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Helping Students Understand Divine Truth

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In a recent CES fireside to religious educators, Elder Richard G. Scott stated:

One of the greatest concerns that President Hinckley has expressed to me personally, which I have repeatedly felt myself, is the number of students who attend class without internalizing “in the fleshy tables of the heart” the instruction given. Such do not appear to associate what you teach with their personal choices in life. They can answer test questions well but do not retain in their minds and hearts the principles and truths taught. In times of trial or testing, they often seem to follow the world rather than the truths taught them. They do not appear to realize that what you share is not something of casual interest but are powerful truths that, when understood and applied, will help them resolve the defining challenges they face hourly. . . . It is almost as if what is taught is temporarily recorded on a tape, maintained until the exam is passed, and then deleted from the permanent storage in the mind and heart.

I am afraid that we have a few students who think all that is needed is to get the material from your notes into their notebooks without encumbering their minds or memories. . . .

I implore for each of you to correct this tragic misunderstanding when it occurs.¹

Part of our role as teachers is to help our students understand their role as learners. They must know that no matter how much information we have, no matter how skilled we are at teaching, learning still depends on them.

Elder Scott continued: “Will you pray for guidance in how to have truth sink deep into the minds and hearts of your students so as to be used throughout life? As you prayerfully seek ways to do that, I know that the Lord will guide you. The solution will vary for different individuals, but you will come to understand how to do it. Make your objective to help students understand, retain, and use divine truth. Keep that objective foremost in every aspect of your preparation and teaching.”²

Note that in this short excerpt Elder Scott asked us to do two things. First, he implored us to correct the “tragic misunderstanding” that our job is simply to get the material into the students’ notebooks without encumbering their minds and memories. Second, he invited us to pray for guidance in getting the truth to sink deeply into the minds and the hearts of our students. Elder Scott has given us, as teachers, a call to action. He is, in a sense, asking us once again to do more. The objectives he gives are clear. We are to

1. Help students understand divine truth.
2. Help students retain divine truth.
3. Help students use divine truth.

Defining the Word *Understand*

Although the objective as stated by Elder Scott is threefold, it is the first part of the objective, that of helping students understand divine truth, that I wish to discuss. This is not the first time an Apostle speaking to CES has given such a mandate. President Henry B. Eyring has continually discussed the need to get the gospel into students’ hearts. He recalled how one time President Hinckley pointed his finger at President Eyring’s chest and asked how they could get the truth into the students’ hearts.³

As I have been trained on my mission, in the seminary and institute program, in various leadership callings, and now at BYU, the plea of the Brethren seems to sink deeper and deeper into my own heart. I have struggled with how to most effectively be an instrument in the Lord’s hand to help students understand the gospel. I have analyzed teaching, observed students and teachers, pondered and reflected on my own teaching, and recognized many of my own weaknesses in bringing this objective about. As I was working on my PhD in instructional psychology and technology, while at the same time analyzing teachers’ implementation of the Seminaries and Institutes of Religion’s Teaching Emphasis, teaching seminary, and working with an incredible

seminary faculty, my mind was constantly on the simple nuances of learning and teaching. I found that the Brethren, many of whom had little or no formal training in education, understood the process of true learning, teaching, and conversion better than all of the greatest educational professionals. Studying all of these topics with the words of the Brethren as my foundation was of great benefit. General and specific questions began to flow as I worked to become an effective instrument in the hands of the Lord in teaching and helping others teach his children. I learned many great principles of education and leadership throughout this process and continue to learn as I express the desire accordingly. I have so far yet to go.

One of the great things I have learned is that there is often a subtle difference between the world’s definition of certain words and the Lord’s definition of them. Although *pride*, for example, may have some positive connotations according to the world, there is no righteous pride to the Lord, according to President Ezra Taft Benson. Educational terms are very similar. For example, there is a gap between the world’s definition of *understanding* and the Lord’s definition. The world’s definition of *understanding* is mental or cognitive; although usually there is a deeper connotation than a simple knowledge of something, this definition does not adequately reach the deeper level of the Lord’s definition.

From my own personal study of the word *understanding*, in correlation with Elder David A. Bednar’s talk entitled “Understanding Is a Wellspring of Life,” I have come to see *understanding* in a new light. *Understanding* is the internalization of divine truth by the Spirit; it is associated with knowledge and wisdom but has distinctive qualities as well. Understanding, when applied, is wisdom.

