

CONNECTING

Casey Hurley—Editor

The realization that all learning is connected, that all true principles can be understood in light of the restored gospel, first dawned on me during a BYU history of civilization colloquium course called Turning Points. In hindsight, I identify a field trip to Moab, Utah, as the beginning of my journey of connecting truth. But it wasn't the discussion about geology in Arches National Park or the readings on observing nature that inspired me most. It was the connection I made with other students.

Taking a long bus ride, camping, and hiking together forged bonds that followed us to the classroom. We formed naturally into study groups, thinking we were just getting together to have a good time. We would meet at Ryan's apartment and start by learning a new song on our guitars. Then Greg would read us the latest love poem he'd written for a girl he saw in the library. The love poem would remind Tiffany of a book we'd read for class, which made Lee think about the scientific theory we'd studied, which Ryan noticed was a perfect example of a revelation recorded in the Pearl of Great Price. We were amazed that science, psychology, literature, and the arts all brought us back to doctrines of the gospel, and we couldn't get enough of these types of discussions.

The course curriculum and format helped us make some of these connections. Readings in science, psychology, history, art, and literature were carefully selected to help us see the connections. We talked about how scientific theories like relativity influence ideas like moral relativism. We had three professors from different fields, and four TAs who emphasized the unity of truth. Units of study were divided by topics such as "Seeing" and "Understanding Truth" rather than "Physics" or "British Literature." Guest speakers showed how Dante's *Inferno* related to the gospel or how Freud's theories of psychoanalysis related to architecture. Careful planning by the instructors provided a perfect backdrop for our discoveries.

But the relationships that created our learning environment could not be written into the course syllabus. It was the safety we felt with each other that allowed us to share, explore, and learn on a level we'd never encountered before. Assigned study groups or group projects would not have had the same impact.

At BYU-Idaho, teachers like Bruce Kusch taught me the importance of learning students' names to connect with them, allowing them to trust me as the teacher and sense my concern for them individually. When I started teaching one-credit courses to business majors who study together in a coherent group for an entire semester, I realized that a rich learning environment depends more on students connecting with each other than

on students connecting with the teacher. With only eight to ten meetings in the semester, I struggle just learning their names; but because they feel comfortable with each other, they are willing to engage in ways that seldom happen even in a three-credit class. Learning students' names as early as possible is still important, but now my first day or two of class focuses primarily on helping the students get to know each other.

At semester's end, in a class that seemed especially successful in terms of student preparation and participation (and learning, too, based on final exam results), I asked students to comment anonymously on what motivated them to prepare so well. Some mentioned receiving points for doing the reading or a desire to perform well on exams. But most students said peer pressure was a motivating factor and that knowing the other students in the class made them want to come to class prepared:

I think that since the beginning of this class, we have all been very close. We knew that we were all here to learn business law and we all knew that we were here to learn by the Spirit. I think this really helped me to know that if I said something wrong, then someone else would help me understand it more by helping me to correct my mistake.

Getting to know classmates on the first day of class and having a spiritual discussion helped me be more comfortable and more receptive to the Spirit.

When students connect with each other, they become comfortable discussing content more deeply and personally, and they comment or ask questions when they might otherwise hesitate. In short, they engage each other on a level that allows them to make connections in the curriculum, just as my friends and I made those connections years ago in the Turning Points colloquium.

Contributors to this issue of *Perspective* share their insights on all kinds of connections: connecting students with each other, connecting teachers with students, setting up curricula that allow students to begin making their own connections, connecting students and teachers through online technologies, and finally, connecting with ourselves, with each other, and with God through dance and other creative expression. We hope this issue helps you consider new ways of connecting—of teaching connection as well as actually connecting. ☺