

## A CASE FOR STUDENT PARTICIPATION

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In an interview published in *Perspective* last year, President Clark was asked if he saw more “collaborative learning and less lecturing” in store for BYU–Idaho students. “Much less lecturing, much less,” he responded. “I would say 80/20, maybe 20 percent of the time in lecture.”<sup>1</sup> His comments are philosophically in line with other counsel we have received recently. For example:

- At the August 2005 Faculty Meeting, Elder Jay E. Jensen taught us that, in the words of one of his early teaching supervisors, we need to “[l]earn to put more of the burden of the learning on the student.”<sup>2</sup>
- In February 2006, Elder Bednar reminded us that, particularly when it comes to learning by faith, “we primarily are to act and not only to be acted upon—especially as we seek to obtain and apply spiritual knowledge.”<sup>3</sup>

Such a vision represents a dramatic change from the national norm. One survey concludes that 73 to 83 percent of college professors “spend almost the entire hour lecturing to a passive student audience.”<sup>4</sup> While BYU–Idaho professors may be somewhat better than the national average, anecdotal and quasi-empirical evidence from students suggests that participation in BYU–Idaho classes is currently far from the student-focused breakdown President Clark advocates. In fact, although imperfect, an informal survey of BYU–Idaho students indicates that they believe professors spend 78.8% of class time speaking themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Many faculty members are undoubtedly already striving to make inroads towards achieving President Clark’s vision. However, some may still question whether such a teaching style is appropriate for a university setting. Others may desire to increase student participation in their classes but may lack the knowledge of how best to do so. Although important, such concerns are beyond the scope of this article. Recognizing that lecturing, as well as many other teaching methods, is an important element in any college classroom, my aim in this article is to review the benefits of greater student participation and address some of the common concerns about doing so.

### BENEFITS OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION

There are many potential benefits to greater student participation in the classroom,<sup>6</sup> but I focus on four that have been most significant in my experience and seem most applicable in the university setting: greater

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retention, richer diversity of insights, better student preparation, and the opportunity for improving communications skills.

*Greater retention.* President Harold B. Lee once expressed his “deep concern about the fact that some [students] could go through Primary, Sunday School, Mutual, priesthood quorums, and seminary and come out the other end without testimonies.” His explanation for why this was happening was simple: “*Because our young people have grown up spectators.*”<sup>7</sup> His concerns in the spiritual context echo those of Derek Bok in the academic context. The former Harvard president wrote that what students retain is “likely to be determined less by *which* courses they take than by *how* they are taught and *how well* they are taught.”<sup>8</sup> In particular, Bok notes:

Most professors teach as they traditionally have, [continuing to] ignore the accumulating body of experimental work suggesting that forms of teaching that engage students actively in the learning process do significantly better than conventional methods in achieving goals, such as critical thinking and problem-solving.<sup>9</sup>

During a question-and-answer session at BYU–Idaho, Elder Bednar articulated this principle in a powerful fashion when a student asked for the reference of a scripture Elder Bednar used in his remarks. “If I tell you, you’ll never remember,” Elder Bednar replied. “If you discover it for yourself, you’ll never forget.” Similarly, in his February 2006 address to religious educators, Elder Bednar noted: “The most important learnings of life are caught, not taught.”<sup>10</sup> One of my students put it this way: “I seem to remember those points the most that I verbalize in class.”

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Research bears out what intuition predicts: students retain far more knowledge in classrooms with active student participation than in lecture halls where they passively ingest professors’ insights.<sup>11</sup> In his inaugural address at Harvard nearly 150 years ago, Charles W. Eliot similarly observed: “The lecturer pumps laboriously into sieves. The water may be wholesome, but it runs through. *A mind must work to grow.*”<sup>12</sup> Of course, minds can work and grow when reading, taking notes, and listening attentively, but students’ minds are stretched in a distinctive way when they are invited to verbalize their conclusions and newfound knowledge. As we give students more opportunities to express their thoughts in class, we help them assume the burden of learning and discovering insights for themselves.

