

## THOUGHTS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING BY FAITH

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As teachers at BYU–Idaho, we have a wonderful opportunity to help students understand the principles of learning by faith. Our students live in a world where noise and distractions constantly pull on their best intentions, where iPods and cell phones and video games lure them away from reality at the push of a button, and where time for reflection and pondering is sucked away, often without their realization of its loss. The media they ingest, the affluence many experience, and the instability of many families and institutions make their world as different from ours as ours was from our parents'. How can we meet the challenges of reaching today's students? How can we teach them to focus in class and that so doing is interesting and useful to their eternal progression? How can we help them learn to learn and to develop a love for learning? How can we help them find the way to learning by the Spirit of the Lord so that they may learn to hear His voice?

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Elder David A. Bednar's CES talk in February of 2006 is a profound statement on learning and teaching by faith. As I read and reread that talk I am struck by how much work we have to do as teachers to make this university a place of learning by faith that we may prepare our students more fully to meet the challenges that await them beyond the university:

The learning I am describing reaches far beyond mere cognitive comprehension and the retaining and recalling of information. The type of learning about which I am speaking causes us to put off the natural man (see Mosiah 3:19), to change our hearts (see Mosiah 5:2), and to be converted unto the Lord and to never fall away (see Alma 23:6). Learning by faith requires both "the heart and a willing mind" (Doctrine and Covenants 64:34). Learning by faith is the result of the Holy Ghost carrying the power of the word of God both unto and into the heart. Learning by faith cannot be transferred from an instructor to a student through a lecture, a demonstration, or an experiential exercise; rather, a student must exercise faith and act in order to obtain the knowledge for himself or herself.<sup>1</sup>

What Elder Bednar is asking of us and what we are asking of our students is extremely demanding—experiential learning, active learning, requires much more of the students (and ourselves) than pure lecture methods of instruction—and frankly, our students are not prepared to make the changes immediately. Many lack preparation because their past educational experiences have trained them to see their educational pursuits as "merely a game to be played with the ultimate winner determined by

test scores and GPA.”<sup>2</sup> Elder Bednar characterized this attitude as “the academic path of least resistance.” Our students’ past experience has not given them the opportunity to understand the eternal nature of learning. For some students this attitude, learned from past education experiences, is exacerbated by a lack of humility or willingness to be taught. Our job is to teach the importance of “conscientiously and consistently and constantly learning how to learn.”<sup>3</sup>

We, as teachers, must help students see patterns for success, and we must require of them all that they can give. They have much potential and we have the opportunity to help them develop that innate desire to grow and excel, which has, in many cases, been sadly neglected in the secondary schools. We must consistently remind and encourage them to be active learners, acting for themselves and not merely being acted upon by us. We can then facilitate their being active learners by giving them opportunities to practice learning by study and by faith with the help of the Spirit.

Three years after my third child was born, I was divorced and trying to figure out how I was to provide for these children. I prayed long and hard and decided that I should go back to school and finish my graduate degree so that I might obtain a position at a university. After many struggles, I packed up the kids and drove across the country to Logan, Utah, to attend Utah State University. I had never really studied as an undergraduate, and I had no real notion of how to do it; furthermore, I was terrified of the consequences of not studying and failing while 2500 miles from home with three kids in tow. I have no doubts about how I passed my exams and obtained my degree. It was by the grace of a loving Heavenly Father and the worn knees of many pleadings and prayers. During this time, I learned to study and learned how to study. I learned to prepare with enough time to let the ideas coalesce before I tried to use them. I learned to be patient with myself and to read and reread material until I understood. I learned not to trust in my own understanding, but to rely on His understanding and His willingness to help me achieve my goals. I learned to call on the Lord in mighty prayer to teach me through His Spirit and to help me keep my wits about me when I was too tired to go on. I have an undeniable testimony of the love of our Heavenly Father and his great desire to help us succeed in our righteous endeavors if we will humbly seek his help. I cherish this encounter with God in academia in which I learned in part what it means to learn by faith. I learned by desperate need, and I would not wish that on any student of mine. I would hope, though, that my experience could be a glimmer of hope in the mind of a student: “If Heavenly Father helped Sister Harris in school, maybe He would help me.” I hope that I can provide classroom

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experiences that help students build faith in themselves and their ability to succeed in school with the help of the Lord and his Holy Spirit.

