

## TEACHING AND LEARNING: EDUCATIONAL THEORIES

Rhonda Seamons—Learning Assessment Coordinator

*Editor's Note: The following Major Forum address was delivered at BYU-Idaho on 18 July 2002.*

I would like you to remember some of the experiences you had in kindergarten. Remember the smell of the newly sharpened pencils, of the purple ditto-master fluid, and of the chalk dust. See in your mind's eye that lovely box of sharp, full-length crayons with their wrappers still on them and that row of children lining up for an assembly. Hear the recess bell ringing on the playground, a chorus of children repeating the Pledge of Allegiance, and the hum of the big clock on the wall. (Why were school clocks always so noisy?) Imagine the feel of the cool desk chair as you slid into it and the smooth, hard covers of the books in your school's library. Taste that white paste! (Don't kid yourself; we all ate a few fingerfuls of that stuff!)

You have been there and done that. You are an expert in being a *student*. And you don't just have one year of memories; all of you have spent at least a decade in school. Some of you have almost finished your second decade as a student. Now, if any of you ever went back to your kindergarten classroom after becoming an adult, you were probably surprised to discover that it was far smaller than you remembered as a child. You had grown taller. Your perspective had changed. You may have experienced that on a physical level. Today I'd like you to apply that principle on an intellectual level.

Today you are bigger and taller intellectually than you were at five. I hope. We're going to look at the teaching-learning process. And we're going to consider it from both a student's perspective *and* a teacher's perspective. You see, *students* don't always view things the way that *teachers* view them. What you remember learning as a student may not be exactly what your teacher remembers teaching.

In America today there are six major teaching theories. As I present them, you will have many "ah-ha!" experiences. You'll think, "Oh, yeah, Mrs. Jones did that in fifth grade!" You remember *what* Mrs. Jones did. Now you're going to discover *why* she did it. You might even discover why someday, when you're teaching your Elders Quorum or Relief Society or your family, *you* may want to use Mrs. Jones' approach!

**Now, if any of you  
ever went back to  
your kindergarten  
classroom after  
becoming an adult,  
you were probably  
surprised to  
discover that it was  
far smaller than  
you remembered  
as a child.**

### SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTIONISM

Each of the six theories flows from a particular world philosophy. For instance, Social Reconstructionism comes to us from the philosophy of

Idealism. The Greek philosopher Plato, living in the 4th century B.C., first formalized the philosophy of Idealism, which stresses the ideas of the mind. Hence the name “Idealism.” Idealists believe in the power of the unseen world. They believe in mind over matter.

The modern educational theory that flows from Idealism is Social Reconstructionism, which holds that schools should be change agents, free from all forms of discrimination, and concerned with issues of global welfare. Rather than merely having their students read and talk about the world’s problems, teachers of this theory encourage their students to feel and to think about issues. They have their students spend time in the community becoming immersed in problems and finding possible solutions. Simultaneously, Social Reconstructionists challenge their students to acquire strong moral values. One of the primary techniques employed is simulation and debriefing.

**Social  
Reconstructionists  
challenge their  
students to acquire  
strong moral values.**

Let me give an example. I once taught with a terrific teacher who loved the Social Reconstructionist approach. At the time, Mrs. Jeppeson was teaching fourth grade at J.A. Taylor Elementary School in Centerville, Utah. In fourth grade, students learn about Utah history. They study the Anasazi and other Native American tribes. As part of her unit, Mrs. Jeppeson had her students turn their classroom into a cliff dwelling. The children crumpled brown paper bags, rubbing them until they became soft like suede. They flattened the bags and attached them to every surface in the classroom, making it look like a cave. The students learned about the pictographs that many tribes used to record significant events. Then they painted their own stories on their cave wall. It really was a beautiful work of art.

One day after school when the cave was finished, Mrs. Jeppeson took cans of spray paint and wrote graffiti all over her classroom cave. The next morning the students were devastated. Their beautiful cave had been defaced. They were furious. They interrogated all of the teachers, learning nothing. They interrogated the other students. Still nothing. At recess someone found a spray paint can in the dumpster, which led to a fresh round of bullying children on the playground to find out if anyone had seen anything. Nothing came of their efforts. They were beside themselves.