Gaining understanding is based upon divine principles. First, although basic understanding can come as a result of discussing, reasoning, and learning truth, true understanding is tailored to each individual and granted by the Spirit. Second, understanding is dependent on the worthiness or state of the heart of the individual. Third, understanding is granted by the Lord based upon the spiritual desire of the individual and usually requires actions such as asking, studying, and praying in humility. Understanding is a process granted to each individual line upon line. Fourth, an action of some sort—the making and keeping of covenants, for example—often follows understanding. Understanding results in edification, rejoicing, and power.

If we as teachers are to help our students understand divine truth, we must do so using the Lord's principles of teaching and learning. Many of these principles of education are used and widely known in the secular world and are found throughout educational texts, seminars, and so forth. I was surprised as I attended an international conference on the improvement of education and saw many similarities between the principles used by secular professionals and those used by CES. Although much of the methodology (group work, pair and share, and case studies) is the same, in a religious setting these methods are used because of a divine mandate, and they are accompanied by the Spirit. In other words, these methods may lead to understanding as man defines it, but with the inspiration and guidance of the Spirit we can use these same methods to help our students truly understand, according to the Lord's definition of understanding.

The methodology used by many educational entities, from kindergarten to graduate school, including medicine, law, and engineering, is often referred to as "active student learning." Some teachers in CES have assumed that these methodologies were unique to Seminaries and Institutes of Religion or BYU, but they are not. The secular concept of "active student learning" allows students to act and not merely to be acted upon in the classroom. Rather than having a talking head, or a lecturer, dominate in the classroom setting, students are involved in group work, pairing activities, student presentations, and so on. In the secular world, it has been shown that this type of student involvement increases student understanding and knowledge of the field of study and also provides many other benefits.

In a religious setting the benefits of such methodology go far beyond mere cognitive growth. When students are allowed to act rather than be acted upon, the Spirit is invited to enter "into" and not just "unto" the heart of a learner.⁴ When the student is given responsibility and the freedom to act, the Spirit is better able to teach and testify of divine truth. The Lord, through his divinely inspired Brethren and the scriptures, has given many examples of how the Spirit comes "into" us or testifies of divine truth when the student acts rather than being acted upon.

Look for what the Lord teaches us about understanding in 3 Nephi 17:1–3: "Behold, now it came to pass that when Jesus had spoken these words he looked round about again on the multitude, and he said unto them: Behold, my time is at hand. I perceive that ye are weak, that ye cannot understand all my words which I am commanded of the Father to speak unto you at this

time. Therefore, go ye unto your homes, and ponder upon the things which I have said, and ask of the Father, in my name, that ye may understand, and prepare your minds for the morrow, and I come unto you again."

What do we learn about understanding from these verses? Is it possible that, although there may have been those in the multitude who thought they understood what Jesus had said, he perceived that they were not getting all of it? Perhaps Christ knew there was something about the place of home and the process of pondering and praying and preparing one's mind that would create an even deeper influence on the people's understanding. Perhaps their preparation and their action would allow the Holy Ghost to bring the truth not only "unto" but "into" their hearts, as Elder Bednar taught. The Savior understood the role of the Holy Ghost and an individual personal preparation in creating understanding.

Note that the Savior did not say, "I perceive that you are weak, and that you cannot understand, so listen carefully to me as I continue to explain." No, he sent them home with specific instructions to follow:

1. Ponder upon the things which I have said.
2. Ask the Father, in my name, that ye may understand.
3. Prepare your minds for the morrow.

The Savior recognized that the real learning would be what they would get through prayer, through the Spirit, and well beyond even Christ's own words. If the Savior recognized the role of the Spirit in gospel learning and sent his people home to be taught by the Spirit rather than continuing his discourse, think about how much the Spirit can teach our students beyond our own capacity.

In a recent talk at Campus Education Week, Elder Scott stated:

Most of the teaching in the world is based on one of the five senses—hear, see, touch, smell, or taste. In your classroom you can teach by the power of the Spirit.

Such communication begins by your encouraging each one you teach to participate rather than be a passive listener. In this way you can assess their understanding of what is taught, create a feeling of ownership, and also learn from them. More important, their decision to participate is an exercise in agency that permits the Holy Ghost to communicate a personalized message suited to their individual needs. Creating an atmosphere of participation enhances the probability that the Spirit will teach more important lessons than you can communicate.⁵

Some of my most enjoyable teaching moments have been when I watched students teach each other. I remember one of these moments happening in a

released-time seminary classroom. On this specific occasion, I discussed with the students the importance of their roles as teachers—not just learners—in the classroom and their ability to help each other learn and teach by the Spirit. Then I set the stage for a special group activity and turned the class loose. As they explained, shared, and testified of principles and doctrines to each other, the brightness of their eyes, the joy in their countenances, the truth that was being shared, and the loving feeling in the room were priceless. Although it is difficult to measure the influence of the Spirit in the classroom, it was obvious to me that the Spirit was there and teaching the students. I honestly wished the moment would not end, that the Spirit would continue to help them understand. As we debriefed following the experience, it was obvious that the students' learning had gone far beyond cognitive gain. Much truth that day was caught, not taught.