Since last February, I have been seriously considering what I can do to encourage my students to be active learners. I have also been pondering what I can do for myself to model the characteristics mentioned above. The suggestions mentioned below are things that I have tried in my classes over the past few semesters. Some are recent innovations; some practices I have had in place for many years. As I learn more about learning and teaching by faith, I am hopeful that my classes will become opportunities for my students to begin to practice learning by faith. I have arranged the ideas into the following topics: 1) humility, 2) focus, 3) precept, 4) insight, 5) industry, 6) worthiness, 7) accountability, 8) atmosphere, 9) prayer, and 10) consistency.

## HUMILITY

One of the first topics that our students need to understand is the essential nature and necessity of humility. Granted, that heady age when a young person knows all there is to know has something to do with it, but I find many of my incoming students more and more arrogant as the years go by. The culture in which we live is surely a contributing factor, and we, as shepherds and guides as well as teachers, can stress the importance of humility in seeking answers to life's problems, not the least of which is learning in general and learning by the Spirit in particular: "Let him that is ignorant learn wisdom by humbling himself and calling upon the Lord his God, that his eyes may be opened that he may see, and his ears opened that he may hear; For my Spirit is sent forth into the world to enlighten the *humble and contrite*, and to the condemnation of the ungodly" (Doctrine & Covenants 136:32, emphasis added).

Likewise, maintaining a humble attitude as an instructor is an important complement to the students' efforts. In his talk, "Seek Learning by Faith," Elder Bednar's admonitions are fairly straightforward. We are to "become and remain worthy conduits through whom the Spirit of the Lord can operate.... It is never about me and it is never about you."<sup>4</sup>

## FOCUS

Get between students and their noisemakers. This must be done gently and consistently across campus. Students cannot focus or concentrate, much less hear the still, small voice of the Spirit, if they are constantly talking on their cell phones or listening to their MP3 players. I am not suggesting banning cell phones or MP3 players from the campus. I am suggesting that we talk with our students about counting the number of minutes per day that they don't have any external noise in their heads and

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suggest that they try to increase those minutes little by little throughout the semester. We can share our own experiences of gaining insights while walking or driving without the radio on. Students can be weaned from these distracting devices if we continue to remind them and give them a reason to change their behaviors. We are asking them to partner with the Spirit and learn to learn more independently, but long term behavioral changes take time and effort and won't happen if our students forget their goals. Further, one cannot partner with the Spirit if one never has quiet time to hear his voice.

#### PRECEPT

Have students read and write a one-page essay on Elder Bednar's talk about learning by faith *before* they come to class. I post the talk on Blackboard and send each student an email at least a week before the semester starts. I also remind them that if they have already read and written about this talk, I expect them to reread the article and write a new paper that reflects their current thoughts. The following is the posting in Blackboard and the questions that I ask them to address in their papers:

##### Elder Bednar's Talk

Please read Elder Bednar's talk before you come to class on Tuesday. Type up a one page summary of this talk and how its principles apply in your life this semester. Your paper is due in class on Tuesday. Be sure to address the following questions:

1. What does Elder Bednar mean when he says that "the Spirit carries the message *unto* but not necessarily *into* the heart?"
2. What are the three basic elements of faith?
3. Describe how "assurance, action, and evidence influence each other in an ongoing process." What is a helix?
4. What does Elder Bednar mean when he says that "there are things to act and things to be acted upon?" How does this idea relate to learning? How does it affect the way you will learn this semester?
5. What are two of the central features of the Father's plan of happiness?
6. "Learning by faith requires \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ exertion and not just \_\_\_\_\_ reception." How can you incorporate these ideas into your study plan for Calculus this semester?
7. Explain why "learning by faith cannot be transferred from an instructor to a student through a lecture, demonstration or experiential exercise."

8. Reread the entire talk. What insights did you pick up the second time around?

The first day of class we start with a discussion of what they have learned from Elder Bednar, and I promise them that I will try to help them learn in practice what that talk is all about. What would be the effect if students read this talk several times each semester? My guess is that students would pick up more and more of the truth contained therein with each pass. How much could we accelerate the learning curve if we brought these principles to their (and our own) attention on an ongoing basis! After four years of studying that talk, they would be far along the path to becoming life-long learners by faith.

#### INSIGHT

Help students develop the insight to know what they as individuals need to do to succeed in their endeavors. Often students want to be led by the hand in their learning: “Tell me what to do for the points; tell me what to study for the test; tell me what to do for extra credit, etc.” Though they think they need all these things to succeed, in fact, we are not allowing them to grow intellectually when we provide everything they need to succeed.