The Lord has emphasized the fact that teaching principles helps us better understand the very principles we teach: “Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, *that you may be instructed* more perfectly” in all manner of things (Doctrine and Covenants 88:78-79, emphasis added). Perhaps because teaching principles is one of the best ways to learn them,

the Lord directs us to “[a]ppoint among yourselves a teacher, and let not all be spokesmen at once; but let one speak at a time and let all listen unto his sayings, that when all have spoken that all may be edified of all, and that every man may have an equal privilege” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:122). While the Lord is speaking specifically in regards to gospel study, President Clark’s admonition to increase student participation, coupled with academic research, implies this is sound pedagogy for the classroom as well.

*Diversity of insights.* When the teacher alone speaks in class, the data bank of knowledge, experience, and insights is limited to one person. But when teachers allow students to share their insights, the data bank increases dramatically. For example, while discussing the story of Nephi’s broken bow last year, I invited my students to share some insight they had about the story. One amateur archer noted that Nephi had to fashion not only a new bow, but also a new arrow—even though the text mentions only his bow being broken (1 Nephi 16:18-23). The student explained that different types of bows require different types of arrows. Because Nephi made his new bow from wood rather than steel, this student observed, it made perfect sense that he would also have to fashion a new arrow.

I had never before noticed this particular authenticating detail.<sup>13</sup> My student’s insight was just one of many things I have learned from the impressive pool of my students’ collective knowledge. Much of that knowledge comes from our students’ experience: being an avid archer, having divorced parents, being a racial minority, having to choose between being in a successful rock band and serving a mission, living in Saudi Arabia as an American citizen, having joined the Church over the objections of parents, and having raised sheep—to name just a few of the many experiences my students bring to the discussion that I do not. Providing opportunities for students to incorporate their experiences into their learning can enrich the learning experience for students and faculty alike. President Bednar told this faculty on more than one occasion that “any faculty member at BYU–Idaho who does not believe that he or she can learn something from a student does not deserve to be a faculty member at BYU–Idaho.”<sup>14</sup>

*Greater motivation for preparation.* My law school experience taught me that where teachers expect and even require students to regularly participate in classroom discussion, student preparation improves dramatically. Students who know they can skate through a lecture without any risk of being called upon are less likely to prepare for class as intensively as those students who know their teachers might call upon them. Just as most of us learn more from preparing for a Gospel Doctrine class we teach than one in which we are students, our students may learn more when they prepare for classes in which they know they will be actively involved.

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*Opportunity for improving communications skills.* Harvard's Derek Bok notes that a *Wall Street Journal* survey of major corporations revealed that "communication was the most important of all competencies to employers, who frequently complain about the inarticulateness of the college graduates they hire."<sup>15</sup> When teachers help draw students out of their comfort zones by inviting them to share their insights, students have invaluable opportunities to increase those very oral communications skills that employers seek. Granted, merely speaking in class does not ensure that students' communication will improve; however, faculty members may use these opportunities to instruct students regarding appropriate modes of discourse for that particular field, providing an important teaching opportunity beyond the course's subject matter.

#### CONCERNS REGARDING INCREASED PARTICIPATION

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Notwithstanding these benefits, some faculty harbor genuine concerns about talking less and encouraging students to talk more. I will briefly address some of the concerns faculty might understandably have about increasing student participation in their classrooms; these concerns have been frequently expressed during conversations with colleagues.

Concern: It's hard for me to see how my students will learn if I'm not teaching. If our students are going to gather new information and master new concepts, doesn't the teacher need to be the one doing most of the talking and teaching?

*Room for teaching by explanation.* No one calling for more student participation is suggesting there should be *no* lecturing in the classroom. Most teachers committed to drawing students into the learning process through participation still spend some percentage of their class time explaining concepts. However, the question is simply how much of any given hour teachers should spend explaining things.

*Learning by participating.* Without preparing in advance or receiving some explanation from teachers, it's true that students may not learn much from each other in an unguided discussion. But with some advance preparation, a bit of explanation by a teacher, or above all, some thoughtful questions from an expert, students can, in fact, learn in the very process of discussing things they did not previously understand or only recently learned.

Personally, the most vivid example of learning through participation was my experience at Stanford Law School. The professors were clearly more knowledgeable and more intelligent than the students, yet the heart of almost all their courses were student discussions fueled by great questions. Professors used brief explanatory lectures to introduce topics, clarify principles, and sum up discussions, but almost never as their sole or dominant mode of teaching. My classmates and I were certainly not

experts, but because our professors expected it, we read the assigned cases and were thoroughly prepared to discuss their implications. With insightful questions, our professors gave us opportunities to articulate principles we had just learned. They also helped us promptly reexamine our newfound conclusions by challenging our assumptions with probing questions. In the process, we almost always gained insights we had not yet even considered. This is the very essence of the Socratic method at its best: to lead students to the discovery of new insights through a series of thought-provoking questions.