Toward the end of the day, Mrs. Jeppeson called her class together for the debriefing. She told them that the playground supervisors were displeased with their behavior. She said she wanted to hear what their side of the story was. They voiced their frustration at working so long and so hard to create something beautiful only to have it destroyed by someone who didn’t care. After hearing what they had to say, Mrs. Jeppeson gently asked them how they supposed the real Native Americans must feel when tourists visit their beautiful cave dwellings and put spray paint on

them ... or carve their names in them ... or steal parts of them. She never told them what had happened, that she had deliberately ruined their cave. That wasn't the point of the lesson. She had wanted her students to learn the value of respecting other people's property, and she did it through simulation and debriefing. The lesson was well-learned. Her students will never forget what it felt like to be treated disrespectfully. They will think twice before destroying other people's property.

You can probably think of other examples of Social Reconstructionism. Many of you have studied that classic blue eye/brown eye simulation of slavery. That's Social Reconstructionism. Certainly, at some point in your elementary school experience, your class created a mini-society complete with some form of currency. You elected officers and made rules to practice running society. That's Social Reconstructionism. It's a powerful way to teach.

## BEHAVIORISM

And it's totally different than the theory of Behaviorism at the other end of the card. Behaviorism finds its roots in Realism. Aristotle, one of Plato's pupils, was the father of Realism, which stresses the world of nature or physical things. Rather than focusing on the ideas in the mind, realists focus on the tangible things we can sense around us. They rely heavily on the scientific method, on the systematic analysis of what is observed. They believe the aim of education is to cultivate habits.

The basic principle of behaviorism is that education can best be achieved by modifying student behavior through the use of rewards. Behaviorists believe teachers should state a behavioral objective, observe student behaviors, and distribute appropriate reinforcers. Behaviorists are big on performance skills and checklists.

In junior high school, I had a band teacher who was a Behaviorist through and through. He loved calling out two names from one of the sections—like two clarinet players or two trombone players—and making us stand up and play the twelve major scales in rapid succession. The student who played them faster was given the higher chair, and the slower student would take the lower one. Moving up a chair was a powerful reward.

Mr. Thomas also required us to enter a Solo and Ensemble Festival. For those who have never been, I will explain the procedure. You (and a friend or two, if you're in an ensemble) stand before a panel of judges and play a musical selection on your instrument. The judges evaluate and critique everything from your posture to your breathing, from your tonal quality to your use of dynamics. And then they give you a rating. Our Festival judges made a 1+ the highest score, and it was nigh impossible to achieve. Anything over a 1- brought tears of happiness.

**The basic principle of behaviorism is that education can best be achieved by modifying student behavior through the use of rewards.**

We would spend weeks practicing to earn a score in the 1 range. Weeks. That's Behaviorism.

You have certainly had teachers who practiced Behaviorism. Maybe you have played Number Munchers, a math facts computer game where one reward was advancing to the next level. After three rounds of escaping the Troggles, you were additionally rewarded with a little comedy sketch. You've been in Spelling Bees where the reward was staying in while the others were eliminated. That's Behaviorism, too. The Pizza Hut Book-It Program and the Accelerated Reader Program are other fine examples of Behaviorism. And they work—very well.

#### PERENNIALISM

For many years there was a struggle between the philosophy of Idealism and that of Realism. Eventually, Thomas Aquinas attempted to reconcile the two. The philosophy he authored, known as Thomism, is the official philosophy of the Roman Catholic Church. Thomists believe that both ideas *and* tangible realities are important. Furthermore, they believe that when reason fails, man must rely on faith. Thomists feel that school curriculum should contain both theology and liberal arts.

