UPCOMING EVENTS

Fall Faculty Conference
September 9
8:30 am-1:00 pm
Hinckley Building

The Faculty Dialogue Committee is incorporating a few exciting changes to this year’s Fall Faculty Conference on Tuesday, September 9th. The theme of this year’s conference is “Facilitating Deep Learning in a Student-Centered Classroom: What Works?” The conference will be held from 8:30-12:00 and will begin with a 30 minute keynote address from Brian Memmott, speaking on the benefits of developing curiosity among faculty and students to enhance creativity in learning. This year, a larger number of faculty sessions will follow the keynote. A total of twelve faculty members will present shorter 20 minute sessions this year at three separate times to allow more opportunity for attendees to catch sessions of interest. All the presenters at this year’s conference were personally invited to participate based on recommendations by colleagues or from having received recent campus awards for implementing learning strategies with their students that actually translate into results. The conference will conclude at 12:00pm with a buffet lunch, which we hope will encourage faculty to stay and mingle with presenters and colleagues. Please join us for what should be a wonderful start to the new academic year.

Spori Summit
October 2-3
Sky Mountain Ranch

Brown Bag
October 16 and 17
1:00 pm
MC 372A Little Theater

Brown Bag
November 13 and 14
11:30 am
MC 372A Little Theater

R&CW Conference
December 11
IN THIS ISSUE OF PERSPECTIVE

There has been a complex history associated with the idea of “research” at BYU-Idaho. At its inception, President Hinckley’s pronouncements that “graduate degree programs will not be offered,” and that, “[BYU-Idaho] will be just as good a teaching institution as we can make it” (Eyring, 2001) made it clear that the mission of the University would not include traditional research programs.

On the one hand, this should be seen as a good thing. There are many aspects of a research university that are not necessarily conducive to good teaching. In graduate school, I remember reading an editorial from the Journal of Chemical Education that bemoaned the second-class status of teaching faculty at large research institutions, and the corresponding inability of many research faculty to be effective undergraduate teachers. As the author put it, “[a] life spent writing papers for research-oriented journals and proposals for grant support does not necessarily dispose faculty toward excellence in undergraduate teaching” (Lagowski, 1992). The current structure of BYU-Idaho prevents this bifurcation of our faculty and keeps our focus on exceptional teaching.

On the other hand, finding the proper role of research for our students and ourselves has not been easy. When I first arrived at BYU-Idaho in 2004, the word “research” was relegated to dark hallways, spoken in whispered tones, as though its use might call down unnamed curses from unknown sources. In the intervening years, however, dedicated faculty have shown that targeted undergraduate-level research projects are invaluable as a part of many students’ educations. These colleagues see “mentored student research” as a means to an end—training students to be effective, creative investigators in their fields—rather than the end itself. Today, students from disciplines across campus are regularly engaged in research and other creative, independent projects, presenting their results at the Research and Creative Works conference, regional and national meetings, and even publishing their work in respected peer-reviewed forums.

This issue of Perspective highlights the current state of undergraduate research and other faculty-mentored student endeavors at BYU-Idaho. Brian Pyper and Hector Becerril discuss the past and present of the Research and Creative Works Conference, Sid Palmer provides a glimpse into the future of Mentored Research and Faculty Development, and several others share their experiences and personal growth gained in guiding students toward independent discovery. Enjoy!

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A longitudinal view of the restoration of the gospel and
the establishment and maturation of The Church of Jesus
Christ of Latter-day Saints shows a clear and distinct
progression of seasons. These include seasons of revelation,
proselytizing, gathering, consolidation, dispersion,
temple building, global expansion, and hastening of the
work. During each of these seasons, all church work and
programs were active, but special focus was given to one or
two aspects of the work.

BYU-Idaho has experienced a similar progression
of seasons. We have experienced in our recent history
seasons of program building, rapid curriculum changes
and development, and online learning and global influence.
We are now entering a season of faculty development
and student experiential learning. As with the Church’s
progress, each season was defined by increased focus on
a particular area—while still moving all aspects of the
work forward. This new era will build on and continue
to advance the work of prior seasons. While BYU-Idaho
(and Ricks College) has been active in developing faculty
and students throughout its history, we are entering an
era where faculty development and student experiential
learning will progress in ways and to degrees we have never
experienced before.

At BYU-Idaho, we sometimes refer to experiential
learning as faculty development and mentored research
(FDMR). This shorthand title is meant to include all
aspects of scholarly work. It encompasses what it means
to ‘practice the craft’ of all disciplines. These scholarly
activities are a natural outgrowth of something that is very
much at the heart of what we are and what we’ve been, as
a University. Alumni of BYU-Idaho and Ricks College
often describe the impact that faculty members had upon
them. Many have stories of how their lives were touched by
a timely and personal interaction with a faculty member.
Individual and nurturing interactions of faculty with
students have been a hallmark of BYU-Idaho, a central
component of the Spirit of Ricks, and something we
endeavor to maintain as the school grows and the student-
to-faculty ratio increases.

Student mentoring, in the form of FDMR, at Ricks
College from the 1960s through 1990s consisted of a
few faculty who mentored students as time permitted.
Institutional support for research was minimal, but the
level of engagement in FDMR was significant for a junior

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college. As Ricks College became BYU-Idaho in 2001, it was commissioned to be a teaching institution focused on student learning. In the early 2000s faculty developed programs and courses generally did not pursue FDMR activities—except in the arts, where a strong earlier tradition continued. Around 2005, administrators and faculty began exploring how to take advantage of the benefits of FDMR for students and faculty while safeguarding the University’s student-and teaching-focused mission. These efforts led to steady strengthening of FDMR on campus.

These developments included establishing a campus student research conference; creating the Eastern Idaho Entrepreneurial Center (E-Center); initiating funding for student research; developing a faculty professional development program that encouraged research and included funding for FDMR; forming the Southeast Idaho Research Institute (SIRI). (Today, The E-Center and SIRI have combined and are now known as the Research and Business Development Center, or RBD Center).

BYU-Idaho faculty engage in FDMR to develop themselves and their students. FDMR activities are faculty-driven and student-centered. They enhance learning and teaching, prepare students for careers and advanced education, occur both inside and outside the classroom, and build/strengthen relationships with external entities. BYU-Idaho faculty and administrators use these characteristics to determine which FDMR activities are appropriate for BYU-Idaho.

Clearly, this type of experiential learning is not new to BYU-Idaho. Still, we often overlook the proven benefits that come from this kind of learning. The following categorized list of benefits builds on the Laursen et al. (2010) summary of previous work:

**Personal & Intellectual Benefits**

- Develops the individual
- Increases confidence in and motivation for learning and career preparation
- Clarifies, refines, and confirms education and career path
- Reinforces classroom learning and provides opportunities to reflect on and synthesize learning
- Increases GPA, retention (in school and in major), and rate of application to graduate school
- Introduces students to the nature of and current issues in their field
- Teaches how new knowledge / creative works are generated
BYU-Idaho faculty engage in FDMR to develop themselves and their students.

- Provides a graduate-like learning experience at the undergraduate level

Skills Development Benefits
- Improves written and oral presentation and communication skills
- Develops ability to understand and analyze the literature
- Builds skills in integrating and synthesizing ideas / information; making judgments about or discerning patterns in evidence or phenomena; applying knowledge in different situations; viewing situations from multiple perspectives; tolerating ambiguity; thinking creatively; analyzing and solving complex, real-world problems; learning on own; and taking intellectual risks
- Increases student ability to pose a question, carry out a project, and share the results with the professional community
- Develops skills in time management, leadership, persistence, and project management
- Increases familiarity and comfort with how professional activities are conducted, including discipline-specific techniques and instrumentation
- Improves ability to work independently

Professional Socialization Benefits
- Establishes collegial relationships with advisors and peers, and engages students in the larger professional community (including attending professional meetings)
- Answers employer and graduate advisor concerns about project management, ability to communicate, work in teams, etc.
- Develops a job / graduate school network and makes students more competitive
- Develops understanding of collaboration as a professional work norm

University faculty must ‘practice their craft’ in order to maintain their professional abilities, including their ability to teach students how to become professionals. Faculty that participate in FDMR benefit from:
- Increased professional development, including knowledge of current developments in their discipline
- Enhanced collaboration with other professionals, both within and outside the University
- Improved teaching ability, which results from renewed passion for the discipline and refreshed ability to understand and work through common obstacles to student learning

Although not all students and faculty experience every benefit listed above, these impressive benefits illustrate why FDMR activities are becoming a central part of BYU-Idaho. FDMR activities are worthy of the resources, efforts, and sacrifices they require.

The recent creation of the Office of Faculty Development and Mentored Research, and the new associate deans in each college, will facilitate FDMR opportunities like never before. Already, FDMR project development and support has been significantly streamlined. The new ‘30+6’ faculty load model will begin to provide faculty with opportunities to engage in meaningful professional development each day, each week. Faculty, departments, and colleges have been given additional resources to support FDMR activities. The ability of faculty and students to connect with external agencies and organizations through the Research and Business Development Center is stronger than ever. Increasingly, faculty and departments are discovering the benefits of FDMR activities for themselves and their students. As a result, more programs are formally incorporating experiential learning into their curricula.

While there is much yet to do, it is remarkable how much progress we’ve made in developing BYU-Idaho-appropriate FDMR over the last several years. Our current
FDMR activities are strong, and growing. Funding and administrative support for these activities are substantial and continues to grow. We are witnessing increased faculty scholarship and eagerly await continued growth. What a remarkable and exciting season to be a faculty member at BYU-Idaho! Our ability as faculty members to bless students has never been greater. We have access to tools, resources, and opportunities that have never been available to this extent before.

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The late summer of 2003 turned into a beautiful fall in Logan. It was made all the more beautiful for my having just spent the past year in the enormous effort leading to putting the final touches on the defense of my dissertation. My advisor, David Peak, had invited me to his office in the days before we were to return to Rexburg. His question, which really resonated with me at the time, was, “What are you going to do now? For the next few months, you are the world-wide expert in this tiny area of physics. Don’t waste it.”

I pondered a lot about what I might do. Write a book about what I’d done, certainly try and incorporate the stuff I’d done into my classes, maybe look for someone interested in collaborating to expand my project to a wider audience...

