotional safety. In some communities, if a person leaves the village, he or she in effect is disowned and cut off from family. This is particularly the case when Alaskan Natives join our Church. In 1900, various religions met to divide the state into religious regions. The Presbyterians were “given” Southeast Alaska and the area around Barrow in the north, while the Athabascans in the interior became Episcopalians. Although the Russian Orthodox Church did not send a representative, it was given the Aleutian Islands because of the Russian settlements there. Now, these religions are almost as integral to Native Alaskan traditions as fish camp and ivory carving. Joining the LDS church is a betrayal of that tradition.

Elder Richard G. Scott tells us that at times members of the Church may have to sacrifice one tradition for another: “Appreciation for ethnic, cultural, or national heritage can be very wholesome and beneficial, but it can also perpetuate patterns of life that should be set aside by a devoted Latter-day Saint.”⁵ The process for deciding which traditions to adhere to is an excellent example of critical thinking:

How can one determine when a tradition is in conflict with the teachings of the Lord and should be abandoned?... Recognizing the need to do it is a major step towards success. Customs and traditions become an inherent part of us. They are not easy to evaluate objectively. Carefully study the scriptures and counsel of

the prophets to understand how the Lord wants you to live. Then evaluate each part of your life and make any adjustments needed. Seek help from another you respect who has been able to set aside some deeply held convictions or traditions that are not in harmony with the Lord's plan. When in doubt, ask yourself, "Is this what the Savior would want me to do?"⁶

For prospective converts, students, or anyone else, dismantling a theme park and letting go of traditions of thought may be necessary. However, in our enthusiasm for fostering critical thinking—as missionaries, as teachers—we should recognize that, while necessary, this change is hard. In dismantling these counterproductive theme parks, we face not only one challenge but two: introducing higher level thought while recognizing which traditions should be held onto and which ones abandoned.

NOTES

- 1 Dawn Anderson. "Dismantling a Theme Park." *Perspective* 2.3 (2002).
- 2 Harold Napoleon. *Yuuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being*. (Fairbanks: University of Alaska, Fairbanks, November 1991).
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Howard W. Hunter "Counsel to Students and Faculty." (Church College of New Zealand, 12 Nov. 1990.)
- 5 Richard G. Scott, "Removing Barriers to Happiness," *Ensign*, May 1998, 85.
- 6 Ibid.