**Thomists feel that  
school curriculum  
should contain  
both theology  
and liberal arts.**

And so a “Catholic” theory of education arose—a theory known as Perennialism. It focuses on the world's permanencies: on God and on the classic works of history and literature. The Perennialist teacher feels education should confront the problems and questions that have challenged people over the centuries. And, for the Perennialist, this is primarily accomplished by reading and discussing the classics. As a Perennialist would point out, if a problem was addressed by people in the past, we can and should learn from them.

When have you experienced Perennialism? Well, perhaps you were involved with the Junior Great Books program. In it students read short stories by writers like Tolstoy or Hans Christian Andersen. On a given day in groups with children and parent volunteers, they discuss in amazing depth the elements of the story: the characters, the plot, the setting, and the theme.

Perhaps your school didn't do Junior Great Books. Still, you must have had teachers who had you read chapters at home for an in-class discussion—or an essay. My tenth grade American History class was that way, as was my AP Biology experience. When you want to expose students to the greatest thinking mankind has to offer, Perennialism is the best approach.

## ESSENTIALISM

The Reformers, men like Martin Luther and John Calvin, protested the abuses of the Catholic Church. Not surprisingly their philosophy is called Protestant Sectarianism. Like the Thomists the Protestants believed that God exists and can be known by both faith and reason. Unlike the Catholics who maintained a strong attachment to the past (like Latin, a rather dead language), Protestants didn't focus heavily on the "classics." They focused on what was essential for their day. So while formal schooling was important to the establishment of a "priesthood of believers," Reformers like Luther thought academics should occupy only part of the day and vocational training should occupy the rest.

Their theory of education became known as Essentialism, the curriculum consisting of the "essentials": reading, writing, and arithmetic. The primary method employed by Essentialists is the lecture and test. Essentialists like the no-nonsense approach of just telling students what they must know. And they usually like students to take notes during the lecture—often in Roman outline form, if you know what I mean.

I remember the first teacher who introduced me to outlining a lecture. I was in Mr. Burrell's sixth grade grammar class. He called us into the alcove (I went to a school without walls), handed us squatty little notebooks, told us to copy everything he wrote into our "Notes," turned to the chalkboard, and began to lecture on the eight parts of speech. And I neatly copied the information into my notebook. I felt so mature. It was actually exciting.

My AP European History teacher at Roy High School also used the lecture format—exclusively. I never remember Miss Larkin using *any* other method. And she was, without question, one of the best teachers I ever had. History came alive in that class. I still remember her stories about Robespierre and Rasputin. Wow! Many Essentialist teachers incorporate visual aides into their lectures—you know, PowerPoint presentations and video clips. Not Miss Larkin. She kept us spellbound with just her personal charisma. She was an Essentialist teacher who knew the power of that theory. Essentialists focus on presenting the fundamentals—and doing it in a very direct fashion.

## EXISTENTIALISM

The next theory to develop was Existentialism, which arose in the nineteenth century from the philosophy of Existentialism, which makes it easy to remember. While some of the teachings seem a bit bleak, Existentialism, more than any philosophy which preceded it, taught that we must create our own meaning. Existentialists believe that we are responsible for the choices we make. They believe students must *choose* to

**Their theory  
of education  
became known  
as Essentialism,  
the curriculum  
consisting of  
the "essentials":  
reading, writing,  
and arithmetic.**

learn. A teacher cannot *force* knowledge into a student. A teacher cannot *arrange* the conditions. At some point ultimately the student must take that responsibility.

Existentialist teachers provide time for their students to do self-reflection in journals because they value that part of the learning process. They want their students to make personal meaning from the education they are receiving. The main teaching strategy they employ is independent research and presentation.

As an elementary school teacher, I used the Great Brain program for independent research wherein students spend about one month researching a topic of their choice both in class and at home. When they are ready, they teach the class what they have learned. The projects were incredible.

For instance, one student, Fantasia, asked if she could learn to make porcelain dolls, a craft her grandmother enjoyed. Her hour-long presentation showing dolls at each stage of the firing process was delightful, and she even gave me a doll she helped make.