But, with what I felt was some inspiration, I settled on starting a little research group, using undergraduate students to pick interesting topics to study in the broad and somewhat fledgling field of discipline-based educational research. So, I surveyed my classes for students who impressed me and invited them to work with me. Initially, I sought money for them from the mentored student research funds; then, later, I was able to hire them as research assistants. We looked at how conceptual development was tied to gender biases, how attitudes and reasoning ability affected conceptual development, why students did or didn't choose a major in physics, what sorts of activities alleviated or exacerbated common misconceptions, how confident students were in their responses was tied to whether or not they were correct, and several other interesting projects.

One of the main reasons I had for encouraging these experiences in my students, was to get them to go to professional conferences and present their work. It would expose them to the wider community of physicists and how that community functions, as well as make them feel a part of it. It would get our work out there, for folks to use our results to improve teaching and learning, and give my students experience presenting. Remembering how nervous I used to be in my first presentations, I wanted a semi-realistic chance for my students to practice their talks before we took them on the road. At first we just reserved a room, and I timed their talks while offering feedback on what they could improve.

Then, I became aware that there were some other folks at BYU-Idaho doing research with students using very similar models to mine. I suggested the possibility of combining for an evening of letting our students practice their talks on each other, but it never panned out, so I went to my dean and asked for $500 for a guest speaker, some refreshments, and some prizes, and set up the first spring student conference...

One of the main reasons I had for encouraging these experiences in my students, was to get them to go to professional conferences and present their work.
research conference in 2006. I modeled it very much after the professional scientific conference, with parallel sessions of oral talks, and an open poster session. The first conference had about six posters and twelve oral talks, four of which were my own students. All the talks were from the physical and biological sciences. I invited a colleague from BYU (then the dean of the Freshman Experience, Steven Turley) to come and speak about the value of undergraduate student research to the academy, which we held for about a dozen people in the Taylor Chapel. I printed programs, set the sessions, arranged the judges (strong-arming my friends), and set up the refreshment tables. The prizes were laser pointers, key fobs, and t-shirts from the bookstore, accompanied by certificates of achievement I scrambled to print up between the ending of the last session and the awards session ... and it went off swimmingly.

One year later, we ran it again. It grew, but not by much, and I was able to get some more money from the other colleges involved (still mainly biology, physics, chemistry, geology, and engineering). I invited the Director of Public Outreach of the American Physical Society, the Vice President for Research from Utah State University, and the President of the Utah Academy of Arts and Sciences over the years to be our keynote speakers, and the conference grew to where we had about 50 students presenting and it was too much for me to manage alone. Rhonda Seamons, Dean Cloward, Greg Roach, and our department secretary, Melanie Nelson, did yeoman work helping me not to go crazy that week we put it on, and that got us to 2011, where the University invited me to consider letting someone else be in charge of it, and expand it to include creative works from the arts and literature folks.

Kelly Burgener met with Hector Becerril and I that spring to talk about the future of the conference. I had met Hector before, but only in passing. I sat down with him that spring and showed him what I was doing to get the conference running, and he jointly helped run it that year. Under his direction and the help from the Academic Office, it has since expanded to every semester, and has several hundred students presenting in nearly every academic area. I suspect it is one of the larger activities of its kind in the country. Considering the beginnings, the purpose for which I originally envisioned it, and the difficulty I had with the University getting rooms reserved, AV support, and someone to come represent the University at the keynote session, I am a little surprised how big it has become. I never intended it to be such a production, but its success I think speaks for itself. It has certainly been a game-changer for the students I have had involved with it. The impact of the vision they gain from this kind of experience on their careers has been profound, and several have spontaneously remarked upon it to me. And that’s the reason we do it. 🎉
Editor’s note: Perspective wanted to interview Héctor about the development of the Research and Creative Works Conference. Because we’re short on staff, he interviewed himself. Since the writing of this article (May 2014), Héctor’s hopes were realized and the responsibility for the R&CW conference has been transferred to the new Office of Faculty Development and Mentored Student Research, with Sid Palmer as the conference chair, and the council of associate deans as the new faculty advisory committee. This move marks an even stronger degree of institutional support for the conference and will undoubtedly result in wonderful improvements. The student director for the conference has also changed as of April 2014.

The article presents the state of affairs for the R&CW conference at the time of its writing in May and recognizes the work of the previous faculty advisory committee.

So, tell us one “behind-the-scenes” moment that stands out for you about the Research and Creative Works Conference.

It was a dark and stormy night. Parker was walking down the sidewalk between the library and the BYUIC, when something he saw disturbed him deeply. It was some time after 10 pm, he had had a hard, long day in preparation for the end of the semester and he was heading home in hopes for warm food and a few hours of rest. How could this be happening now? Yet, there was no mistaking that there was a light in Maria’s window and Parker knew what he had to do—so he went in, and he found them.

What do you mean?

Parker Crandall was our second student manager. The conference was going to be held very soon and things were not quite ready. He and others worked through the night that time to make it happen. I did not find out about it until the third day. I did notice them being a little slow the next day, and railed on them for it, but nobody said a word.

Ah, these are plucky chaps you have at the R&CW!

The very best.

And you were kind of, harsh...

They did call me the “evil overlord,” after the Megamind character. Maria had an even more interesting codename, from another movie, but I won’t give it away.

Sounds like you had a good relationship with the team then...

Never you mind, we digress. The meat of the business is that the R&CW conference management team is a great place for the very best students to work because they obtain experience interacting with administrators, faculty, department chairs, and deans from all across campus, as well as with alumni, professional societies, graduate schools, companies, and others as they seek to form alliances that can improve the conference and bless our students.
I wonder how many other university conferences are managed by students?

I could not tell you for certain, but not many. The folks at the Council of Undergraduate Research (CUR) were very surprised when they learned about our model, “for students by students,” as Dan Moore likes to say. They were particularly impressed when they learned that every paper submitted to our conference is judged, and that written feedback is given to the students and their faculty mentors the day after the conference. They also could not believe our faculty would be so generous to help us judge. We tried explaining to them about walking on water, but some of them were agnostic. What really threw them for a loop was that we hold the conference three times per year. Most other institutions that have a conference hold it once per year or even every two years.

Wow, I did not realize that. And how did we get to this point?

That is a long yarn, but the way I was told starts with Bryan Pyper realizing that there were some faculty and students who collaborated in academic projects outside of the classroom, and he wanted to recognize their going the second mile. He joined heads with Rick Hirschi, Rhonda Seamons, Jason Hunt, Greg Roach, and Eric Gee, and together they got a puppy.

A puppy?

Why, yes, the cutest one you’ve ever seen. It was vivacious and friendly, and all the students wanted to play with it because it made them feel loved and special in a place where doing research was pretty much discouraged. Many faculty liked it too, myself included, and would come and judge for it because we saw that students who presented their projects really wanted to know how they were doing and how professional their work was. So the puppy grew and got stronger under the tutelage and sacrifice of the original faculty advisory group. They did everything for it, they got the rooms, the money, the food, they got the students, the judges, the programs. They even got external speakers a few times and worked really hard to keep it growing for about three years until it got weaned.

What do you mean?

Somehow Dan Moore came to me one fine September morning and asked me to help Brian co-chair the conference for one semester and to take it from then on. I felt honored, but accepted reluctantly because I knew that not everyone likes dogs and this one was getting bigger, messier, and smellier than it had ever been. But, I took the leash in hand and started running…

Importantly, I hate running. Fortunately, there were three elements that made significant and positive difference in my experience with the conference. First, Dan was there for us whenever we have needed him. Second, Brian Schmidt had the genius idea of assigning Maria Nate as the administrative support to the conference; he also mentored
My hope is that by having more of these external judges we will have something similar to a professional peer-review system

us and secured funding from the Academic Office. Third, Kelly Burgener challenged us to use students to run the conference in a sustainable way. He pointed me to Andrew Bradbury, the medical director of our BYU-Idaho health center, who had succeeded in implementing a student-led model for pretty much their whole operation. So Maria and I met with Andrew, whom I knew before as my Tae Kwon Do instructor. As a good sensei, he did not fail to share his wisdom with us.

Remarkable.

And so it happened that Maria and I got with chemistry students Camilla Jones, Kathleen Gienger, and Parker Crandall. Together we started meeting with the faculty advisory group, and we grew the puppy, potty trained it, and cleaned up after it a few times. Next came Anna V. Nielsen, who took the little dog running twice a day every day and made it strong, and showed it to everyone on campus through personal visits and by making promotional videos. She also wrote a complete handbook about how to take care of it to keep it healthy and growing. After Anna came Jarom Robertson; he followed the handbook to the “T” and the doggy grew and got shiny. Next, Bridget Lundie put it on Facebook, and at that point it was ready.

Ready for what?

For obedience school, of course! Alan Young, former director of the Community Connections program, came and took the dog and the nine students in the management team and began teaching it new tricks, things that I’d never even envisioned it could do, like a new session for written essays and a streamlined procedure for awards, to name just a couple. Alan has great experience organizing events and working with people, and within one short semester the conference was well on its way to becoming a true dog show champion.

So you gave it up?

Not at all! The dog is still my responsibility, but Alan runs the kennel and I visit once a week to check on it. The current faculty advisory group, including Jack Harrell, Brady Wiggins, Jason Hunt, Jared Williams, Lane Williams and Shawn Randall, also come and visit once or twice per semester to share their vision, give their feedback and set policy about what is accepted, how to judge, how to recognize winners, etc. And, they get to request new tricks too; indeed, it was Jack who asked for the writing session. They also help us organize the program and make sure that things belong together in sessions. Hayden Coombs, our current student manager, works closely with Alan to implement all the things that the advisory committee and I request. As you probably noticed during the Winter 2014 conference, they are doing a great job simplifying the logistics and enhancing the experience for students and faculty alike.

Wow. So what is next?

Well, thanks to the efforts of all these good people, more and more of our current judges come from companies, professional societies and graduate schools, and we are starting to see that the conference is playing a significant
role in the professional preparation and networking of our students. Some of these entities are getting very excited, and they are handing out their own awards to our students during the conference, and talking about the possibility of scholarships. Even I got an award from the Idaho Academy of Sciences (IAS) in connection to my work with the conference. Dr. Stevan Hunter, the president of IAS, has told me several times that “the BYU-Idaho R&CW conference is the biggest thing in Idaho” and promised they would promote it through their society and the societies they interface with. I am also in communication with other national professional societies, and I expect that through collaborations with such diverse organizations there will be greater benefits and opportunities for our students who present at R&CW.

