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# Breathing Life into a Dead Class

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Many of us can relate to this phenomenon, especially when we teach two classes back-to-back: one of the classes is full of spirit and enthusiasm and active learning; the other seems dead, lifeless, without energy or zeal. Of course, with so many variables involved, it's difficult to determine whether the fault lies in the teacher, the students, the subject matter, the temperature, the time of day, or the win-loss record of the football or basketball team. But this much is certain: each class has a spirit about it, a personality and temperament, and that is one of the things that make teaching both exhilarating and, at times, disheartening.

As one BYU Religious Education professor noted: "As every class begins, I never know what I'm going to find. Will the students welcome me with open hearts and minds, or will they tune me out and ignore what I'm trying to teach? Will I enter the room prepared spiritually and mentally to teach a class that is worth their time and mine? Will this be a bad, good, or great class? Every day of teaching is a new experience."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, each day of teaching is different; no two classes are alike. Many of us have experienced a term of joyful teaching, when we look forward to

each class period, each student in the class is engaged, and the term seems to end far too early. Other classes are less than ideal, but we go along doing our best to engage the students, and we have some days that are better than others. Then there are the dead classes, where it seems that despite our best efforts, the students are disengaged and seem interested only in getting content for the assignments and exams, getting a grade, or getting out of class—as soon as they can.

What's a teacher to do?

Do the math: a class of fifty students is filled with fifty spirits and individual dispositions. Each brings his or her own set of interests and gifts and talents, challenges and trials and heartaches, worries and pressures and expectations. Then add those of the teacher. All of this multiplies into a classroom that has a personality, a spirit, a culture and milieu, and each one is different.

No teacher is good enough to be all things to all students at all times, and not every class experience can be exceptional or transcendent or transforming, but as teachers we can sincerely strive to do our best to teach with power and spirit and breathe life even into a dead class.

How?

Here are five suggestions that have helped teachers enliven their classrooms.

Granted, most of what follows you already know is important, but perhaps this paper will serve as a reaffirmation and reminder. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught, “We need to be reminded more than we need to be instructed.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Be Prepared, Especially Spiritually, for Each Class**

It takes courage to face a class full of diverse students and attempt to teach them something worthwhile, especially when we teach the most important subject on earth—the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our students are brighter and better prepared and have higher expectations than ever before. They expect and deserve that when we enter the classroom, we are prepared in every way to offer our best.

Noted teacher Parker J. Palmer observed, “Each time I walk into a classroom, I can choose the place within myself from which my teaching will come, just as I can choose the place within my students toward which my teaching will be aimed. I need not teach from a fearful place: I can teach from curiosity or hope or empathy or honesty, places that are as real within me as are my fears.”<sup>3</sup>

As professional teachers, we may rightfully see ourselves as experts not only in our subject matter but also in the craft of imparting what we know to others. But effective, life-giving teaching is so much more than just knowing something and relaying that information to someone else—especially when it comes to teaching the gospel. We must have the truths in our mind, but it's even more important to have them deep in our heart.

David McCullough, a celebrated author and historian, once said to a graduating class at Dartmouth College, "If the teacher is enthusiastic about the history of the American Revolution or Shakespeare or the workings of the internal combustion engine, the students get that right away. If the teacher is uncertain, indifferent, or maybe a bit bored with the material, the students get that, too, right away."<sup>4</sup> If enthusiasm is so vital to teaching history or literature or mechanical engineering, then it's certainly true of teaching the restored gospel. The word *enthusiasm*, after all, comes from the Greek roots *en*, meaning "in," and *theos*, meaning "God."<sup>5</sup>

Few students wonder if their statistics professor *really believes* in statistics; few economics students are concerned whether their teacher *really lives* the principles of economics; few chemistry students worry about whether their instructor *really feels* the periodic table in the heart. They appreciate good teaching, learn the subject, see its usefulness, and move on. But what we teach is different. Our students want to know and feel and see that we *really believe* what we're teaching, that we *really strive to live* what we profess, that we *really feel* the power of the gospel in our hearts. We are always under surveillance, and our students want to know that this is more than an academic subject or a set of facts and a pile of interesting information to us. They want to know that we *really believe* and are sincerely striving to live the gospel, which may do more to change hearts and minds than any class lecture or assignment.

Our mind *and* our heart must be ready as we enter the classroom: our mind filled with knowledge, information, and facts, and our heart overflowing with love, faith, and testimony. If our heart and mind are prepared and our attitude is positive and proactive, we will be better able to teach with the Spirit and bring life to a lifeless class.