Can we achieve similar results at BYU–Idaho simply by expecting students to come prepared? Not only may our students be less motivated than those at graduate schools, but in creating a safe learning atmosphere for our students, BYU–Idaho professors will refrain from using intimidation or humiliation to motivate students to prepare. Yet with the help of such mechanisms as grading students on daily reading and providing questions to ponder prior to class, I have found that the vast majority of my students come to class reasonably prepared. Even in a supportive environment, knowing that participation is expected and may be required can motivate students to come to class better prepared.

*Concern:* Doesn't student participation inevitably come at the cost of covering material? Each minute students spend participating in class is one less minute I have to teach.

*Student teaching.* I have felt this concern, worrying that time spent in student participation was time sacrificed on the altar of pedagogical inefficiency. Over time, however, I have realized that rather than merely treading water (repeating concepts already presented), great classroom discussions actually propel the class forward. Guided by master teachers, discussions cover much or most of the material teachers otherwise would have covered themselves. In the end, they arrive at the same destination as they would have if they had lectured, but students have done much of the driving. Indeed, in one study involving Harvard physics students which I discuss in more detail below, students who were given class time to discuss problems with fellow students actually made more progress in understanding basic physics concepts than did students in classes taught in the traditional lecture method.<sup>16</sup>

*Covering material versus mastering material.* While wise teachers may use discussion to cover much of the same material as lecturers, they may ultimately cover less material than someone who only lectures. That would be a problem if simply covering material were the goal. Elder Richard G. Scott reminds us that it is better for students to understand a few significant principles well than a potpourri of principles poorly: “Remember, your highest priority is not to get through all the material

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if that means it cannot be properly absorbed. Do what you're able to do with understanding. . . . Determine. . . what is of highest priority."<sup>17</sup> Because students learn so much better by participation than they do by lecture, teachers who choose to teach solely by lecturing so that they can cover more material win a Pyrrhic victory, at best: they cover more material, but their students actually understand less.

*Concern:* It would be great to try this style of teaching with Harvard Business School students, but doing it with our undergraduates is a whole different challenge. I'm not sure it can really be done here.

To be sure, the more motivated and capable the student, the better this approach works. As a former institute and seminary teacher, I can't help but see some irony in this objection, as I have heard the concern raised from some quarters that student participation might be fine for seminary students but that it really isn't scholarly enough for college-level students.

I am unaware of any empirical data either supporting or refuting the notion that younger or less brilliant students are incapable of learning in a model that involves more student participation. However, my personal experience has been that when given the chance, BYU-Idaho students have risen to the occasion and made meaningful contributions.

*Concern:* What about students who think they know more than they do—and in the process simply confuse things? It seems inappropriate for teachers to abdicate control of the classroom to the most vocal students.

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Master teachers invite student participation, but they never cede control of the classroom. Increasing student participation does not require teachers to approve of every comment. Indeed, particularly in more technical or scientific fields, student comments can do more harm than good if teachers do not correct any misunderstandings created by mistaken student statements. Providing such correction creates tactical challenges for teachers, given the fact that “[l]earning occurs best in an atmosphere of trust and safety.”<sup>18</sup> But just as bishops remain responsible for the doctrinal content of sacrament meetings, teachers who invite participation in classrooms can and should ensure that students are not left with any doctrinal or theoretical confusion.

*Concern:* I've seen teachers who do this well, but I'm not one of them. It's just not my style. We should all teach to our strengths, and my strength is lecturing.

Facilitating student participation can be difficult, and some teachers may do it more effectively than others. Yet for all the reasons discussed above, this is a change worth making. For many, the change will not be easy. Even more patience and dedication may be required for those

who naturally prefer to lecture, but even a small adjustment can benefit our students. In fact, as Derek Bok notes, “the experience of many professional schools shows that it is possible for entire faculties to alter their teaching methods to help their students learn to think critically” by using the discussion method.<sup>19</sup>

*Concern:* To argue that student participation is preferable to lecturing seems a stretch, when we see more sermons than seminars in the scriptures and in General Conference.