That is wonderful, do people know?

It seems to me that most students and faculty mentors are not yet aware of these new developments. The student team has some ideas about how to get the word out to them, and we might also get some help through the council of associate deans and the Office of Mentored Research and Faculty Development. My hope is that by having more of these external judges we will have something similar to a professional peer-review system, and the conference will slowly morph from being a dog to being more like a cat.

Dog to cat, what do you mean?

Dogs are nice, but they are very accepting of everyone and everything. Cats are a little more selective, and people have to work hard to win them over. We have mechanisms in place that seek to elevate the quality of the works that are accepted into the R&CW, but there is only so much one can do based on an abstract. To really work, quality assurance has to come from inside the mentor-student collaboration. Because their projects will be presented before judges “from the real world”, I expect students will want to do their very best all semester to have a great project to show at the end. I also expect that faculty mentors will feel comfortable telling students to withdraw their submissions if the project does not reach the level of professionalism required for peer-review in the mentor’s discipline. So, the R&CW conference will still accept most submissions, but the authors will become better at self-monitoring the quality of their projects because of the increased visibility of the venue. Right now we do really well most of the time, but we occasionally have some submissions with wonderful abstracts that are coupled to projects that underwhelm the judges. When this has happened and the judge points it out to me it gets a bit awkward, so I hope that these fade away. We want everyone to have the very best experience possible; students, mentors and judges.

I see your point. How do you gauge the experience that people have with the conference?

Almost from the start we hired top-notch junior and senior psychology students to develop, administer, and analyze attitude surveys for presenters, mentors, judges, and conference attendees. So far we have had Michael Petty, Andrew Lowry, Kyle Whittle, and Jordan Hunter, and they have done a great job. Eric Gee and Brady Wiggins from the Psychology Department have generously mentored our students all these semesters. Their compiled data show that students value the conference; firstly because of the feedback they receive, and secondly because of the benefit to their resumes in preparation for whatever the next step is after they graduate. They also mention that the conference prepares them for off-campus presentations in a significant way and gives them confidence in their abilities. We try to make the results of their surveys available to all faculty every semester in a one-page statistical report that indicates the number of submissions, the number of presenters, mentors, judges, their colleges, etc. We are also working with Dan Moore to make this data more available.

Wow, we’ve uncovered quite a few interesting things about the R&CW conference. Would you like to add anything before we conclude?

I have mentioned many names here, but I really need to say that this conference would not be possible without the silent and dedicated work of three individuals I have not yet named: Michael Decker, an accounting student whom I mentored to create the software upon which the R&CW conference runs. He was an excellent collaborator, and since graduating he got a job at Ernst and Young working their databases. Loyd Bigelow from Event Services and
Karen George from Custodial have also supported our event every single time. They have been a joy to work with and have helped us get through conference day with its manifold emergencies and vicissitudes; not once have they said the words “No” or “Can’t,” even when we put blue tape on the walls. It has been wonderful to work with them and with so many other good people, many of whom I would have never met if not for this assignment. I feel I have learned much and grown professionally and personally because of my involvement with the conference. I am grateful for the chance I’ve had to be associated with it, starting that fine September morning.

Thank you for your time.

You are welcome.

About the title:
The first four managers of the conference were chemistry students. They were the vampires and they worked late many nights. The rest of the student team came from the humanities, and they were the zombies. Now, the vampires have graduated and the zombies have taken over. Michael Decker was a werewolf. Alan Young’s team is slightly less supernatural and they call each other codenames from the movie Top Gun. It has been fun.
BYU–Idaho has recently emphasized research among faculty, and among students. The Research and Creative Works conference every semester is a new way for students to present their research. In addition, there are dozens of faculty-members, from all the colleges and most of the departments across campus, who have taken students to external venues to present their research. We recently sat down with two faculty members who have taken students to conferences for the past five years, and asked them about their perspective on mentoring student research.

Tell Perspective a little bit about your background. What do you teach and how long have you been at BYU-Idaho?

Michael: I came to BYU-Idaho almost six years ago to direct the TESOL education program and to teach Chinese language classes for the Department of Languages and International Studies. I have a MA in Language Acquisition from BYU and Ph.D. in East Asian Studies from the University of Arizona. Jeremy and I were hired at the same time.

Jeremy: And, I was hired to teach international politics and international studies. I received my MA in European Politics from the University of Reading, and my Ph.D. in Political Studies from the University of Aberdeen.

Why did you start mentoring students in research?

Michael: I love working one-on-one with students, so when I heard that the administration was interested in having faculty mentor students here in research projects, I jumped on the bandwagon. I called around and found some funding for a student to do some language proficiency testing for my students and statistical analysis. It was a dreadfully boring project. Since that time, we are doing a lot more interesting projects.

Jeremy: In my case, I was working on my PhD and started using my teaching assistant as a research assistant. He’d do research for me, and I’d get all the credit. Best set-up ever! Anyway, I had proposed a paper to a conference at Princeton University and asked him if he’d be interesting in co-authoring. He jumped on board, helped with the research, and did the actual presenting. We were
They get to meet graduate students and faculty from all over the country. It is a great opportunity for students to network and build relationships. It also gives students a glimpse of what graduate school and a career in academia is like.

able to tap into the Thomas E. Ricks funds to pay a good chunk of his costs. That was in 2009. About 6 months later, I did the same thing with a different student at a different conference at the University of Washington. I’ve been mentoring students ever since.

How did you begin working together in this mentoring? You guys aren’t in the same department, right?

Michael: Boy, that’s ancient history. Jeremy, you can correct me, but as I remember I had a student or two that I wanted to take to a conference down in L.A. I wanted to put together a panel, but was short a couple of papers. I had kept hearing the name “Lamoreaux” from my students. He was everyone’s favorite teacher so I picked up the phone and gave him a call. We’ve been working together ever since.

Jeremy: Yeah, that’s pretty much how it went (except the “favorite” bit!). I found two other students, and we made a panel. We practiced presenting with them, helped hone their papers a bit (they really did the vast majority of the work on the papers) and helped them get TER funds. The panel really did awesome and, in fact, one of our student’s papers was actually recommended as the best “postgraduate” paper… until they realized that he wasn’t actually a post-graduate!

Why mentor students in research?

Michael: It is fun to work with students. They have energy, they love learning and have quick and inquisitive minds. I learn a lot from them and that knowledge directly impacts what I do in the classroom. My teaching is informed by the research I do with students. Finally, it is also really fun to go to conferences with students and faculty from campus.

Jeremy: Absolutely! It really is a lot of fun, and we haven’t been disappointed yet. The students are really keen for opportunities like this. They do most of the work and come to us primarily just to get feedback. I can’t say enough about how outstanding our students are.

How do you find students to work with?

Michael: It is a little more difficult for me. I only teach 100 and 200 level language classes. Students simply do not possess the linguistic ability to do research in Chinese linguistics. So, here’s what I do, once every semester I use 10 or 15 minutes to talk about undergraduate research and some of the benefits to students here at BYU-Idaho. I show them a conference announcement and talk about some previous research projects my students have done. Then I make the invitation; if you are interested in doing research, come see me during office hours. Usually only two or three students will make the effort to come. With them I’ll explain very simply how research works and encourage them to select a paper or a project that they have done for another class that they could then push to the next level. Basically I allow the students to self-select.

Jeremy: In my case, it’s fairly easy because about half of my classes focus pretty heavily on individual research projects so I mentor students anyway. I keep an eye out for the best papers and projects, and nudge them toward conferences.

What if you have a student who wants you to mentor them, but you don’t know anything about the topic?

Michael: I call around campus and find someone who does. I once formed a panel of five students for an I-TESOL conference and found five different faculty to mentor each paper.
Jeremy: That's what I do as well. I've nodded students in the direction of faculty all over the place. And, they've received good guidance.

What is the best way for students to share their research?

Michael: Although we've had students present at the Research & Creative Works Conference here on campus, we feel strongly that regional discipline-specific academic conferences are really the best venue. Why? Because it's a real conference, and the quality is elevated a level. Our students who have done both have remarked on the stark difference. They get to meet graduate students and faculty from all over the country. It is a great opportunity for students to network and build relationships. It also gives students a glimpse of what graduate school and a career in academia is like. For example, during the WCAAS 2012 conference, several of our students spent considerable time with the Department Chair of Anthropology at Harvard University, Theodore C. Bestor. By the end of the conference, he offered to write one of the students a letter of recommendation for graduate school. Of those students, one is now studying at Thunderbird School of Global Management, and another is studying at Yale. We've had students present research at academic conferences at the Princeton, University of Washington, Cal State Northridge, Claremont College, Weber State University, Arizona State University, and Brigham Young University, not to mention the conference we hosted in West Yellowstone in 2012.

Jeremy: We also make sure our students are well prepared for the conferences, because their performance reflects on us and the University. So, about a week before the conference we have the students do mock presentations. We invite other students and faculty to attend and give immediate feedback (oftentimes very blunt). Additionally, the night before the actual presentation we talk with the students again and basically tell them that faculty from other universities will be there and it better be good! It usually gets their attention and helps them step it up a notch.
What’s the most rewarding experience you’ve had with undergraduate student research?

Michael: We were at a reception for conference board members when a faculty from the conference organization came up to us and said, “I just want to meet the guys who have the cheek to have undergraduates present at our conference.” Nearly the whole board of the conference organizing committee attended our students’ panel. Our students did an outstanding job and made a big impression on the faculty. At that same conference, in 2010, the board members were so impressed they asked BYU-Idaho to host the 50th anniversary conference of the organization.

Can you tell us a bit about the conference you chaired in 2012?

Jeremy: We held it in West Yellowstone. We had around 100 papers presented from researchers all over the world. People came from as far away as Turkey, Germany, Japan, Korea, England, and all over the country. BYU-Idaho faculty chaired most of the 25 panels and BYU-I students were highly involved. It was quite stressful, but really a blast! One of the things we really wanted to do was make it a complete experience for everyone attending. So, we organized a guided tour of Yellowstone (with BYU-Idaho students as the guides), a tour at a dog-sled kennel, and had a band come up from Salt Lake City. It was pretty cool because so many conferences can be just boring. Everyone loved it.