For example, homework should not necessarily be a static assignment. I do not make specific homework assignments (especially in introductory level classes), but have a standing assignment to do as many problems as a student might need to do to succeed. And how does a student with presumably less experience than the instructor know what he or she needs to do to succeed? I often provide some guidance in the form of a list of suggested problems from which I will take quiz questions. Ultimately, the responsibility for figuring out how much homework to do is the student’s, not mine. Of course, some rejoice that they don’t have to do homework, but that sentiment is usually short-lived. It is critical that I make sure my students understand why I am not assigning specific problems to be graded. I spend valuable time the first day talking about a student’s success being a very personal endeavor. The problems one student needs to do are not necessarily the problems another needs to do. A life skill is learning how many problems “I” must do to succeed. Students can’t do that if the assignment is handed to them. Often, they will do, at most, just what is assigned. Based on this traditional model, three things can happen:

1. Students do more problems than are necessary because they already understand the concept.
2. They do too few problems and still don’t understand the concept at the end of the assignment.

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3. Least likely to occur—they complete just the right number and difficulty of problems to help them learn the concepts.

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For most assignments and most students, homework assignments are either busy work or not enough work to solidify the ideas. We must teach the students to enlist their own intellects as well as the Spirit in determining how much homework they need to do for their own success. This concept ties directly into the notions of learning by faith and learning to act and not be acted upon. I continue to remind the students throughout the semester of their responsibility to figure out how much work they need to do to succeed and whether or not they need to come see me to get help. I can't determine that for them. When I explain my homework policy and their responsibility repeatedly, my students buy into it (or at least appear to).

Although the examples I have mentioned deal with math homework, I believe the principle is true no matter the discipline. A reading assignment might be made, but it is the student's responsibility to know whether he understands the assignment with one reading or whether he needs to read it two or even three times. As teachers we need to remind students that reading an assignment once may not be enough. The same can be said for writing assignments. It is a rare student indeed whose first draft of a paper is sufficient, yet many students turn in their first attempts as completed assignments.

I have used this strategy for homework for many years in virtually all of my classes. However, in one class, I had continued to make homework assignments that were turned in and graded. I unfairly believed that these students, who often must be dragged through the course kicking and screaming about busy work, would not have the maturity to do the problems on their own. After several semesters, I mentioned to my students that it did not appear that the homework was helpful and I asked them what they would do if I did not require homework. Several said that if they didn't have to turn in the homework they would have more time to learn the concepts. Most indicated that they would do enough homework to get the idea even if it wasn't turned in. One student said that she wouldn't do the homework if it was not required for a grade. When I asked her whose problem that was, she agreed that it was hers and that she should take responsibility for her own learning. Because of that discussion, with trepidation, I decided to remove the homework requirement from that class the following semester. The change has been remarkable. Not only have the test scores improved on every test (and I have taught this same class for six years), but the attitude about the class has also improved dramatically. Perhaps I just have an exceptional class this semester, but I don't sense that. I believe the change is due to the trust I put in my students to learn as they need to succeed.

INDUSTRY

Repeatedly remind the students that we expect two to three hours of work outside of class for every hour in class. Two to three hours of study time includes time for reading the material, rewriting and organizing one’s notes, doing homework problems, preparing for upcoming exams on a regular basis (as opposed to the night before the test), and perhaps working on out-of-class projects. Students have learned in high school that school work is done in the classroom and life happens *outside* the school. At BYU–Idaho, we hope that “life” happens in the classroom, in the library, in the dorms and apartments, and that it consists of many things including school work. We can help them understand that a full-time student’s “job” is studying and that whatever else may have to be done in a day, a student had better plan some time for study in each class.

Stewardship reviews can help a student focus on managing his time and priorities. When giving stewardship reviews to students, we need to be pointed in our questions. Questions that ask, “grade yourself on your stewardship last week in this class from 1-10, with 10 being your best effort and 1 being no effort at all,” are often answered erroneously, though I don’t believe deceitfully. Students often think that any effort at all is worth 8 or 9 points and anything beyond that is 10. I am convinced that they genuinely don’t realize that looking at the book for 10 minutes a week and coming to class doesn’t constitute a valiant effort. I ask students pointed questions like: “Did you spend two to three hours outside of class for every hour in class last week. If not, why not?” Below is a stewardship review process that I have borrowed from Jenny Youngberg, a colleague in the Mathematics Department. This review is printed on the back of a weekly quiz. The fact that they are answering the questions in the testing center after having just taken a quiz based on the homework seems to help focus the students’ reflections. She gives points for the reviews; I don’t. We also make graphs of the student quiz scores vs. stewardship scores and talk about data points that show unreasonable relationships like students who fail the quiz but have perfect stewardship reviews. We then specifically talk to those students individually to help them make their study time more effective.