President Boyd K. Packer echoes this principle, saying that “a testimony is to be found in the bearing of it.”⁶ This principle emphasizes the need to have students share their testimonies with each other while they are with us. One institute student stated, “I am a convert to the Church and feel uncomfortable sharing my testimony with others. My family has no desire to listen to what I think about gospel topics, and sharing with them is very uncomfortable and seems contentious. The only place I feel comfortable sharing my testimony is in institute. I have noticed that when I share, not only do I better understand what I am thinking, but the Holy Ghost confirms to me that it is true. I also am able to learn from and grow closer to people my own age who believe in the same things.”

As I see it, if a testimony is gained in the bearing of it, and my responsibility is to help my students gain testimonies, then I must allow students plenty of opportunities to bear their testimonies. If I am the one doing the testimony bearing, then I am the one gaining a greater testimony. This is not to say that the Spirit cannot testify of truth as it is being learned, but somehow the very action on the part of an individual in bearing testimony increases spiritual confirmation.

Confusing Means and Ends

It is important to recognize that having students bear testimony is not the end purpose, but rather it is to help the students gain and strengthen their testimonies through bearing them. Keeping the end in mind, then, is critical to planning effective classroom methodology. I have participated in a number

of in-service and training meetings in and out of CES where the primary objective was to help the teachers get the students involved and participating. Participation is good, but it is a means to an end. When participation itself is the desired outcome, this often leads to “split and spill” or “pooling of ignorance” activities. Group work or pair-and-share activities done solely for the purpose of participation often do not lead to understanding any better than a straight lecture does.

Understanding is the ultimate end purpose. After a recent in-service meeting, I had a conversation with a religion teacher who stated with conviction that what was taught in the meeting would work in someone else's class but not in his. His classes were different, he said, so he would simply continue to lecture because that was the only way his students could actually learn the material. Then, as if to give support to his conviction, he misquoted President Packer's famous quote, saying, “True doctrine changes attitudes and behavior, quicker than a study of behavior.” He was missing a key word: “True doctrine, *understood*,” said President Packer.⁷ There is a large difference here. Satan himself knows doctrine (depending on the definition of *know*); he just does not understand it. Perhaps this teacher would have changed his entire teaching approach if he realized the importance of *understanding*, not just *bearing* the doctrine.

Let's return to 3 Nephi 17. In verses 3–4, the Savior does not just send the multitude home to fulfill an assignment. He does not just tell them to go home and ponder; he gives them a reason to do so. He does not, as many of us have a tendency to do, confuse the means with the end. He tells them to go home and ponder and ask the Father in his name that they may understand. There is a purpose behind the command. He is requiring them to be prepared to receive something of greater benefit because of what they are doing at home.

Some teachers give assignments to students simply because they are told to do so. They ask questions, even well-thought-out questions, because they have been told that asking questions is a great way to begin a discussion. They have their students read because they are supposed to have their students read. They do the methodology well, but sometimes the methodology is not in line with the desired outcome. For what purpose are the students in groups? Is it to take time, to get them participating, or to help them share their testimonies, knowing that a testimony is gained in the bearing of it?

One student, after being asked if his teacher had him read at night, replied, “My teacher has us read, but I don't think he cares that I'm reading.

We check it on a box or in our grading sheets. I wish he would ask me *what* I read instead of just asking me *if* I read. I think he just asks to ask.” Here is another example of getting the methodology and the means confused with the end. Scripture study is just one example, but there are many ways in which the means and the end can be confused. It is vital for teachers to constantly keep the objective in mind.

Methodologies That May Lead to Understanding

It must be understood that even though it is important to keep the end in mind, the “how,” or the methodology we use to get ourselves and our students there, is critical. President Packer stated: “In the course of my efforts to teach His gospel, I have come to know Him, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only Begotten of the Father. I stand in reverence before Him with deep regard for what He taught, and with deep regard for how He taught. It is not untoward for any of us to aspire to teach as He taught. It is not untoward for any of us to aspire to be like Him. He was not just a teacher; He was the master teacher.”⁸