Do you have any advice for faculty thinking of working with students? How do they get started?

Michael: Working with students is fun and rewarding. Pick a regional conference in your field and co-author a paper with a student. It will scare you back into being the researcher you once were. What you learn from the experience will directly influence your teaching and rekindle your passion for your discipline.
In an address to the faculty, President Clark (2013) emphasized the importance of the faculty using both scholarship and teaching to produce learning resources and, ultimately, high-quality alumni. While this did not include a substantial shift in resources or focus, it did emphasize the need to do more in the way of combining our research and teaching activities. President Clark indicated that two key ways for this to occur are 1) using the classroom as a laboratory to increase our scholarship of learning and teaching and 2) developing mentored research to include students in the research process. The recent creation of the position of Dean of Faculty Development and Mentored Research is meant to support this type of activity and to simplify the process of gathering the necessary funds. This article addresses several of the challenges of the process and highlights some of the activities I have pursued in trying to meet these challenges.

We often hear that there is a divide between teaching and research, and PhD candidates face pressure to decide between the two. Intuitively, many of us balk at that suggestion, asserting that research should enhance teaching. If we aren’t researching, we get stale and are less effective in our efforts. However, teaching undergraduates involves a different set of expectations than teaching graduate students. Students generally come to us with limited understanding of the basic knowledge required to form questions and very few skills required to conduct research. They come to us with fairly naïve notions of what people in our fields of expertise actually do.

Perhaps the biggest constraint we face is time. Even with the improvement of an additional 3-credit load hour reduction a year, we at BYU-Idaho still teach about two to two-and-a-half times as many classes a year compared to our typical colleagues at other universities. This significantly influences what we can do. As a trade-off for the extra teaching load, we are spared the “publish or perish” pressures common elsewhere. If we are going to do both teaching and research, we need to combine the two in a way that focuses on teaching students to research.

How can we construct our teaching so that it builds the basic fluency in content and skills needed to help with research? Although I am by no means an expert in this, I have had some success in inviting students to share in my research in different ways. In many ways, this could be patterned after the EDGE method (Explain, Demonstrate, Guide, Enable) advocated by the Boy Scouts of America or the request in “I am a Child of God” to lead, guide, and walk beside.

If we aren’t researching, we get stale and are less effective in our efforts.

Lead
Faculty frequently express concerns about the “teach one another” part of the BYU-Idaho Learning Model (2007), worried that it can become “the blind leading the blind.” I experienced this early in my teaching career,
having assigned group presentations on international border conflicts. A group chose the Russia-Georgia conflict. One of the students used his time to discuss the American state of Georgia rather than the country. None of the group members knew enough to correct him.

In the early phases, it is necessary to provide meaningful, closely-guided research projects. This is extremely tricky, and I still struggle to get it right. Guided research may be easier for courses with lab sections than those, like Political Science, without dedicated application time. Political Science requires a great deal of background and contextual knowledge that poses significant difficulties for the creation of simple 50-minute research questions with a good way to check the quality of their methods, inferences, and conclusions.

Sweet and Michaelsen (2012) provide several suggestions on using team-based learning to overcome most of the problems with using group work. They recommend front-loading the reading, having students take a “Readiness Assessment Test” first as individuals and then as a group. I had disappointing results with this technique in my Introduction to Comparative Politics class. The students did not have enough knowledge to be able to make sense of the text well enough to pass the readiness assessment as individuals. They did much better as groups, but much conversation simply revolved around “What did you put?” Students also tend to simply defer to the “smartest” one rather than discuss answers in detail. I did find, however, that even the best students improved their scores with the group work. I was unable to confirm that higher group scores actually indicated an increase in learning or comprehension.

This semester I am experimenting with a different method, in which I walk the class through a brief investigation of a research question such as “Does a higher rate of gun ownership increase rates of homicide?” During the investigation, I pose multiple-choice questions about reading the data or making inferences. In small groups, students scratch-off multiple-choice answers on the IF-AT forms (http://epsteineducation.com), receiving immediate feedback on the correctness of their answers, and getting reduced credit for each wrong answer. Instead of doing this as a pre-application assessment of their understanding of the reading, I am now checking their ability to do comparative political analysis at a basic level so that they can gain an understanding of the concepts and principles covered in the readings as they progress through the exercises. The instant feedback from the IF-AT forms helps them identify where they have mistaken or confused ideas.
and motivates them to ask for clarification. While I don’t have systematic evidence of the difference in learning outcomes yet, it certainly has decreased levels of anxiety and increased expressions of enthusiasm.

In my introductory classes, I’ve decided that learning the basics of a discipline is much like learning a foreign language. It is unfair to ask a student just beginning a new language to review a novel; it is just as unfair to ask inexperienced students to conduct sophisticated research. However, it is fair to give them a sample poem or short piece, and lead them through an analysis, helping them check their ideas along the way.

**Guide**

At the intermediate range, the emphasis can shift from leading students through prepared examples of research to guiding them as they make their way through a project. For example, my Politics of Advanced Industrial Nations Class will research topics concerning religious liberty. They need guidance on how to effectively take notes so they can construct a literature review and develop strong research questions. They will also be required to present their work at the Research and Creative Works Conference. At this stage, there are fewer right-or-wrong exercises, but more evaluation of the quality of reasoning and argumentation.

Students laugh guiltily when I describe what they think of as a research paper. We wait until a day or two before it is due. We do a quick internet search and take the top X articles, where X equals the number of citations our professor told us we need. We glance through the first one, summarize it briefly, and forget about it. Repeat with two through X. Then we conclude with what we thought of the issue before we started the project, and *viola* there’s the paper! There has to be a better way; with the tight schedule and tendency to work only on the next thing due, they need structure and guidance on how to break the research down into steps that fill the semester. It is important to have them check their work at several points along the way.

The Research and Creative Works Conference, held on campus every semester, is an excellent opportunity for students at this phase. Bringing the research or other work out of the classroom, and knowing they will be judged by someone other than the professor enhances the importance of the project and increases the level of commitment on the part of the student. The conference also enables the students to practice their skills of visually and verbally communicating what they have learned and how they learned it. This is another way to help guide them as they develop into professionals.

**Walk Beside**

At the more advanced stages, students are ready for more autonomy in their research. The capstone classes are often this type of activity. Time restricts what they might accomplish in one semester. To overcome this at my previous university, we required them to have already completed a capstone research proposal with a designated mentor by the start of class. Here, our department has a bit of a mix between senior seminar and capstone paper, so there is a bit less time to focus on original research and revision of the writing. I require my students to present their work at the Research and Creative Works Conference. Paragraph, it should be I tend to allow more autonomy in topic selection and methods than I do at less advanced stages.

Last semester, four students decided to work together on a paper. I insisted that they actually write it together, not just have each do a part and slap it together. The first part of the class focused on learning about psychological profiling of political leaders using several different methods. The students decided to focus on the profiles of leaders in Israel and Egypt, with the objective of testing whether leaders’ personalities might be linked to the level of hostility or cooperation among states. To improve the students’ understanding of politics in the area, David Peck, of the History Department, presented additional information to the class. As a mentor, I helped them make decisions along the way, such as recognizing that adding the Syrian leaders would be too much for them to accomplish in a semester. I also worked carefully with them on their interpretation and presentation of the data resulting from the content analysis they conducted.

Collaborating on their research taught them a great deal, including how to better employ various computer programs and internet technology. Class periods were often spent reviewing their analysis to help them make sense of the data and figure out how best to organize and present their findings. They were required to present their reviews of journal articles throughout the semester, and we discussed such issues as the publishing process and how to write literature reviews. I thoroughly reviewed the draft of the paper using turnitin.com. They also presented the completed
project at the Research and Creative Works Conference and received first place in their session. At the end of the semester, they indicated that it was the hardest and best thing they had accomplished as students.

There are many non-class opportunities for mentoring research. For example, I had a second-year student who wanted to go above and beyond the classroom and work on a project. He didn’t know what was involved or even have an idea for a topic, so he asked me if he could help me on a project. I was working on a project involving the use of Question Period in Canada to develop personality profiles of party leaders. This project was time-intensive, so we worked together. For over a year, we confronted challenges to our assumptions and learned more about my field of expertise. We received money from our department, our dean, and from the Thomas E. Ricks Foundation to pay for the student to attend an international conference at which we presented our findings (Carter and Bell 2012). This student did an excellent job presenting our research, and several faculty members at the conference were asking him about his plans for graduate school.

As I was working on that project, I became involved as a mentor for a topic about which I know nothing (software design). I was frustrated with the time it took for me to get the data I use for the content analysis. I was convinced there had to be an easier way. I contacted the Computer Science Department for help. I was invited to submit a proposal to the class CS 246: Software Design and Development. For several semesters now, I have acted as a client as students in this class have worked on software that will allow me to easily collect the data I need to conduct my analysis. It took a few semesters to get a product I’m happy with, but the results have greatly expedited data-collection. I plan to continue working with CS 246 students on these programs so that I will be able to create an on-going project that will provide many research opportunities for future Political Science and International Studies students.

At a more advanced level, I am a member of a doctoral dissertation committee. Here my role is similar to that of a colleague, reviewing what the student is doing and offering helpful suggestions. It is much closer to a pure walk-beside approach. It is interesting to watch the project evolve.

**By way of conclusion—or commencement**

With our limited time and resources, we can do much to enhance the education of our students by teaching them “all that [they] must do” to excel in their chosen professions. My view of the process is that the particular political facts of the day are temporary. Our understandings of human behavior vary from one theorist to the next. We struggle with complex causality of social interactions. The best we can do for them is to help them develop the skills they need to research, understand, and act on their findings with confidence.

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Research – Another Way to Bless Students

LARRY CHILTON

When I graduated from college for the last time, one of the professors I admired most gave me only one piece of advice. He knew I was headed to a job teaching Math at the Air Force Institute of Technology (AFIT) in Dayton, Ohio. His advice was to “keep doing research; it will make you a better teacher.” This was not welcome advice for two reasons. First, I had just completed an intense research experience and was looking forward to a break. Second, I was headed to teach in a department that had very few graduate students. The Math department at AFIT was a service department, meaning we taught Math classes to graduate students from Electrical Engineering, Aerospace Engineering, Physics, and other technical disciplines, but had very few Math graduate students. With a sigh of relief, I thanked this admired mentor, and in a perfect passive aggressive maneuver, decided to reject his advice. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to do research; I was just looking forward to working in an environment where it wasn’t required!