Another student, Jeff, asked if he could study planes. Now Jeff was one of those quiet, artsy students. You know the type: they never say anything, but their illustrated desktops are simply incredible to look at. I figured he was going to draw a few planes and quietly hold them up for us to look at, but I said, "Sure." On the day of his presentation, Jeff asked if he could set up during lunch recess. I gave him permission to remain in the room, and I went out with my class. When we returned some 40 minutes later, Jeff had suspended a dozen model airplanes from the ceiling. He had positioned them in dogfights, doing all sorts of aerial maneuvers. He had gone to Hill Air Force Base and had secured a copy of the fighter plane silhouette book. With intense (and surprising) animation, Jeff asked us to open the book at random. He could identify, by silhouette, any plane in the world. He told us which country manufactured it, which countries had access to it, how many mach it could go, which ones had vertical lift-off. It was fascinating. He held us captivated for over an hour. That's the power of independent research.

**Existentialism is probably the best theory for teaching students to be independent and life-long learners.**

Maybe your school did a Science Fair, Math Fair, or Free Enterprise Fair. In each case you did your research on your own and then came in and made your presentation. Existentialism is probably the best theory for teaching students to be independent and life-long learners.

#### PROGRESSIVISM

The last theory is Progressivism, which comes from the philosophy of Pragmatism, the philosophy of twentieth-century America, which is, "Whatever works." For the Pragmatist, "reality is an event, a process, a verb." Pragmatists believe that learning should be centered around the interests

and needs of the child, and that it should be creative and fun. This is the first philosophy to truly encourage “fun.” The theory of Progressivism encourages cooperation, not competition. It is focused on problem-solving in cooperative groups, and it makes use of peer evaluation and review.

I incorporated many cooperative learning activities in my class, projects which integrated numerous subjects. One of my students’ favorites was our doll house project. In math we were learning about scale and ratio. The students were placed in teams for building “dream houses” for a Barbie. They each drew plans on graph paper, and then they met to evaluate which features they liked best. These were blended into a single set of blueprints. They later enlarged the plans onto butcher paper, eventually tracing them onto plywood. Several parents took the boards home and cut the pieces. The next week I handed out power drills and screwdrivers to my fifth graders—and may I pause to point out that ten-year-olds are probably too young to fully comprehend the use of power tools; a few desks in that room were riddled with holes by the end of the day—and we assembled the houses. In art we learned about color theory, and they painted the homes. In science we studied circuitry, and they wired them with electricity. They made furniture and other interesting accessories for their elevators, helicopter launch pads, and swimming pools. And we eventually sold the houses at auction for over \$100 each. That’s cooperative learning. That’s Progressivism: integrated subjects and fun!

I did other things, from Interplanetary Travel Companies to a Children’s Museum for the Ancient Cradles of Civilization. Creative Pursuit, in the state of Utah, is another fine example of Progressivism. Kids like it, and they do learn from it. It does tend to be a bit noisier than some of the other approaches, though. Power drills can be that way.

## MORMONISM

When I teach courses in educational theory, students here at BYU–Idaho often ask, “Which theory of education does Mormonism use?” The answer is not so obvious as you might think. The world believes we are a protestant sect. They think we are Essentialists. And, frankly, if all you see is Sacrament Meeting and General Conference, you might be inclined to believe that all we do in this church is lecture. Fortunately, there is more to the Mormon theory of education than that!

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints happily teaches that *all* of the philosophies I have mentioned contain some truth. In 1978 the First Presidency gave a statement regarding God’s Love for All Mankind. In it they proclaimed:

The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received

**The theory of Progressivism encourages cooperation, not competition. It is focused on problem-solving in cooperative groups, and it makes use of peer evaluation and review.**

a portion of God's light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals.

All of the philosophies I have presented today, and all of the theories that emerged from them, contain some truth. Elder B.H. Roberts explained the doctrine this way:

While The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is established for the instruction of men; and it is one of God's instrumentalities for making known the truth; yet he is not limited to that institution for such purposes, neither in time nor place. God raises up wise men and prophets here and there among all the children of men, of their own tongue and nationality, speaking to them through means that they can comprehend.... All the great teachers are servants of God; among all nations and in all ages. They are inspired men, appointed to instruct God's children according to the conditions in the midst of which he finds them.