As I have observed classrooms of religious instruction over the years, I have seen many methodologies that can help lead to greater understanding. Although group work and pair-and-share activities are fantastic means-to-an-end activities, they are not the only effective activities. A simple question to ask is, “What will be the most effective way of helping my students understand [remembering the Lord’s definition of *understand*] the divine truth that the Lord would have them learn?” Other activities that give students the opportunity to act rather than to be acted upon include writing, studying, participating in class discussions, exploring case studies, and role-playing. Although many of these activities, such as studying, pondering, and writing, are often done alone or at home, they can also be effective in helping students be converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ “while they are with us,” as President Eyring says.⁹

Writing. Writing has been applauded by educators for years as a way of helping students better understand what they are taught. For the Lord, however, writing is even more than that. Elder Scott taught, “Knowledge carefully recorded is knowledge available in time of need. Spiritually sensitive information should be kept in a sacred place that communicates to the Lord how you treasure it. That practice enhances the likelihood of receiving further light.”¹⁰ Where does further light come from? From the Lord, through the Spirit.

In other words, the likelihood of gaining additional understanding can be enhanced through writing.

I once had a student who, after graduating, came back to visit our seminary class regularly before his mission. He would come in quietly and respectfully, sit in the back of the class by the window, and study, listen, share, and especially write. Curtis was well known and well liked by the other students in the school, but many of the incoming sophomores did not know him. On one occasion, a sophomore boy noticed how much Curtis was writing and asked him about it. I watched and listened as Curtis pointed to the quote by Elder Scott, as stated above, which was hanging on the wall, and said simply, “I have learned by doing that Elder Scott was right, and I need all the light I can get before I leave for my mission.” Not wanting that teaching moment to pass too quickly, I had Curtis share with the class why he was writing so much. He went on to explain his process of coming to understand the importance of writing. He said that he used to not write at all because he thought it was a bother. After reading that quote and being challenged by another student to put it to the test, he did. It didn’t take long, he said, for the Spirit to confirm to him that not only was the precept true but that many of the things he was learning about were true as well. He found that the more he wrote, the more he learned, and the more he learned the more he wrote. He recognized the importance of what he was learning through this process. It was so important to him that he wanted to capitalize on it while he could before he left for his mission. After testifying of the principle, he offered a short and simple challenge to those in that classroom to put it to the test and confirm the promise of Elder Scott for themselves.

Studying. One of the best ways to help a student understand the principles of the gospel is to give them time in class to actually study the scriptures. So little quiet time is given in class for study. It is true that such study can be done at home, and I have heard many say that you should only do in class what you cannot do at home. However, I once heard a teacher tell his students as they were leaving the classroom, “There is nothing we did today that you cannot do at home.” While students can study at home, many have not been trained how to do so effectively. Although the home is the ideal training ground for scripture study, our classes of religious education can be ripe training grounds as well. Part of the effectiveness of this type of learning experience comes in recognizing who causes true understanding to occur. A teacher who believes that this type of activity is a waste of time and that the students have come

only to hear the teacher lecture should take the time to remember who the Teacher really is.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland admonished us, “Encourage your students to . . . read more slowly and more carefully and with more questions in mind. Help them to ponder, to examine every word, every scriptural gem. Teach them to hold it up to the light and turn it, look and see what’s reflected and refracted there.”¹¹ The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “The things of God are of deep import[ance]; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out.”¹²

Give your students time to ponder in class. Allow them time to think. We talk so much about what they should do in order to get revelation, but rarely do they have a chance to practice it. It is true that often there is such little time to get through all of the material that needs to be covered that day, but what is our real goal? Elder Scott reminded us: “Remember, your highest priority is not to get through all the material if that means that it cannot be properly absorbed. Do what you are able to do with understanding. Determine, according to the individual capabilities and needs of your students, what is of highest priority. If a key principle is understood, internalized, and made part of the students’ guidebooks for life, then the most important objective has been accomplished.”¹³

One of my favorite quotes I use to train my students in their scripture study comes from Elder Scott. He advised, “As you seek spiritual knowledge, search for principles. Carefully separate them from the detail used to explain them. Principles are concentrated truth, packaged for application to a wide variety of circumstances. A true principle makes decisions clear even under the most confusing and compelling circumstances. It is worth great effort to organize the truth we gather to simple statements of principle.”¹⁴

I once observed CES couple missionaries being trained before leaving for their various assignments throughout the world. The excitement in the room was contagious as these couple missionaries, who were highly experienced with the gospel, took on a completely new way of studying their scriptures. Rather than just reading aloud with each other for fifteen minutes as they were accustomed to doing or just reading through the scriptures to finish a chapter, they were now specifically searching for principles. As the principles were discussed in a group, one man, excited and refreshed, stated, “I’ve been studying this book my entire life, and it has never meant so much to me and applied to my life so much as it does right now!” He, at a late stage in his life,

was doing for the first time what the Brethren have asked us to teach our students to do in their early teenage years.