Although we can try to characterize the teachings of prophets and the Savior in mortality in different ways,<sup>20</sup> I concede that the scriptural record we have documents far more lectures than discussions.<sup>21</sup> But before building a tower to give our next lecture like King Benjamin, we should note some reasons for caution in wholly emulating the teaching styles we see in General Conference and the Sermon on the Mount.

First, different circumstances warrant different teaching styles. Given the translation challenges alone, for example, it is not surprising that General Conference addresses are sermons written in advance. Logistically, the kind of teaching described in this article simply isn't feasible in many of the teaching settings we witness or see involving prophets. The different approaches we take in sacrament meeting and Sunday School also suggest that there is a time and a place for talks as well as for more interactive learning.

Second, in addition to logistical differences, our circumstances as college professors (including religion professors) are ecclesiastically different than those of prophets and the Savior. Although we can certainly gain great insights from their teaching styles, we must also remember that they are in a unique position to declare doctrine and call sinners to repentance. Thus, while the Savior himself provided unparalleled sermons, among believers in our day he provided for the appointment of teachers who would preside over discussions in which all would have a chance to participate (see Doctrine and Covenants 88:122).

Finally, when confronted with a host of scriptural teachings or statements by Church leaders that could be read to support competing points of view, there is always safety in giving greater weight to the most recent and prevalent line of thinking. Perhaps the definitive statement on teaching in the Church today, *Teaching, No Greater Call*,<sup>22</sup> notes the following under the heading, “Don't Talk Too Much”:

Teachers who lecture most of the time or answer every question themselves tend to discourage learners from participating. You should be careful not to talk more than necessary or to express your opinion too often.... Think of yourself as a guide on a journey of learning who inserts appropriate comments to keep those you teach on the correct path.

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Your main concern should be helping others learn the gospel, not making an impressive presentation. This includes providing opportunities for learners to teach one another.<sup>23</sup>

Read together, the collective counsel today clearly promotes a prominent role in the classroom for student participation.

*Concern:* This model may work well for teaching the gospel or perhaps even in the social sciences. But I teach classes in a discipline with right and wrong answers, most of which the students don't know in advance. I have a hard time seeing how these methods will work in my discipline.

Maybe greater student participation won't work well in every circumstance. The challenge of involving students through participation certainly seems greater in math or chemistry than religion, for example. But the evidence in support of more participatory teaching and learning methods is strong enough that it's worth giving it a try.

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One Harvard physics professor combined lecture and student participation in an unusual way. In class, he would briefly explain a physics principle and then give a test question about the principle. After all his students had noted their answers, he gave students a few minutes, working in small groups, to try to change each other's minds. While watching these small groups in action, the physics professor repeatedly saw that those students who had answered the question correctly were often better than the instructor at intuitively understanding why some of their classmates had gotten the answer wrong—and better at helping correct the misunderstanding.<sup>24</sup> Students taught in this way “made twice as much progress in grasping the underlying physics as well as substantially outperforming their classmates in solving the quantitative problems common to most introductory physics courses.”<sup>25</sup>

*Concern:* Great style can never compensate for bad content. Isn't it more important that I teach accurate information, with the rest being frosting on the cake?

There is no question that we would all be better off teaching true principles poorly than teaching falsehoods well. Bells and whistles and fancy *PowerPoint* presentations can never compensate for a lack of knowledge on the teacher's part. Nor can the most animated student discussion make up for a failure to convey accurate information. Thus, as we strive to improve our teaching style, we should be careful not to neglect the task of staying current in our respective fields.

Yet if our goal is to help our students understand the material, we cannot be content with simply mastering the material ourselves. Teaching truth isn't enough to discharge our duties; we must also teach it effectively. Getting the content right is necessary but not sufficient; we must also teach our content well if our students are to succeed in learning. While

we must guard against emphasizing style over substance, we must also guard against the other extreme: invoking the importance of substantive expertise to excuse ourselves from making stylistic improvements.