Much to my delight, when I started teaching at AFIT, I was assigned to teach some very fun engineering math classes to highly motivated, bright professional students (they were being paid to go to school and had no occupational distractions – in fact – their assigned military “mission” was to graduate). About 85% of the students at AFIT were seeking Master’s degrees and about 15% were PhD students. All were required to do a research project. It was great fun and a little stressful as I tried to keep up with the very talented students. I was cruising through my second year teaching Linear Algebra and Numerical Analysis, when a knock came at my door. A student entered who I recognized - he had been in one of my classes a few quarters earlier. He politely asked if I had a few minutes; he needed help with a math problem. I naively thought I could answer his question in a few minutes and get back to what I was doing. The student was working on a dissertation topic that involved geo-locating downed pilots based on a radio beacon. This is actually a simple problem unless you are on a battle field and want the friendlies to find you but not the un-friendlies. I showed him some “mathemagic” which he thought was pretty cool. One thing led to another and I had the privilege of working with this student over the next few years and became his PhD advisor. I learned a lot about signal processing and how fun it is to solve real problems that impact the lives of real people. His research was used by the US military in Iraq to save the lives of downed pilots and others.

His advice was to “keep doing research; it will make you a better teacher.”

Over the eight years I taught at AFIT, this experience was repeated multiple times with students coming to me with a math question related to their research. Sometimes the relationship was short and sweet. Other times it turned
Students doing research who discover a new pattern or relationship are more likely to remember it and be energized by it in a way that will probably change what they believe and how they behave.

into a multiple year collaboration with significant impact on real problems. As this experience unfolded, I began to recognize important patterns in the contrast between students doing classwork and students doing research. Here is a summary of these observations:

1. Students doing classwork are trained to believe that all problems can be solved on a few pieces of paper and in a relatively short period of time. Students doing research discover that in order to solve important and difficult problems, they must learn how to organize their work and give a consistent and focused effort over an extended period of time. They also learn to keep going even though the end may not be in sight. They learn to keep going even though the desired outcome isn’t certain. They learn to enjoy the journey, because the journey may be all there is. They discover that if they pay attention during the journey, they may discover a more important question than the one they started out to solve. Armed with this perspective, they are better equipped to serve an employer well. When applied appropriately, this perspective can be a valuable ally as they create and implement a long term plan for the growth and development of their children and family.

2. Students doing classwork get excited when they recognize a pattern or relationship for the first time, but will probably forget it sooner than they think. Students doing research who discover a new pattern or relationship are more likely to remember it and be energized by it in a way that will probably change what they believe and how they behave. In other words, this type of learning has a deeper, long-term impact on student behavior.

3. Students doing classwork live within a protective shield that affects how they think (whether they are aware of it or not). They have faith they can solve the problems in the classwork because they believe the teacher has already solved them (this may not be true but students don’t need to know this). On the other hand, they do not develop confidence that they can solve problems that don’t come from a book or other academic source. Students doing research discover that their mentor doesn’t know the answer either, and so they have the opportunity to develop a type of faith, learning from their own experience that they can do difficult things. These students become solvers of real problems and not just problem solvers. This perspective can translate into other aspects of life in addition to academics. Students who believe they can do hard things are more likely to lead out when others hesitate to get started.

4. The level of passion for their work generated by students doing classwork can be pretty impressive, and varies a lot from student to student. The level of passion for their work generated by students doing research can also be impressive and vary a lot from student to student. My experience is that the average level of passion among students doing research is measurably and significantly higher than the average classwork doer, especially when the students chose their own topic.

A reader of the previous list may infer that doing classwork is an ineffective way to learn. This is not the intended message. Classwork is one step in a progression of learning activities that points to learning by doing, and doing hard things.
In addition to the immediate benefits students involved in research enjoy, there are longer term benefits available to them as well. They are more attractive employees, particularly if they can use their research experience to benefit their employer. Doing research requires balancing both individual and team work. It often involves collaboration in an interdisciplinary environment. All of these experiences are attractive to employers.

Students involved in research have an advantage when applying to graduate school. They also have a much better idea if graduate school is really a good fit for them. Since many graduate programs are research oriented, research experience can be a critical piece to the admissions puzzle. Unfortunately, for some graduate programs, if a student doesn't have research experience, they are very unlikely to be seriously considered.

For those of us who don't have students knocking on our door asking us to help them with their research, I would offer one way to get started in guiding students toward a learning by doing experience. Since students aren't asking us for help, let's ask them. We are all extremely busy. There must be some of our professional work students could do. Imagine how nice it would be if we had someone to help us do some of the many things we have to do each day. Students can do a great job providing feedback on course materials. I have seen students do a great job writing test questions. They are very good at research tasks that involve finding resources on the internet. You might want to provide historical context for a topic you are teaching. This could be a great research experience for the right student. Of course, there are many more ways students can experience your profession than these “getting started” ideas.

Before closing, I should clarify what I mean when I use the word research. The Lord invites us to “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” (Matthew 7:7) He hopes we will heed his invitation at the beginning of our journey back to him, and all along the way. When I read this invitation, I see it as an excellent definition of research. By asking important questions, seeking to find the answers, and knocking on his door for help, we discover that we are not alone in our efforts to learn and discover new and important things.

I have reflected on the advice shared with me by my mentor several times over the years. One realization is that it is not always true. It is possible to engage in research in such a way that teaching actually suffers. My mentor said doing research will make you a better teacher, not a great one. I believe this is true in most cases. More importantly, his advice suggests a corollary: “give students the opportunity to do research; it will make them better learners.”
My Experiences With Mentored Research at BYU-Idaho

ELI LANKFORD

In recent years the idea of student–mentored research has been presented to BYU-Idaho faculty as a means to enrich student learning. I am currently completing my ninth year at BYU-Idaho and during my tenure have been fortunate to experience the evolving mentored research process first hand. At times mentoring students through research projects has been frustrating, overwhelming, and sometimes extremely time consuming. However, the lessons and concepts students learn are invaluable and can become paramount in the lives of both the faculty mentor and the students.

During my undergraduate and graduate work I dedicated my time and abilities to being the best in my game. I was always in the lab, presented at numerous conferences, did the proper networking, and even received an award for outstanding graduate research making a name for myself in the science world as an up and coming researcher. During my master's program at the University of Montana, I was assigned to direct the undergraduate research. Immediately, I gained an overwhelming love for helping students put practical application to concepts learned in the classroom and basic lab classes. Following a short hiatus as lab director researching site direct mutagenesis, real-time PCR, and other than novel lab techniques, I started a doctoral program focused heavily on research. Yet, I deeply enjoyed teaching and using research experiences to portray my thoughts in the classroom discussion in an interesting manner. I was also asked to advise undergraduate students regarding class and career choices. I was later invited to apply at BYU-Idaho, not knowing or understanding the environment at the newly converted Ricks College to BYU-Idaho. During my interview process, several topics discussed were surprising to me. One question in particular posed by Max Checketts was, “What is your idea of research and could it be implemented at an institution like BYU-Idaho?” This was inspiring to me since my primary research interest was working with undergraduate or master’s level students in a mentoring-type capacity. I was also asked during my interview process the feasibility of creating a new program based on a science background to compliment an already existing physical education program. Despite my overwhelming spiritual confirmation regarding the acceptance of a position at BYU–Idaho, I assumed that I would be the odd duck by coming to BYU-Idaho because of its emphasis on teaching over research. Very quickly I learned that I was wrong. I soon met individuals from other departments, particularly the sciences, with similar backgrounds as myself who were successful and motivating instructors in the classroom with a wealth of experience in the laboratory.
Mentored research at BYU-Idaho has been a learning experience for me. I originally struggled to understand what the University wanted. My idea of research and BYU-Idaho’s idea of research were definitely not identical. I came fresh from a doctoral program at a research institution where projects were based off of novel concepts with the idea of a solid peer reviewed publication and secured funding in mind. Research was meticulous and lackadaisical error was not acceptable. My research largely involved human subjects with a deadline which, unlike a petri dish, cannot be thrown away upon a mistake. I soon learned to accept that a quality research experience is sometimes more about the lessons learned than the study results and outcomes. I have recognized that smaller projects focused on student learning are less frustrating for myself and give students the opportunity to grow in understanding as the project progresses. I have also found that working with other universities to supply pilot data for larger studies is an excellent means to provide mentored research with a lower level of pressure on the students and myself.

Mentored research creates a spark in the mind of the students. It gives them experience that is often not gained elsewhere, including the classroom. For me, research is a major form of my faculty development.
Mentored research creates a spark in the mind of the students. It gives them experience that is often not gained elsewhere, including the classroom. For me, research is a major form of my faculty development. It keeps me current in my field, and I take pride in being able to give first hand experiences regarding topics in the student’s textbook, therefore making the subject matter intimate and thought provoking. The mentored research I have been involved with at BYU-Idaho has ranged from acute blood glucose regulation, to neuromuscular vs hypertrophic responses, to resistance training, to dance physiology, to factors influencing fat oxidation rates. Students from our department have had the opportunity to present research both at the Research and Creative Works conference here at BYU-Idaho and at regional conferences. This resulted in abstract publications in the International Journal of Exercise Science, Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise, and The Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research.

I have witnessed the blessing of mentored research in the lives of BYU-Idaho students. One student recently told me of his interview process for a physician’s assistant program. During the interview process he was repeatedly asked about his research project and asked to go into more detail. The interviewers were astounded at his level of understanding of the topic. They noted that most undergraduates often get second-hand projects with the lion’s share reserved for graduate students. He was asked if he had an interest in continuing research, received an early admission, and was invited to work in a research lab. Seeing the joy in this student’s face as he expressed appreciation for both his education at BYU-Idaho and the opportunity to become involved with that particular research project assured me of the positive blessings of mentored research.