Our students live in a go-go, me-me world. They are entertained to the max with the most modern media. Too often I have observed teachers trying to mimic this kind of entertainment. When teachers become entertainers, very little understanding takes place. As the moon can block the sunlight in a solar eclipse, so teachers can get between the Spirit and the students.¹⁵ I believe that our students are craving and hungering for the things of the Spirit. They want time in class to read, study, and ponder. One seminary teacher shared with me an experience that he had in having his students read a talk by one of the Brethren. He gave them fifteen minutes of silent time to read the talk, which addressed the principles they were studying in the scriptures that day. When the teacher asked if the students were ready to move on, they responded that they were not; they wanted more quiet time to read and study. They continued for more than half an hour. The teacher told me that they could have gone on for much longer, but he wanted some time to distill what they were learning. Some of the insights, personal likening, and questions that came as a result of that study time were far beyond any entertainment he could have provided. Note that this type of learning usually requires the teacher to give the students some type of training on how to study. This does require extremely mature students, but I have come to realize more and more that student maturity in the classroom is often (although not always) a direct reflection of the teacher’s expectation of them.

Prayer. Doctrine and Covenants 68:28 says, “Teach [them] to pray, and to walk uprightly before the Lord.” How can we teach our students to pray? Aren’t most of them members of the Church? Haven’t they been taught how to pray by their parents and Sunday School teachers? How can we help them to pray? We can talk with them about their prayers. We can help them in their prayers through training. We can invite them to think about what they are saying in their prayers. We can teach them to really think before they pray. What was the Lord getting at when he asked us to teach them to pray?

I remember on one occasion telling my class of early-morning seminary students that I had heard them pray so many times to be blessed as they crossed the street that I did not want to hear it anymore—that instead they should be praying that those across the street at the high school should feel inspired to come to the building. The next morning the mother of one of the students was crossing the street, got hit by a car, and had to be taken to the

hospital in an ambulance. I no longer tell my students specifically what to and what not to pray for. Instead, we learn together the principles associated with prayer. We study scriptures on prayer, look at how prophets have prayed, and read the counsel and advice they give. As we determine whom we pray to, why we pray, and in whose name we pray, we not only improve the sincerity of the prayers in class, but I hope we improve the prayers of the students in private as well. Helping students understand the principles of prayer and inviting them to apply these principles in their lives will increase their ability to learn from the Spirit as they study the scriptures and even as they pray.

Class discussion. Helping students testify, talk, explain, and share allows them to practice acting on promptings, thus allowing the Holy Spirit to work in them. Elder Scott stated:

Their decision to participate is an exercise in agency that permits the Holy Ghost to communicate a personalized message suited to their individual needs. Creating an atmosphere of participation enhances the probability that the Spirit will teach more important lessons than you can communicate.

That participation will bring into their lives the direction of the Spirit. . . . Participation allows individuals to *experience* being led by the Spirit. They learn to recognize and feel what spiritual guidance is.¹⁶

Again, as President Packer states, “A testimony is gained in the bearing of it.” Although raising hands or explaining principles may not be considered actions relevant to whichever principle is being taught, participation is a part of the pattern of receiving revelation. They are therefore engaged in the process of receiving revelation.

I have heard many teachers describe the difficulties of class discussions, saying things like, “I don’t have time in my class to get through all of the material if my students talk,” or, “I feel like when I allow class discussion, I lose control of the class.” Some teachers, not familiar with the doctrine, are concerned that they may not have answers to students’ questions. Other teachers feel that the students are to learn from the teacher and not from other students. Still others have shared frustration that the more outgoing students take up too much time. Rather than spending time discussing each of these concerns, I would simply suggest that perhaps teachers could spend more time trying to make class discussion work. If Elder Scott says that no class should be taught without some type of participation and that this enhances the Spirit, perhaps we should try to figure out how to do so more effectively.