## CONCLUSION

The quality of teaching has always been one of the strengths of BYU–Idaho and Ricks College. As we move toward defining a BYU–Idaho learning model, my hope is that we will build on the wonderful things teachers here do already, while looking for ways to help our students learn even more effectively. As we do so, perhaps we will find ourselves asking, as Virginia H. Pearce suggested, “How will I help my students discover what they need to know?” instead of, “What will I teach today?”<sup>26</sup> ☞

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## NOTES

1. Kim B. Clark, “Meeting President Clark—An Interview,” *Perspective*, Autumn 2005, 30. In other settings, I have heard President Clark acknowledge that the desired target rate may need to be different for different disciplines, recognizing that some subjects lend themselves better than others to this style of teaching.
2. Jay E. Jensen, BYU–Idaho Faculty Meeting, Rexburg, ID, Aug. 19, 2005.
3. David A. Bednar, “Seek Learning by Faith,” Address to Religious Educators, February 3, 2006, West Jordan, UT, 2.
4. Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006, 120) (citing Robert T. Blackburn, Glen R. Pollino, Alice Boberg, and Colman O’Connell, “Are Instructional Improvement Programs off Target?” *2 Current Issues in Higher Education* [1980], p. 32).
5. Of the 278 students e-mailed, 117 responded. While not truly random, this sample should represent a healthy cross-section of majors. However, with 183 of the students coming from Book of Mormon classes, the sample may have been skewed toward underclassmen, who probably encounter more lecturing in larger classes than do juniors and seniors. Additionally, because all the students surveyed were currently enrolled in one of my classes, the experience of this sample of students may be somewhat skewed. Finally, students’ perceptions of participation levels are not necessarily accurate; one colleague who asked students to estimate what percentage of the time he spent talking in their class found that their estimates ranged from 0 to 90 percent. Still, student perceptions may be the most useful measurement we currently have of actual levels of lecturing and participation.
6. Student participation could fall into several categories, including many that describe activities occurring outside the classroom. However, the scope of this article is limited to that subset of student participation activities that occur when students participate in some way inside the classroom.
7. Melvin Leavitt, “Elder Robert L. Backman: Be Where the Lord Can Find You,” *New Era*, May 1982, 13.
8. Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 49.

9. Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 312.
10. Bednar, “Seeking Learning by Faith,” 5.
11. See Wilber J. McKeachie, *McKeachie’s Teaching Tips*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 31; Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 123. Logistical constraints make student participation in the form of comments more difficult in some settings (e.g., classes with several hundred students) and impossible in others (e.g., General Conference and sacrament meeting talks). Even in these settings, however, we tend to glean more as students when we use techniques that engage us more actively—such as taking notes or looking for personal applications—than when we are more passive listeners.
12. Quoted in Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 123 (emphasis added).
13. My student wasn’t the first to notice this detail. See John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, (Provo and Salt Lake: FARMS/Deseret Book, 1992), 41-43.
14. David A. Bednar, BYU–Idaho General Faculty Meeting, Rexburg, ID, Aug. 26, 2003.
15. Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 106 (citing *Wall Street Journal*, “Work Week,” Dec. 29, 1998, A-1).
16. Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 133.
17. Richard G. Scott, “To Understand and Live Truth,” *Address to CES Religious Educators*, Feb. 4, 2005, West Jordan, UT, 2.
18. Virginia H. Pearce, “The Ordinary Classroom—a Powerful Place for Steady and Continued Growth,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1996, 11.
19. Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 124-25.
20. For example, the Savior used questions extensively. See Elder Walter F. González, “Teaching as the Savior Taught,” *Ensign*, Sept. 2004, 28 (“The Savior used memory questions, reasoning questions, and questions for the heart. We can use them also”).
21. Pres. Clark notes that the Savior’s teaching with parables undoubtedly inspired discussions among the disciples that the scriptures do not record. Clark, “Teach One Another,” 40.
22. More than just another manual, “a new abbreviated and improved edition” of this book was part of the Brethren’s response to the First Presidency’s challenge to “revitalize and improve teaching in the Church” (Dallin H. Oaks, “Gospel Teaching,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1999, 78).
23. *Teaching, No Greater Call: A Resource Guide for Gospel Teaching* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1999), 64.
24. Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 132-34.
25. Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 133. And for a fascinating example of how one teacher used a Socratic series of questions to teach binary arithmetic to elementary school students, see Rick Garlikov’s “The Socratic Method: Teaching by Asking Instead of by Telling” at [http://www.garlikov.com/Soc\\_Meth.html](http://www.garlikov.com/Soc_Meth.html).
26. Pearce, “The Ordinary Classroom—a Powerful Place for Steady and Continued Growth,” 11-12.