Over the years I have come to recognize that research comes in all shapes and forms. Different disciplines approach research in various fashions. With the new formation of the Office of Faculty Development and Mentored Research, there has never been a stronger support for mentored research and improved learning on this campus. I can express with sincerity that mentored research has been a positive resource for my classroom lectures. I am excited to see what the future has in store for mentored research at BYU-Idaho as we continue to bless the lives of students and increase opportunities for valuable student learning.
Six Lessons Learned in Mentoring Student Research

LANE WILLIAMS

For three or so years now, my students in the Communication 280 course, Communication Research Fundamentals, have completed significant group research projects — focus groups, surveys, and content analyses mostly. They’ve completed applied research projects for various organizations or explored basic research questions about human communication.

Some findings my students and I have found over the course of a few years of research:

- Nearly 60 percent of students acknowledge using their smartphones — of those that have them — during class even when it isn’t time to do so.¹
- The term phone is growing dated among students: talking on their mobile phones is now only the fourth-most-popular thing students do with their phone — after social media, texting, and tools like calendars and reminders.² (Don’t quote me on this because I can’t find the reference … but my memory tells me that some students say they watch Netflix in class.)
- Students spend, on average, an hour and a half per day consuming social media.³
- Despite the amount of time spent on social media and texting, there is limited or no data suggesting that the more time students say they spend on social media correlates inversely to what they say their grades are.⁴
- That having been said, 25 percent or so of students personally believe their use of mobile devices has affected their academic performance.⁵
- Students on this campus are nearly as likely to use their phones as their “e-Reader” as they are a Kindle.⁶
- Students prefer printed books to e-books, however, when they read.⁷
- Students on this campus struggle knowing much about the country around them. While every student can name the president of the United States, only about one in four can identify the nation’s second-most powerful politician: Speaker of the House John Boehner.⁸
- Beyond that, just more than one in 10 students (13 percent) can identify one (not all nine) member of the United States Supreme Court. A similar percentage can name their personal representative to Congress from their home district.⁹
- Only 7 percent know the mayor of Rexburg is Richard Woodland.¹⁰
- Social media is changing relationships. Thirty percent of BYU-Idaho students say they would say things in texts that they would have trouble saying face-to-face.¹¹
- Students have learned about important organizations on campus: for example, students wishing to deal with Financial Aid prefer dealing with people face-to-face rather than interact electronically.¹²
- Only just more than one in four students is aware the library will check out a Kindle to them.¹³
- Oh, and this: Scouters who attend the Island Park Scout Camp tend to think the bathrooms there need a little attention.¹⁴

Of the now dozens of projects in Communication 280, I have learned something from each one, often something fascinating. It has been a worthwhile activity.
Of the now dozens of projects in Communication 280, I have learned something from each one, often something fascinating.

Communication 280 is an introductory course however, many students come into the course with a misunderstanding of what research is. Those students sometimes think research is using Google or crafting a term paper. They use words like “boring” and “difficult” to describe research. Furthermore, many lack basic skills in Excel with which to evaluate data, and others lack understanding of the basic concepts and vocabulary of research.

To be successful, therefore, I need to teach students basic skills while guiding them through a semester-long research project. This project daunts me at times, but when I watch their smiles and see the beauty of their finished posters, the outcomes please me. They become basic communication researchers and begin to know the importance of research to their future careers. They begin to develop the key skill of taking information, analyzing it and using those analyses in a well-presented fashion to persuade or to inform.

Students do either a basic research project or an applied one. For the basic research project, they look at a question that relates to communication theory. I have seen a project about media framing of the Native Americans. I have seen a project about how word choice affects the perception of advertising effectiveness. Others have looked at social media, texting, and technology and their influences upon our interconnected world.

Those who do an applied research project find an organization or I find one for them. I don’t force those doing applied research to do a communication-related project — I just ask them to use a survey or a focus group or depth interviews to help an organization learn something they wished they knew. Students have researched e-books for the library. They’ve looked at Center Stage publicity. They’ve examined video webcasting of University athletics events. They’ve looked at Scouter satisfaction with the Scout Camps in the Grand Teton Council.

I don’t pretend that my course is perfect, but I have been pleased with the outcomes of this major project. Students collaborate in groups, learn what a scientific paper looks like, analyze findings, state those findings clearly and present them in an actionable way. Along the way, they learn a bit about communication theory and about software tools too.

My students present three things at the end of their project: A scientific poster, a scholarly paper and an in-class presentation. They present the posters at the University’s Research and Creative Works Conference. I advocate the conference because as my students present, it helps them interact with judges and see other research going on. I believe it helps their confidence and provides the reward of having people seeing their work. They learn to communicate. After the conference, they present a longer, oral presentation to the class. Guests come sometimes. Those presentations are formal – about 10 minutes. They finally turn in a paper to me – following the traditional format of an academic paper, abstract, background, methods, findings, and conclusions. These papers are usually designed at a high level, as would be expected from communication students, and make solid contributions.

Here are a handful of lessons I have learned through mentoring research:

LESSON 1: Go ahead and take class time to mentor.
I meet with my students about four times a semester as teams during class time. We discuss what their project is. We talk about best methods. We talk about problems. We provide specific guidance about how and when to study. This kind of project can be hard because some have a strong idea of what they are doing already, but most groups need guidance.

In a class where students don’t necessarily understand the difference between a focus group and a survey as they begin study, I can’t wait until they understand these differences and other core concepts before they begin to get University approval, gather data, and present their research. I have to mentor in such a way that they can learn as they go and do.

So, regular group meetings and space for lots of questions and dialogue really help.
LESSON 2: Use individual grades for group work.
This is new for me. I have long resisted the idea of having individual grades on group projects. I think groups rise and fall together, not as individuals, in the work place. However, I also believe in research and listening. My growing sense is that students wish to evaluate one another — to have the ability to stop a malingerer from bringing them all down. They tire of carrying the load unfairly.

So, I have decided to provide the opportunity to use individual grades, as appropriate, in this group project. Here is what I do:

- I created a small questionnaire in Qualtrics. Each group fills out a different survey with the same questions.
- The questionnaire first looks at the evaluation of the group as whole. If the group says it worked well together and all, more or less, did the same amount of work, then each group member will receive the same evaluation on the elements of this project.
- Second, the team evaluates each group member on individual contributions. The paper asks for students who are unusually helpful or who caused some problems.
- Third, the group members try to evaluate themselves. They tell me what they did and if they thought they carried their own load. If their assessment looks less than the rest and if the group dynamic is bad, I can lower – or raise – one or two people’s grade.

LESSON 3: Be very specific about expectations and provide examples.

Students who have never done a research project before rightly feel nervous about expectations. Besides regular mentoring, I provide a detailed rubric of expectations and as many examples as possible – other student papers or professional examples.

I also create a pair of readings about expectations and then give an open-book quiz on those readings at the beginning of
I don’t pretend that my course is perfect, but I have been pleased with the outcomes of this major project.

LESSON 4: Try to find partners with whom to do research.

Many students do excellent work doing basic research, but I think some of the more useful projects come when either students or I find an organization with which to partner. Recently, we did studies for the Grand Teton Council. It was the first time in years that the local Boy Scout council had done any research about how satisfied adult Scouters were with the Boy Scouts of America’s local Scout camps. Students developed questions, examined the academic literature about the Boy Scouts and about camping. They did excellent work and provided useful analysis directly to BSA.

the semester. I hang excellent posters in the classroom to show students good work. I provide professional and student examples of papers.

One problem I found early on involved demonstrating a good literature review. Most student papers in those early semesters lacked substance and relevance to their research questions — they were too broad. So, I worked to find clear, excellent examples. I found one especially good professional paper that I began to share as “the example.” Since then, I have noted student papers improving. Now, I also have student papers to use as examples of effective literature reviews.
LESSON 5: Research can be messy.

Students will make mistakes. Projects will get sidetracked. Groups will stumble. These are things you can expect in an environment of original research. However, when you work closely with the groups, you can help them change direction. You can help them focus on findings they have, rather than what they originally wanted. You can tell them whether to do a regression analysis or a T-test.

LESSON 6: Help students focus on their “big question.”

I have now mentored dozens of groups and hundreds of students on final projects. So, I have gained a little insight about how to discuss projects with them. As I remember learning from Elder Bednar, learning to ask good questions is key to effective learning. So, as I mentor, I ask my students: “What are you researching? What is your “meta-question?”” As students learn to articulate their central question, we focus on the next question: How will you answer that? In so doing, I can shape the research or help students find answerable questions. This may well be the most important lesson I have learned.

So, as you mentor students with their research, you will learn many things, and so will they — even if the most important finding is about an outhouse in the Island Park Scout Camp.

References:
4Ibid.
5Ibid, p. 9.
7Ibid., p. 5.
8Unpublished data, survey conducted by Lane Williams, 2010.
9Ibid.
10ibid.
13Tangiora, p. 7
Mentored student research allows me to show students the concrete consequences of their learning. Sometimes learning can be abstract; learning can be done solely by the mind, separate from the work of the hands. Abstract learning, although appropriate for many of us, has not been sufficient for me when teaching Industrial Organizational Psychology. I want something different—something personal, practical, hands on. I have found that engaging students to solve current problems found in today’s organizations, using psychological science, helps those students develop a richer and fuller desire to learn.

Abstract learning can be traced to Plato, the philosopher that split the world into two parts: The rational (the sun) and the empirical (the cave). Plato’s perspective on education is clear— it is the person’s use of rational faculties (the faculty of the abstract mind, the intellect, the ability to theorize correctly) that leads to truth, not the person’s use of the holistic merge of the empirical and the rational experience. These rational truths are, in fact, the rulers of empirical, concrete, observations—empirical objects are just imperfect physical shadows influenced by the truer reality of utopic metaphysical forms (i.e. the bell curve, the laws of nature, the mechanisms of education, the perfect simulations, etc.). With this perspective, I could potentially remove students from the physical world, the community, and teach them intellectual things in a classroom—a classic scholastic perspective. An upshot from this perspective is efficiency: I can deliver abstract content to people in a short amount of time; and we can do it all in our heads, in a simple classroom. This type of education has, I believe, a liable place in academia.