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Stewardship Report for the Week of Quiz # \_\_\_\_\_ / Exam # \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Hour: \_\_\_\_\_

For each of the three sections below *sign your initials* (don’t just mark a check or an “x”) next to the statement that *most accurately* describes your behavior and attitude *in the last week*. Only initial one statement in each section.

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Homework:

\_\_\_\_\_ I have worked each of the assigned homework problems either to completion or to the point where I was certain I understood how to complete the problem. When I needed more practice, I worked additional unassigned problems.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have worked *nearly* every homework problem. I may have skipped one or two problems and/or left a couple of problems incomplete, but I gave a solid effort to homework this week.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have worked more than half of the homework problems. Although I may have skipped a handful of homework problems this week or left several incomplete, I have put a decent effort into the homework this week.

\_\_\_\_\_ Either I have worked less than half of the homework problems in a dedicated and careful way, or I have worked more than half of the homework in a rushed or half-hearted way.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have put little or no effort into the homework this week.

Reading/Preparation:

\_\_\_\_\_ I have come to class completely prepared to learn each day. I have read the assigned sections of the text carefully (taken notes and worked out examples). I have followed any extra instructions Sister Youngberg gave us this week regarding our class preparation. I have sought the help of the Spirit in my work and preparation.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have come to class more or less prepared each day. I have read all the assigned sections of the text carefully, but I did not necessarily read all of them before the class period during which we discussed them. I have followed any extra instructions Sister Youngberg gave us this week regarding our class preparation.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have come to class somewhat prepared each day. I may have only skimmed some of the assigned sections of the text, or perhaps I didn't do a reading or exercise that Sister Youngberg requested we do.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have come to class unprepared some days, but I have at least read or skimmed parts of the assigned sections.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have read little or nothing in the text. My class preparation has been seriously lacking.

Participation/Attitude:

\_\_\_\_\_ I have treated my classmates and instructor with respect and charity. I have tried to contribute to the safe, comfortable, positive classroom environment my instructor seeks. I have participated fully in classroom discussion and

activities. I want to learn because I know that learning is central to Heavenly Father's plan.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have treated my classmates and instructor with respect and charity. My behavior does not detract from the safe, comfortable classroom environment my instructor seeks. I believe learning is important, even though I may view it more as a means to an end than as something that is valuable in and of itself. I may not have participated as fully or enthusiastically as I could have.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have treated my classmates and instructor with respect and charity, but my behavior may have detracted from the learning environment my instructor seeks. I may have worked on something else rather than participating in class fully, or perhaps I was daydreaming, text messaging a friend, or talking with other students at times.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have treated my classmates and instructor with respect, but perhaps I have not been charitable or given them the benefit of the doubt all of the time. I may not have participated much in class

\_\_\_\_\_ I may have been disrespectful or unkind to my classmates or my instructor this week. My attitude has not at all been what it should be.

The responsibility for learning is the students'; however, they can benefit by examining their behavior in light of some standard that everyone understands. Bishops and stake presidents don't ask us to rate our behavior on a scale from 1 to 10 to get a temple recommend. The questions they ask are pointed and searching and set a standard for behavior that is well known and understood. Stewardship, duty, responsibility, call it what you may, is a real part of many facets of our lives and should not be seen by students as something only associated with the temples.

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#### ACCOUNTABILITY

Resist the temptation to provide all the tools and answers for the students. As soon as the time for the first exam arrives, the question invariably gets asked, "When are you going to give us a study guide for the test?" My answer that I'm not going to give them a study guide at all is always met with stares of incredulity and amazement. I then explain that a test that is purely evaluative is not much of a test in my opinion. Tests should be learning tools as well as assessment tools. There is a great deal of learning to be had in studying for a test and in reviewing it after it is returned. A life skill I desire for my students is the ability to prioritize and categorize information. Students can't do that if I prepare a study guide that does it for them. Yes, it's easier, but they have not learned the skills to obtain it for themselves. It is critically important to help students learn to prioritize and categorize information they are studying.

To help students prepare for exams, I ask questions like, “If you were going to write the test for this section, what would you put on it and why?” Such discussions help students to pick out important topics and categorize the information in sections under those topics. Outlining a chapter may be seen as an outdated and tedious method of learning, but it has value in helping students manage the information they are asked to learn. Often, some of my students don’t understand what it means to outline a chapter and respond with blank stares when I suggest that they use this technique to begin studying for an exam. If we help our students learn these basic tools of study, as well as content in our areas, students will master effective studying for long-term knowledge retention. We can and must help them progress from passive students to active students if they are to be successful life-long learners.