Certainly, we must pay the price to know our subject, but even more importantly, we must pay the price to live the gospel of Jesus Christ so that we enter the classroom reflecting his image in our countenances (see Alma 5:14). To paraphrase the words of the Savior, "What doth it profit a teacher to have all the knowledge in the world, yet teach without love or the Spirit?"<sup>6</sup>

President Harold B. Lee said, “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.”<sup>7</sup>

We do not want a student to ever feel or think, “I wish he knew less and cared more” or “I am impressed with her knowledge, but unimpressed with her goodness.” It’s not an either-or proposition: the best pedagogical and content preparation can help us in our spiritual preparation. Likewise, earnest spiritual preparation leads inexorably to deeper and improved academic preparation. We also cannot cram long-term for class. We may be able to “fake” a class and get through content that we really know very little about, but it is impossible to “fake” spiritual sensitivity and preparation, Christian goodness and kindness, care and compassion. Who we are speaks more loudly than what we know. Effective gospel teachers punctuate their classes with the truthfulness of their lives; they manifest goodness and warmth in every class.

Of course, students do not expect perfection from us, nor should we expect perfection of ourselves. Neither do our students expect that we know everything about any given subject. What they do expect is that we have come to the classroom academically and spiritually ready and prepared to engage their minds and touch their hearts. This kind of robust preparation will help breathe life into a dead class.

### **Stay Current with Scholarship, Writing, and Thinking on the Subject**

An informal survey of BYU students during fall and winter semesters 2010–11 revealed the following comments:<sup>8</sup>

One religion professor I had was a really nice man, very sincere, and he tried hard, but I had the feeling that he was essentially teaching the same class he had taught for decades. I was bored much of the time. I know the D&C hasn’t changed over the past 20 years, but how about some new stories or new information or insights.

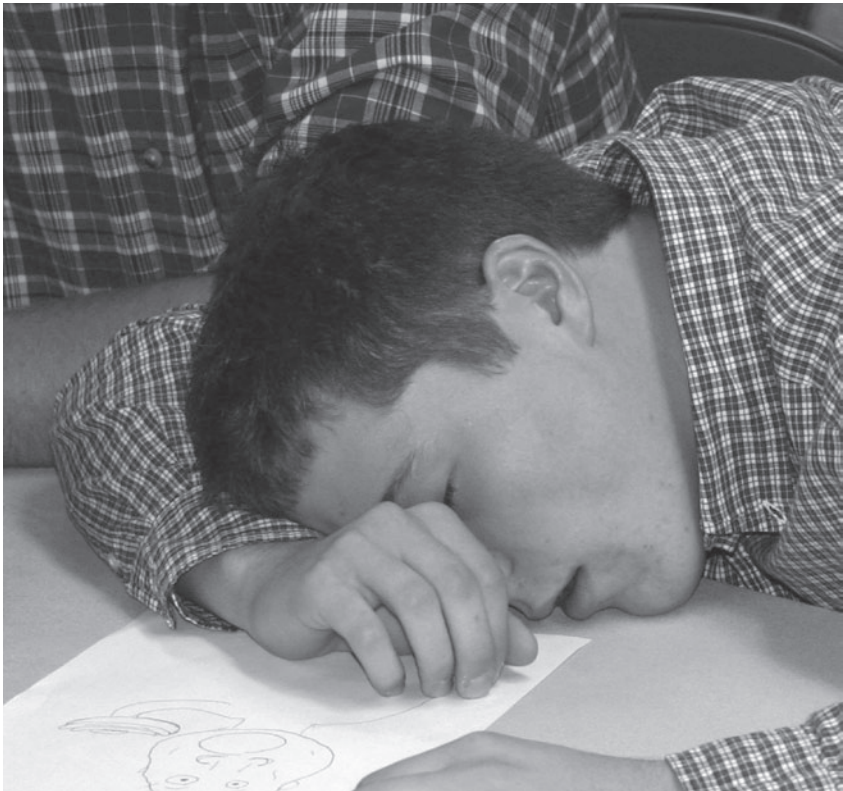
My professor last year seemed almost tired of the subject, almost like he’d been teaching it for too long. I’m not expecting entertainment, but it’d sure be nice to feel some excitement for the New Testament. It seemed like most of the people he quoted were from years ago when he first put the class together.

My favorite religion teacher was awesome. I could tell he loved the Book of Mormon. He had a passion for it. Even though the doctrine and teachings haven’t changed in the Book of Mormon, he made it relevant for our lives today. He told great stories, he talked about some current research on the Book of Mormon, he quoted modern

prophets—he brought it to today. I could tell he had really done some deep studying of the Book of Mormon.

Effective teachers stay current with the scholarship, thinking, and writing on the subjects they teach. Even those whose focus is on unchangeable doctrinal truths never assume that they already know all there is to know on the subject. By staying current with our subject matter, we signal to students that we too are engaged in active learning which will inform our teaching and writing.