I have learned from cognitive psychological science, however, that the deepest kinds of memories are lived with both the hands and the mind. The memories gained through applying a skill using our bodies and our minds simultaneously (personal semantic memories) are stronger and longer lasting than memories gained using just our abstract minds (semantic memories). For example, I can teach the abstract mind how to hold a violin and play it, all from a textbook; and the mind can do well on tests
The deepest kinds of memories are lived with both the hands and the mind. answering questions about how to hold and play a violin. I can even have the students’ minds synthesize the learning into profound propositions. Give the mind a real violin, however, and look at the hands. The empirical hands have not been trained like the mind. The real and concrete result is that students cannot play the instrument, although their minds have been well trained. Mentored research allows me to train the mind and the hands at the same time, making this learning activity more empirically valid, as opposed to just rationally valid.

This meaningful type of learning—and I acknowledge there are other types of meaningful learning—is what drives our mentored research. We are driven by the desire to master an awesome scientific skill with our minds and hands, for the sake of helping others succeed. For example, in our community we have helped Salt Lake Express, Albertsons, Ox Industrial, the Research & Business Development Center (formerly known as the E-Center), etc. The research that came from those experiences are hanging up, as scientific posters, in the hallway of our building. They have been presented at the Research & Creative Works Conference on our campus, at other regional and national conferences, and published in undergraduate research journals.

This mentored work follows simple scientific steps: I present students with an organization. They, in turn, research the company and the scientific knowledge needed to improve it. They synthesize this work in an introduction. I encourage them to show inconstancies in their writing and in their thinking. They then prepare the methods that will, for example, help improve a website or an organizational process. They choose the research participants, the tools (such as focus groups, surveys, experimentation, and biofeedback), and the procedures of how to engage the participants. I question their methods and, when ready, the students apply to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). When the IRB gives us the green light, we do the scientific work. The students then analyze the data, present recommendations, and watch the consequences of the applied recommendations. For example, they have seen the cash value of their work as Ox Industrial changed the color of its logo to make it more recognizable; they have seen Salt Lake Express relocate their call center; they have rejoiced in their hearts at the impact they have had. They will say “that is cool, that is awesome”; a nice change from the usual “I am cool, I am awesome” or “I can’t do this, I am no good.” I have noticed the “I” starts to disappear in the conversations because of the group work that is being done.

This semester we are doing research for an organization in Ukraine called Orphan’s Future. Andriy Nazarenko, the executive director, works directly with us. We coordinate the scientific work using technology. The purpose of this work is to increase people’s awareness of, and contributions to, the cause by improving the website. The stakes are real for students. They are making a human connection with Andriy. They are helping orphans. They are helping this non-profit organization thrive, if they do good work. The reality of the work allows me to give tailored, precise feedback that is meaningful to them.

In the end, I get students that have meaningful scientific stories to tell, about persons like Andriy. What is the result of these experiences? Students are more qualified to meet their next job or graduate school interview; and, more importantly, students know how to help others, by using their minds and their hands at the same time. ❄️
Too Comfortable

DAVID COLLINS

Eight years ago I accepted a faculty position at Brigham Young University–Idaho. Having transitioned from two tenure-track positions at Weber State University and Colorado State University–Pueblo, I was confident this new teaching appointment would provide a better future. In Colorado, the pay was poor, the work was hard, and there was very little community in the community. Employee benefits and retirement plans were marginal. Crime rate was high and teen pregnancies were far too frequent. The quality of the public schools was below average, and I worried for my family’s future. During the summers, I sought research employment to maintain progress towards tenure and to support my family. If employment was not found, I worked summers regardless, writing grant proposals and conducting research with graduate and undergraduate students without compensation. Occasionally, I would teach a summer class for adjunct faculty pay, but opportunities were limited. If I did not qualify for merit pay and faculty promotion, my salary would only increase 2-3% per year. However, at Weber State University I never received a salary increase due to state-wide cutbacks. Qualification for merit pay and promotion was based upon performance in teaching, service, and research.

For me, BYU–Idaho was an oasis. My salary was significantly better, and I was guaranteed a substantial increase each year without merit pay or promotion. Summer employment was available for everyone. There were no research requirements, and I could attend conferences without presenting. Continuing Faculty Status (CFS) was four years (it is now three) instead of six or seven for tenure. If CFS problems arose, I would be informed in a timely fashion so corrections could be made, but virtually all faculty hired would receive CFS. Retirement and health benefits were significantly better, and I was even given a pension plan! I could park on campus for free and was advised to work 45 hours per week. How could I say no? My Colorado colleagues jokingly asked how to become a Mormon.

Teaching evaluations became more important than with former employments, but opportunities were available to help (e.g., Brown Bags, Spori Summit, and Faculty Conferences). I attended as many activities as I could. Because I recognized excellent teaching as a hallmark of BYU–Idaho, and I wanted to contribute, teaching activities quickly consumed my time. In fact, I was advised not to participate in additional professional activities due to potential interference with teaching. Reading discipline-specific literature in order to stay current in my field became a low priority. Resources (time, space, and money) were not available to conduct research. Publishing and proposal writing were not required. There were no awards for doing anything beyond teaching and, quite frankly, I lacked time and motivation. Besides, my salary would

Despite the non-ideal circumstances, I needed to actively contribute to my discipline.
of publishing my first article at BYU–Idaho without involving students. All subsequent publications have now included student coauthors.

Teaching
It was easy to justify allocating time to lecture preparation, course development, course modification, test writing, office hours, review sessions, and grading. Time was spent developing chemistry laboratories, incorporating the iPad and Apple TV into the classroom, utilizing hybrid teaching methods, experimenting with a “flipped” classroom, creating instructional videos, employing classroom response systems, implementing online homework, and developing novel Excel laboratory templates. I was given release time to establish three new required chemistry courses (CHEM 391, 420, and 421), and like most, each semester was something new. In fact, I have spent more time doing these types of activities at BYU–Idaho than at previous teaching appointments.

I hoped to also formally share my teaching ideas and activities with others. As well as publishing forensic science pedagogical material, I have been fortunate to publish two peer-reviewed articles in the Journal of...
I made the mistake of publishing my first article at BYU–Idaho without involving students. All subsequent publications have now included student coauthors.

Chemical Education, “The Unit Cell: Marbles, Magnets, and Stacking Arrangements” and “The Journal of Kitchen Chemistry: A Tool for Instructing the Preparation of a Chemistry Journal Article.” Because most faculty at BYU–Idaho teach three equivalent semesters, it is challenging to find time to formally contribute teaching success with those in our professions. I am greatly inspired by the teaching innovations of faculty at BYU–Idaho, especially those that go unnoticed.

Service
I agreed to serve as the faculty advisor for the Student Affiliate Chapter of the American Chemical Society. While serving for over six years, the society earned two “Commendable” and two “Honorable Mention” national recognitions. For several years I served as an organizer and University liaison for the “Science Adventure” (local science fair). I promoted the science fair by regularly organizing and performing science demonstrations at local schools. I also served for two years as an American Chemical Society Science Coach, earning Madison High School $1000 for its chemistry program.

Research
Contributing to my discipline through traditional research activities was, and still is, my greatest challenge. A significant amount of space and resources are required (in addition to time) to perform research in the sciences. I began conducting side projects with one or two students each semester, using teaching labs for space and teaching instruments with stockroom supplies for resources. Occasionally, the Chemistry Department would buy a specific chemical for our work, but usually, if we didn't have it, we couldn't do it. Although projects were of little significance to the scientific community, the students gained experience. Because students were not paid, it was hard to make progress. Most students would only work one semester and then present their findings at the Research and Creative Works Conference. We would virtually start over each semester. When money became available to pay the students (or perform research for credit), interest increased and a few students worked on projects for several semesters.

In an attempt to focus efforts, I acquired donated equipment from a former colleague and began researching the separation of compounds. Despite my efforts, work was slow and haphazard. I wondered if a collaborator might provide funding and offer an improved direction. I contacted several businesses and universities seeking assistance. Most were excited for the possibilities, but the logistics were too challenging. Waters Technologies Corporation was interested in
having our students develop application notes for their
instruments, but Rexburg was not populated enough to
meet their criteria. Young Living Essential Oils needed
help collecting data for publication and volunteered to
purchase a very expensive instrument for BYU–Idaho if
we agreed to provide the labor. In the end funding was
an issue. Finally, Matt Linford from the BYU Chemistry
Department agreed to send a new diamond column
used to separate compounds. We evaluated the column
and presented our work locally. Matt then requested the
column be returned.

I needed to try something different. I ultimately
desired to establish a traditional, independent research
group. I had understood proposal writing for grant
money was not possible at BYU–Idaho; besides, it would
tie me to a deadline and take away from teaching. In
order to meet the demands of the increasing student
population, I knew I needed to teach every semester, but
I also wanted to conduct research every semester. My
solution was to find a research area that required few
resources and was manageable with a full teaching load.
I decided to research an antiquated technique loosely
related to my area of expertise that needed a facelift.
Because the research was novel, I began sending students
to regional chemistry conferences. We were initially
criticized due to the archaic and rudimentary nature of
the work, but the work was still innovative and, well, it
was all we could afford.

Soon we were encouraged to publish. After five
submissions to three different journals, our first article
was accepted, “Simultaneous Chromatography and
Electrophoresis: Two-Dimensional Planar Separations.”
Surprisingly, our peer-reviewed article was one of four
featured on the cover of an issue of Analytical and
Bioanalytical Chemistry. Nine students were coauthors!
The article was also recently cited in a review article
presenting significant contributions to this area of
research. In addition, one of my current students was
selected to present our research in Washington, D.C. to
several elected government officials. Less than 10% of
all applicants were selected. Over the years, I have been
blessed with students able to present at most BYU–Idaho
Research and Creative Works conferences, and many
regional and national conferences.

I currently mentor four to six students each semester.
During the last two years, conditions have greatly
improved! The administration has decided to support
six hours of leave each year for professional activities; I
look forward to taking advantage of this in the future.
In addition, our department has been able to pay
all student research assistant wages, the college has
provided funds to purchase needed supplies, and the
University has remodeled a room for research space.
Now, other faculty in the Chemistry Department are
beginning to conduct research.