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#### ATMOSPHERE

Structure their learning environment in a way that provides a secure and inviting place to learn. Students must know that they are loved by us when they come into the classroom, not because of the great grades they get or wonderful discussion points they bring up, but just because they are who they are. Surely this is a tall order for a teacher of so many students. It is clear to me that the only way I can achieve this goal is with the help of the Holy Spirit. I must seek to love my students as my Heavenly Father loves them. They are entrusted to me for a semester or so, and it behooves me to make the most of sharing myself with my students.

The most striking thing about this campus when I first came here to teach was the extraordinary friendliness of the faculty and students. The kind and gentle spirits of many of our instructors and students touched my heart immediately and caused me to marvel at the goodness around me. I hope my students wonder about the love they feel in my presence. I hope they feel kindness and goodness when they are around me. I hope they consider that I care for them and that I am seeking for their success as much as they are. I hope they can understand the Father’s ways better because of being associated with me. This is not to say that I can or should fix their mistakes, but I can stand by them and help them recover from those mistakes. I can believe in them and support their endeavors to learn and grow while they are within my influence. For me, this is a superhuman assignment and brings to mind President Clark’s statement that “we must work beyond our capabilities, relying on the Spirit and power of the atonement.” I know that the Lord can and will supply my every need as I seek to truly love my students.

## PRAYER

We must pray for our students like we have never prayed for them before. Many of them have tremendous problems that affect their abilities to progress not only in school but also in the gospel and in life in general. Though I am not qualified to meet the needs of such a student, I can pray for him with real intent. I can pray for my classes as a whole and for individual students who need extra support. I can pray for insight as to how to teach most effectively. It is so much easier to teach content and give tests and assign grades without the genuine effort needed to call on the Spirit in behalf of individuals in the class each day. I have felt the presence of the Spirit much more strongly in those classes for which I have taken the time to pray sincerely on a continual basis. If I expect my students to be working hard trying to learn by the Spirit, I can expect no less of myself. I have been blessed in my efforts to reach students when I work as hard to have the Spirit as I ask them to do. As I have insights into learning by the Spirit, I am able to share them with students as they occur and help the students realize that learning is something that we all do and that growing is a life-long endeavor. This perspective has caused me a great deal of reflection, and I'm grateful for the opportunity I have to grow each semester as I teach my brothers and sisters. We have the opportunity to practice and hone these same skills that we are asking our students to develop. The occasions for the Lord to bless us as we work with Him to lead each class are truly numberless.

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## CONSISTENCY

These efforts need to be campus-wide and repeatedly emphasized for the effect to be measurable. If our students are reminded in every class about their partnership with us and the Spirit of the Lord and about the undeniable strength accessed by the unity of the faculty, the students, and the Spirit of the Lord, they are more likely to remember to call on Him to learn by faith. Research has shown that repetition is necessary for retention. We can help our students remember what they are doing here by being consistent and reminding them, not just once, but many times and in different settings.

We have an obligation to strengthen our students' learning skills so that they may learn to learn by the still, small voice of the Spirit in all that they do. As we prepare them for life outside academia, the blessings that come from knowing how to get answers to perplexing questions are invaluable and will strengthen them as they move into the future. Paraphrasing Kahlil Gibran, our students are as arrows shot from our bows, and where they go, we cannot go, not even in our wildest dreams.

Elder Bednar reiterates the importance of being able to recognize the voice of the Spirit as one prepares for such a flight:

As we look to the future and anticipate the ever more confused and turbulent world in which we will live, I believe that it will be essential for all of us to increase our capacity to seek learning by faith. In our personal lives, in our families, and in the Church, we can and will receive the blessings of spiritual strength, direction, and protection as we seek learning by faith to obtain and apply spiritual knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

We are blessed to be here at this university and we have a charge by the President to “work beyond our capacities,” so that we require the support of the Holy Ghost and the power of the Atonement to accomplish our tasks. The blessings of doing so have been made manifest to me in many small ways as I have pondered those words and the words of Elder Bednar. We must help our students to “work beyond their capacities” as well, with support and direction and explanation. There is nothing that cannot be accomplished on this campus if we are willing to move in the direction we have been pointed. ☺

**We require the support of the Holy Ghost and the power of the Atonement to accomplish our**

**tasks.** NOTES

1. Elder David A. Bednar, “Seek Learning By Faith,” Address to CES Religious Educators, Jordan Institute of Religion, 3 February 2006, 3.
2. Elder David A. Bednar, “...Your Whole Souls as an Offering Unto Him...” Ricks College Devotional, 5 January 1999, 2.
3. Ibid.
4. Bednar, “Seek Learning,” 4.
5. Ibid., 1.