Training students to use the words of the prophets is a great way to help them become mature gospel learners, and it helps them to see that gospel principles are not the teacher’s ideas, but that they come directly from the Lord. For example, the Doctrine and Covenants teaches that when all have spoken, all may be edified of all. This does not say, *when those who like to talk have spoken*, or *when those who have something important to say*; it says, “when *all* have spoken” (D&C 88:122; emphasis added). During my first week of teaching a class of eighty-plus students, I noticed that as we discussed significant principles in the first few chapters of the Book of Mormon, I was getting answers from the same students. After discussing this verse, I told the class that I was going to start calling on students who we had not heard from yet. I also told them that if they really did not want to share, all they needed to do was say “pass.” Easy. Next, I gave the class a moment to think of the important principles we had discussed. All of the students quickly prepared to share a comment about the principle of greatest value to them. Then I called on the quietest, shiest-looking student in the class. She spoke quietly, nervously, and methodically as she shared a principle she had identified about receiving personal revelation and testified of its value in her life. Her shaky voice caught the attention of the class, and as she finished, a number of the students commented on what a great principle she had shared. Rather than discussing the principle further, the class instead discussed the importance of each person in the class, how much their comments meant to each other, and how the Spirit can work through classmates for the benefit of others in the class.

On one occasion, I had a seminary student who was frustrated, stating during a lesson that nothing he said to the class seemed to be very important and that he would rather hear from me than the other students. Before I could jump in and defend the class, another student, a freshman boy, raised his hand. As I called on him, he flipped through his journal and read several comments that the first young man had made in class. Then he told the other young man that he had written those comments down because they were important to him. The other class members were shocked by this young freshman boy and were curious to know if he had written anything down about them. I do not know if he had written down comments from everyone, but as he continued to read statements and coinciding names, the students’ realization of their importance to each other raised significantly. It was a tender mercy of the Lord.

In determining the methodology that will lead to the desired outcome, it is crucial to remember that each teacher, each classroom of students, and each student is unique. Elder Scott stated:

I am convinced that there is no simple formula or technique that I could give you or that you could give your students that would immediately facilitate mastering the ability to be guided by the Holy Spirit. Nor do I believe that the Lord will ever allow someone to conceive a pattern that would invariably and immediately open the channels of spiritual communication. We grow when we labor to recognize the guidance of the Holy Ghost as we struggle to communicate our needs to our Father in Heaven in moments of dire need or overflowing gratitude. Each time we do that we are taking another step in fulfilling the purpose of our being here on earth.¹⁷

Just as there is no formula or technique that will produce the ability to be guided by the Holy Ghost, I also believe that there is no simple formula or technique that will produce understanding and conversion. This requires diligence, desire, experimentation, and prayer on the part of the teacher as well as the student.

Responsibility of the Teacher

President Eyring stated, “It is wise to fear that our own skills are inadequate to meet the charge we have to nourish the faith of others. Our own abilities, however great, will not be enough. But that realistic view of our limitations creates a humility which can lead to dependence on the Spirit and thus to power.”¹⁸

As teachers, we must do all we can to know, understand, and live the principles of the gospel. This includes everything from personal worthiness to genuinely loving the Lord and our students, to teaching with an eye single to the glory of God, to studying and knowing the doctrines of the kingdom of God, to improving our methodology in the classroom. All help to create an environment in the classroom and in ourselves that allows the Spirit to teach. The importance and the responsibility of the teacher to be spiritually, mentally, and physically prepared cannot be underestimated in assessing the effectiveness of a teacher.

One professor I spoke with made the following comment about this understanding:

The sobering part is the thought that I can be filled with knowledge as a teacher and it can just be dripping out of my eyeballs in terms of how much I know, and though I can dispense it left and right, understanding may not take place because my heart is wrong, or mean-spirited, or I’m judgmental, or I’m haughty. That’s the sobering part from the teacher’s perspective. Though God has blessed me with great insight,

if my life is not in order, the spiritual part of understanding may not take place in the students’ lives. If they do not feel and perceive something in the classroom, they will not likely want to go home and do something so simple, but so real themselves.

I have noted that even the amount of sleep I get as a teacher has direct influence on the classroom environment and my ability to help students understand. It really is often the small and simple things that make all the difference in our abilities to help our students become converted.

President Harold B. Lee stated, “If you want to be an effective teacher of the gospel, you have to live the principles that you propose to teach. The more perfectly you live the gospel, the more perfectly you will be able to teach the gospel.”¹⁹

Living the gospel includes living the principles of teaching, as Christ himself so beautifully demonstrated. Christ taught us much about the role of a teacher through his example. He is the perfect example of allowing his students to do as much as they can do. When teaching the people of Nephi after he came to the Americas, Christ taught the children, and then “he did loose their tongues, and they did speak unto their fathers great and marvelous things, even greater than he had revealed unto the people” (3 Nephi 26:14). After raising Lazarus from the tomb, Christ himself could have loosed his burial clothes, but instead, he gave the opportunity to others, saying, “Loose him, and let him go” (John 11:44). Imagine the blessing that this opportunity to act could have been for that person. Christ could do for us all of those things we do in teaching, leading, and acting in the Church, but instead he has delegated that authority to us. Christ could do it better than any of us; he knows more than all of us, he is more skilled, and it would take less time, but I believe that there is something about him letting us do it that increases our learning and understanding and leads us back to him.