I am very blessed to work at BYU–Idaho! I hope
to stay until I retire. I do not wish to take advantage
by becoming too comfortable. My initial intentions
for contributing to my discipline through professional
development may have been somewhat selfish.
Continuing to develop in all areas of life, however, is
less about me and more about others. I am humbled by
those who spend more time making things better for
others. If I want my students to work hard, I need to
work hard. And, yes, supporting professional activities
does require additional time. I have yet to find a remedy,
but I have found great satisfaction in attempting to
balance capabilities with responsibilities. ✿
Observations on Humor in the University

PHIL PACKER

There is a certain mirth in the University, a gladness of heart which on occasion produces laughter (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1987). No doubt we are engaged in a serious business. “Life is real, Life is earnest,” says Longfellow, and education is leading our students along the path to what they will become (Cook, 1958). There is a lot at stake. Yet learning and teaching offer a continuous menu of opportunities to observe and practice humor. Who could not be moved at the following answer to a question on a biology test:

“Question: Explain the concept of homeostasis.”

“Answer: It is when you stay at home all day and don’t go out” (Benson, 2011).

This strikes us as funny. At first we are indignant that the student is so far out in the weeds, after all the teacher has done. Or maybe we shift to a feeling of sympathy for the work which must lie ahead for both the student and teacher, and the hope of future growth. It may also spawn a feeling of superiority because we would never write such an answer, and who would?

It has been my great privilege for the past twenty years to have had the opportunity to observe the use of humor in many settings at the University. This article is aimed at providing a summary of what I have learned through my experience regarding the use and misuse of humor. What I have learned leads me to certain opinions, but all are presented with a gentle mirth which says, in spite of the seriousness of our work, there is a surety that in the end all will be well with those who labor at this special place.

There is a certain type of humor which arises spontaneously. The good natured teasing before class between teacher and students serves to make students feel secure and included. But the use of humor can be used in a calculated way as a tool along with other teaching techniques. It can actually be planned and still be quite effective. Here are three areas where humor can be used as an advantage in teaching and administering:

Building Relationships
The presidential speech writer turned pundit, Peggy Noonan, says that using “humor is gracious and shows respect. It shows the audience you think enough of them to want to entertain them” (Noonan, n.d.). Much has been said about avoiding the temptation to make our classes mere entertainment, and yet there can be little doubt that a spoon full of humor can make the learning medicine go down. When used appropriately, humor sends the assuring message that “we are all in this together, that being in this class won’t hurt.”

Relieving Stress
Sir Thomas More used humor throughout his life as a lawyer, administrator, and scholar to relieve the stress of some very important activities. Even as he climbed the rickety steps to the executioner’s platform, he quipped to a person who took his arm to steady him: “When I come down again let me shift for myself as well as I can.” (Ackroyd, 1998). An example from our own history happened on the day of the transition announcement in the Hart building. After the broadcast announcement from
Salt Lake, then President Bednar, rose to speak to those gathered who were, to say the least, suffering from various stages of shock. He said, “Who would have thunk it?” While his statement could not and did not resolve all the anxiety, it set the stage for his message that there would be more answers forthcoming and that we would work things out.

Increasing Engagement
In the years teaching prior to my move to the Kimball Building, I used exercises out of Roger von Oech’s book, A Whack on the Side of the Head (Oech, 1983), to encourage students to think broadly about solutions to business problems. One story had to do with villagers faced with the problem of apparently dead citizens who were in fact only mostly dead (attribution to Miracle Max in the Princess Bride) as a result of a plague. One group came forward with the idea to place some food in each coffin and a breathing tube running to the surface so that if a fellow citizen came to, he could survive until he could be dug up. Another group’s solution was more direct. They proposed placing a wooden stake in the lid of each coffin directly over the heart of the apparently deceased villager so that when the lid was shut there would be no question whether the person was dead or alive. Which solution was “better?” While the second solution may have been graphic, the light-hearted exercises caught the interest of students, and I found that their connection to the more serious content of the class increased.

In a recent book, The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny, authors Peter McGraw and Joel Warner (Warner, 2014), tour all over the world testing their theory that things are funny when they are a “benign violation” of our norms. We see things as funny which are “wrong, unsettling or threatening,” but the situations must also seem “okay, acceptable, or safe.” It is true that finding things humorous is subjective and

The use of humor can be used in a calculated way as a tool along with other teaching techniques.
it is almost impossible to say or do things that everyone in a class or group find funny, but I offer the following observations about what has worked or not worked for me. Some of you may remember the very experiences and may not have considered them so mirthful.

What Sometimes Works
Being clever can be an important member of the humor family. At the first general faculty meeting held after I joined the academics team in 2002, I used a Cervantes quote, “The proof of the pudding is in the tasting,” to talk about the importance of quality in our developing four-year programs. I had a basket of pudding cups we used as examples. Chocolate, vanilla, butterscotch—even the swirly kind had some contrived implications, and I enjoyed eating from the basket for a long time. (Note: You might recall that I had a pudding-deprived childhood.) We served pudding as part of the refreshments that day and later as a reminder of the message. Almost twelve years later, I have colleagues who bring up the pudding.

Humor can also be useful in tests. On business law tests I have gotten a lot of mileage out of the case of the man who was crushed to death by a shrink-to-fit Levi jacket when caught in a sudden rainstorm. Using odd situations and names sends the message to the student, “Relax, you know the principles, have some fun applying them to answer this question.” Years later when I run into former students, now well established in their careers, they will often refer to various questions and the people involved. A very few of them even remember the principles taught by the questions.

A way to build relationships with students is humor connected to our culture. At BYU-Idaho we have a fertile field for quips about home teachers, green jello, and the treatment of pre-missionaries. The cultures of the Church and the School intersect to allow us to send the message that “we’re all in this together,” or that “you are safe here, be bold, take a risk in class.”

The gulf between teachers and students can also be spanned by self-effacing remarks. I have found that jokes about my age, appearance, nearness to death, and the like all seem to get traction with students and other audiences on campus. It seems to reassure people that no matter how bad they think they have it, life is harder for me (a mild version of Rodney Dangerfield). Self-effacement can be effective as a tool, but it should be carefully controlled (see below). There are times when it is not effective and the recipients won’t accept it.

How do you tell when what you say or do is really humorous? A recent article in the Harvard Business Review introduces the “Duchenne” test of laughter, the name of the French physician who discovered the condition. You can tell if a student’s laughter is genuine or fake by looking for crinkling around the eyes (Beard, 2014). As we all know, sometimes people laugh just to be polite, or even worse, out of sympathy.

What May not Work
As we mature as a University, I have noticed that certain attempts at humor don’t help; rather, the intended message explodes in mid-air and spirals downward. For me, dressing up in class or wandering around campus now would seem misplaced. Maybe it is I who has changed. My plastic nose and mustache disguise, earlier so often used, have been retired with other relics in the cluttered drawers of my office, and I will probably not appear as a large white rabbit again.

It used to be fun to joke with students, especially early in the class before the first round of testing, about how if they “work really hard, do everything assigned at a very high level, they’ll almost all get above a C-.” I’ve got to think of something new. Students don’t joke about grades anymore, although in the end I wonder if they should lighten up a little.

There is no question that humor can be used to demean and ridicule. A teacher can lose the confidence and trust of students almost irretrievably with some comments. Even with further assurances of humor like the retractor “just kidding,” people from Sugar City or Mud Lake can be wounded, and in some cases the wounds don’t heal.

Similarly, one must be careful about jokes or stories which might hit the nerves of other departments or majors. Recently, in speaking to the students and faculty in the Design and Construction Management Department, I told a story about two carpenters who were confused about which way nails were pointing. For non-builder audiences, the joke has always at least drawn tentative laugher, but I didn’t get much from this group. I
wondered later if it was because they thought I was making fun of carpenters. A later joke about sharp business practices seemed to get a better response.

Since beginning to teach American Foundations, I have occasionally ventured into the world of political humor. Of course, there is a lot of very low-hanging fruit in this area. I have always appreciated the democrats as a target of jokes. My quip in faculty meeting that “the democrats in this area hold their meetings in a phone booth,” always draws a hearty response, but it finally hit me that the audiences consist mostly of republicans of one ilk or another. I have found that in this area you should spread the humor around as evenly as you can, but even then it is hard to get a libertarian to laugh. I guess they are focused on the individual choice not to be drawn into the group.

Finally, I offer a cautionary word about self-criticism. When used appropriately, it can send a very lighthearted message of inclusion and assurance to those with whom we deal. It must, however, be of a certain vein. I have found that remarks, attempted at humor, which deal with the competence of the teacher do not go over well, and should be avoided. As I mentioned in the prior section, jokes about my age or appearance, my closeness to death or the nursing home, are easy for me to make and to receive the laughter of students. I don’t really believe that I will soon be gumming creamed corn, but jokes about lack of preparation, failing memory, or inability to hear or understand student responses don’t seem to be positive. Students want to think their teachers are competent in both their disciplines and in the craft of teaching. In addition, even those of us who can stand some teasing take constructive pride in being the best we can and know somewhere deep inside that jokes about our teaching are insincere and false.

Conclusion
Humor can be a powerful tool in learning and teaching. It can add a richness to our content and facilitate delivery, but there are risks too. Sometimes things don’t work the way we want. In those cases, which for me are numerous, you just have to dust yourself off and try again. Even when things don’t work out you can turn things around, you can learn to recover from flops in a good natured way. Because of my many failed attempts, I have learned to turn and send positive messages: “This didn’t work. I’m not hurt by it. I’ll try again, and will be better next time. We’re in this together.” It reassures others and encourages them to do the same.

Humor is also an elixir, a potion that can overcome us. We must remember it is just a part of what we are and do and must be constantly controlled. The genie must be kept in the bottle. Otherwise we can damage credibility and thus our effectiveness. You can become known as a jokster, the clown who can always be depended on for a laugh but not much else. It has taken me a long time and much effort to learn that not every funny thing I think needs to be said.

In the movie Little Big Man, Chief Dan George goes to a mountaintop to die. He lies there for a while and then it begins to rain. Finally, he gives up and walks down the mountain, back to the continuation of his life. “Sometimes the magic happens, sometimes it doesn’t,” he says (Jonas, 2004). Maybe that is all we can say for sure about the use of humor in our BYU-Idaho lives. We know that humor can be an effective tool and it adds a certain magic to life and learning, but it doesn’t always work the way we want. Maybe that’s the beauty of it. There will always be another chance to try.

References:
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