**The first prophet of  
this dispensation,  
Joseph Smith, often  
expounded on our  
need to remain  
open to all available  
sources of divine  
light and knowledge.**

The first prophet of this dispensation, Joseph Smith, often expounded on our need to remain open to all available sources of divine light and knowledge. As he put it, "One of the grand fundamental principles of 'Mormonism' is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may." He further exhorted Church members to "gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them."

So, have we done it? Have we embraced the truth in these theories? Of course! You can find each one of the theories of education represented in some program of our Church:

*Social Reconstructionism (Simulation and Debriefing)*

Pioneer Trek  
Fast Sunday

*Existentialism (Independent Research and Presentations)*

Lay Clergy (Preparing a talk)  
Personal Scripture Study

*Perennialism (Read and Discuss)*

Sunday School  
Relief Society and Priesthood  
Family Scripture Study

*Essentialism (Lecture and Test)*

General Conference  
Sacrament Meeting

*Progressivism (Cooperative Learning and Peer Review)*

Enrichment Meeting

Family Home Evening

*Behaviorism (Performance and Checklist)*

YW Medallion and Duty to God Award

Temple Recommend Interviews

#### EDUCATION AT BYU–IDAHO

Of course, BYU–Idaho is a curious blend of education and religion. Not surprisingly, you can also find each of the theories of education represented here:

*Social Reconstructionism (Simulation and Debriefing)*

Internships

Practicums

Academic Travel

Student Teaching

*Existentialism (Independent Research and Presentations)*

Sketchbooks

FA 100

English 313 Journals

Religion

*Perennialism (Read and Discuss)*

Children's Literature

Shakespeare

*Essentialism (Lecture and Test)*

American Heritage

General Education

Forums

Devotionals

*Progressivism (Cooperative Learning and Peer Review)*

Editing teams in your composition courses

Lab teams in some Science courses

*Behaviorism (Performance and Checklist)*

Expert Juries in Music

Swimming Class

Online Courses

## LEARNING AND TEACHING

Many strategies for teaching and learning are being used here. And not just here; you have seen the different theories at work throughout your schooling—even back in that kindergarten class we mentioned earlier. A few years ago Robert Fulghum wrote what has become an immensely popular book called *All I Really Need to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten*. The book begins with these observations:

Most of what I really need to know about how to live, and what to do, and how to be, I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sand box at nursery school. These are the things I learned. Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you are sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you. Live a balanced life. Learn some and think some and draw some and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day.

Take a nap every afternoon. When you go out in the world, watch for traffic, hold hands, and stick together. Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the plastic cup? The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why. We are like that.

And then remember that book about Dick and Jane and the first word you learned, the biggest word of all: LOOK! Everything you need to know is there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation, ecology, and politics and sane living.

Think of what a better world it would be if we all, the whole world, had cookies and milk about 3 o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankets for a nap. Or we had a basic policy in our nation and other nations to always put things back where we found them and clean up our own messes. And it is still true; no matter how old you are, when you go out in the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.

**While it is true that  
we are instructed to  
be as little children  
in terms of faith and  
of being submissive,  
we are commanded  
not to be as children  
in understanding.**

Mr. Fulghum's point is well made; the important themes of education are introduced in kindergarten. And then, with the cyclical nature of a school's curricular scope and sequence, those concepts are presented again and again, with ever-increasing complexity. And we should strive to increase our understanding of those themes. While it is true that we are instructed to be as little children in terms of faith and of being submissive, we are commanded *not* to be as children in understanding. As Paul put it in his epistle to the Corinthian saints, "Brethren, be not children in understanding; howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men" (1 Corinthians 14:20).

Today, I have tried to help you achieve a deeper understanding about the various teaching theories you have experienced over the years. Hopefully, this will help you as you teach in the various auxiliaries in the Church, or in your occupation, or in your home. You should be able to say, “What am I trying to accomplish?” And, “What method would be the best for doing it?”