How We View Our Students

John S. Tanner, BYU academic vice president, stated that we as teachers need to “focus less on what *we* teach and more on what *they* learn.” He continued, “This can be a difficult paradigm shift for those of us who sometimes indulge exclusively in the ‘sage-on-the-stage’ model of teaching. It is, however, a paradigm shift that for more than a decade has radically altered the landscape of higher education.”²⁰

To effectively help the students understand their role as learners requires the teachers to understand something about their students. They must know

who their students are and they must expect from their students as much as the Lord does. They must strive to see their students as the Lord does.

President J. Reuben Clark Jr. taught: “Our youth are not children spiritually; they are well on towards the normal spiritual maturity of the world. To treat them as children spiritually, as the world might treat the same age group, is therefore and likewise an anachronism. . . . There is no need for gradual approaches, for ‘bed-time’ stories, for coddling, for patronizing, or for any of the other childish devices used in efforts to reach those spiritually inexperienced and all but spiritually dead.”²¹

President Eyring similarly taught: “One of the dangers of the times we are passing into is that we might be tempted to lower our expectations for ourselves and for those young people we serve. As the world darkens, even a partial conversion and a few spiritual experiences may seem more and more remarkable, compared to the world. We might be tempted to expect less. The Lord has given another signal, clear and powerful. It is that we can expect more, not less, of youth. . . . It begins with expectations, yours and theirs.”²²

We as teachers must view our students with an eye single to the glory of God. President Eyring teaches us that our students have seen visions, that they are special for a reason. How does knowing that our students are seeing visions, that they are having spiritual experiences, shape the way in which we teach the gospel? Rather than asking, for example, “Does anyone have an example to share?” the question could be formatted, “Who here has an example or an experience to share?” We have to trust that what President Eyring said about them is really happening.

Responsibility of the Student

Nephi teaches us, as Elder Bednar so carefully instructed:

“When a man speaketh by the power of the Holy Ghost the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth [the message] unto the hearts of the children of men” (2 Nephi 33:1). Please notice how the power of the Spirit carries the message *unto* but not necessarily *into* the heart. A teacher can explain, demonstrate, persuade, and testify, and do so with great spiritual power and effectiveness. Ultimately, however, the content of a message and the witness of the Holy Ghost penetrate into the heart only if the receiver allows them to enter.²³

Part of our role as teachers is to help our students understand their role as learners. They must know that no matter how much information we have, no matter how skilled we are at teaching, it is still dependent on them to learn,

to be prepared and willing to allow the Spirit to take the knowledge of the gospel and give them understanding. The Spirit will take the gospel only *unto* their hearts; it is dependent on the students to get it *into* their hearts. They must have that desire; they must do as the Lord commands—be worthy, ponder, study, and pray—in order to create an environment within themselves for the Spirit to teach.

Joseph Fielding McConkie spoke expertly on this point:

The prophetic efforts of Joseph Smith did not center in sharing his spiritual experiences but rather in the effort to qualify us to have our own spiritual experiences. The emphasis of his ministry was not on what he had seen but on what we could see. . . . Critics of the Church have made a lot of fuss about the fact that we have so few contemporary accounts of the First Vision. But that rather makes the point. Joseph was talking more about what we could do than what he had done. We have a dozen revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants that invite us to see God. Joseph invited us to check him by having our own Sacred Grove experience. The validity of an experiment is if it can be repeated. A good seed not only bears good fruits but it always bears the same fruits—regardless of who plants it.²⁴

We as teachers are to do what Joseph Smith and the prophets of old have done. We are to have spiritual experiences ourselves and then to help our students have such experiences as well. This desire to help our students have spiritual experiences is an admonition given to us by President Packer: “Teach your students to see with the eyes they possessed before they had a mortal body; teach them to hear with ears they possessed before they were born; teach them to push back the curtains of mortality and see into the eternities.”²⁵

The Lord is the perfect mentor. He sees our imperfections and gives us tailor-made opportunities to grow. The Prophet Joseph Smith stated, “You have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves . . . the same as all Gods have done before you, namely, by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one; from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation, until you . . . are able to dwell in everlasting burnings, and to sit in glory, as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power.”²⁶

It is probable that God could have made us all gods, but some experiences and actions are necessary, no matter how much we understand. Christ himself knew cognitively about the Atonement, but not experientially. We learn through experience. It is one thing to be told to do something or to discuss action, but it is another thing to actually experience that action. The classroom is an ideal place for practice and instruction, where students can

gain knowledge and understanding and apply the principles of the gospel in their lives.

We are then, once again, teaching them to understand. We are teaching them to see, to hear, and to feel. We are teaching them, even as we are learning ourselves and are applying the principles of understanding, to reach out beyond this mortal world into the eternities. The process of gaining these experiences has been discussed throughout the scriptures and by modern-day prophets. It is vital to understand the desired outcome of this process and not just the actions themselves. We must know who our students are, trust that the Lord will fulfill his promises, recognize and act on the principles ourselves, and create an environment for these experiences to take place.

Elder Scott gave us our objective as well as ideas about how to fulfill this objective. He taught that a talking head is least effective; participation is crucial. Various prophets have taught us as teachers to help our students understand through experience. They have taught us the critical process involved in helping our students understand divine truth.

It is important that we know this, but it is perhaps equally important that our students know it. They must know what our desired outcome is and know that this desired outcome comes from prophets in scriptures and in latter days.

Blessing

Elder Scott asked each of us, “Will you pray for guidance in how to have truth sink deep into the minds and hearts of your students so as to be used throughout life? As you prayerfully seek ways to do that, I know that the Lord will guide you. The solution will vary for different individuals, but you will come to understand how to do it. Make your objective to help students understand, retain, and use divine truth. Keep that objective foremost in every aspect of your preparation and teaching.”²⁷ As a teacher I have been greatly overwhelmed by the responsibility of teaching Heavenly Father’s children. I have feared and have recognized that my own skills are not enough. It is for this reason, along with many others, that I believe Elder Scott gave us the following apostolic blessing, for which I am grateful: “Humbly, I invoke a blessing upon each of you that as you do your best, the Lord can guide and strengthen your efforts to help each student understand and live the truths you teach.”²⁸ **RE**

Notes

1. Richard G. Scott, “To Understand and Live Truth,” address to CES religious educators, February 4, 2005, Jordan Institute of Religion, 2.
2. Scott, “To Understand and Live Truth,” 2.
3. Henry B. Eyring, “Things Will Work Out,” *Ensign*, March 2008, 28. This address was given at President Gordon B. Hinckley’s funeral.
4. David A. Bednar, “Understanding Is a Wellspring of Life,” Ricks College Campus Education Week Devotional, June 3, 1999.
5. Richard G. Scott, “To Learn and to Teach More Effectively,” address at BYU Campus Education Week, August 21, 2007.
6. Boyd K. Packer, *Mine Errand from the Lord: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Boyd K. Packer*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 118.
7. Packer, *Mine Errand from the Lord*, 307; emphasis added.
8. Packer, *Mine Errand from the Lord*, 337.
9. Henry B. Eyring, “We Must Raise Our Sights,” CES conference on the Book of Mormon, August 14, 2001, Brigham Young University, 2.
10. Richard G. Scott, “Acquiring Spiritual Knowledge,” *Ensign*, November 1993, 86.
11. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Students Need Teachers to Guide Them,” CES satellite broadcast, June 29, 1992, 4.
12. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 3:295.
13. Scott, “To Understand and Live Truth,” 2–3.
14. Scott, “Acquiring Spiritual Knowledge,” 86.
15. Neal A. Maxwell, “All Hell Is Moved,” devotional address given at Brigham Young University, November 8, 1977.
16. Scott, “To Learn and to Teach More Effectively.”
17. Scott, “To Learn and to Teach More Effectively.”
18. Henry B. Eyring, “Feed My Lambs,” *Ensign*, November 1997, 82–83.
19. Harold B. Lee, *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee: Eleventh President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 459.
20. John S. Tanner, “One of the Great Lights of the World: Seeking Learning by Study and Faith at BYU,” address given at BYU Annual University Conference August 23, 2005, 6.
21. J. Reuben Clark Jr., “The Charted Course of the Church in Education,” address to seminary and institute of religion leaders, August 8, 1938, Brigham Young University.
22. Henry B. Eyring, “Raising Expectations,” CES satellite training broadcast, August 4, 2004, 1–2.
23. David A. Bednar, “Seek Learning by Faith,” address to CES religious educators, February 3, 2006, 1.
24. Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Illinois* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, Department of Church History and Doctrine, 1995), 206–207.
25. Boyd K. Packer, “The Great Plan of Happiness,” CES symposium on the Doctrine and Covenants/Church History, August 10, 1993, Brigham Young University, 6.
26. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 346–47.
27. Scott, “To Understand and Live Truth,” 2.
28. Scott, “To Understand and Live Truth,” 6.