Effective teachers are constantly looking to learn and improve and update their teaching. They recognize that even if their lesson plans seem to work well one term, the next term will bring new students with new challenges and different needs. Therefore, they aren't afraid to try new approaches, observe and talk to other faculty members about subjects and classes, add technology and



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media when appropriate, and utilize the teachings of the living prophets and apostles, especially the most recent general conference report. All this helps to make their classes academically rigorous as well as spiritually strengthening.

Effective use of active learning and technology in the classroom can be a good way to keep our classes responsive to the changing needs of our students. We don't need to be tech whizzes, but our students also expect us not to be Luddites. Some use of PowerPoint or Keynote, short video clips, or other technology, such as the innovative use of learning management systems (LMS), where teachers may more personally connect and conveniently interact with students, shows we are striving to move into the twenty-first century with our teaching. Most important, it shows that we are willing to try new things in order to make our classes as effective as possible. This generation's students are used to receiving their messages through electronic media. It's the world our students know, understand, respond to, and expect, and we ought to honor that expectation by technologically connecting with them a bit.

As one BYU religion professor said, "I'm not the greatest at technology, but I try to use it a little in the classroom. I don't want technology to consume my time or focus in the class—I want them immersed in the scriptures, but I do want to connect with students on that technological level a little. I want to try to have my classes be more than just me talking to them."<sup>9</sup> To some degree, meeting students where they live technologically is a way to indicate as teachers that we are freshening our classes.

Of course, like any teaching method, use of technology can be taken too far. We should always see it as a means to an end, not an end in itself. And our purpose should never be simply to entertain our students with attractive media. But if our aim is purely to help the gospel reach our students' hearts, then we will always be looking for the most effective way to do it, even if it means trying something that's new and unfamiliar to us.

### **Make Application to Students' Lives**

It has been said that learning is changed behavior, and if that is true, then both teacher and student ought to be learning and changing. Effective teachers don't monopolize the conversation; they listen, they learn from their students and from the Spirit. They say things that are edifying and positive, they build and bless, and they enlarge understanding and testimony.

Striving to make the teaching relevant to the student's life is an important means of bringing the Spirit into the classroom. We may be deeply interested

in how many stones still remain in Jerusalem's temple wall, how far a Nephite could walk in a day, or how tall Heber J. Grant was, but our students may not be all that interested. We may be fascinated by esoteric principles and obscure research, but many of our students may not find it germane to the gospel subject or their personal lives. We need to find ways to talk to them in their lives today. They face challenges and enticements that seem to them overwhelming at times, so we need to give them concepts and principles and truth that connect to prophetic teachings—or, in the words of President Ezra Taft Benson, “Today’s News Today.”<sup>10</sup> In class, we need to feast upon the scriptures and help students “liken [the] scriptures” unto their lives and trials and temptations (1 Nephi 19:23).

Note these student comments:

I don't remember ever feeling during the semester that this professor knew what it was like to be 22 years old and struggling with things. Some days I came to class really discouraged and tired, and mostly what I got was facts and dates with a few scriptures thrown in. I wanted to know why I should care about this subject and what difference it could make in my life.

One of the things I liked about this class was how the teacher connected the teachings of the living prophets to my life today. I wasn't just learning things for an exam. I felt like I was learning principles for my life.

We need to be fresh and relevant in our approach and intentionally link what we teach to our students' twenty-first-century lives. Try as we might, however, there may be some students whose struggles we will never fully understand. We were all twenty-two once, but we aren't right now, and the world has changed in dramatic ways. Nevertheless, the gospel we teach transcends time and culture. Although the holy writ from which we teach is many hundreds of years old, it has contemporary application and modern parallels to our lives. Good teachers draw those parallels for their students. Even better teachers help students draw those parallels for themselves and help equip students to find in the gospel their own answers to their problems—problems that perhaps no one but they themselves can understand. That's a skill that will serve them well as they raise families and serve in the Church in the coming years.

### **Love and Care about Each Student**

Teaching is more than a job; it is a relationship—a relationship of trust, caring, and respect. Teachers walk on holy ground each time they enter a classroom,





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and in a sense, every time they enter their office. This is part of the profession we have chosen.

As Gilbert Highet explained: “Every profession has its atmosphere, its setting, and those who practice it must feel at home there. It is silly to become an actor if you want a settled home and time to think. Do not enter journalism unless you like the bustle of a large and noisy office, welcome travel and the unexpected, and hope to like it all the rest of your life. If you do not enjoy the prospect of facing the young in large groups, if you would always prefer working in a laboratory or reading in a library, you will never be a good teacher.”<sup>11</sup>

Many years ago, a venerable professor said to me, only partly tongue-in-cheek, “I love everything about my job as a teacher—except the students.” The irony, of course, is that students *are* our work as teachers, not an interruption. They are not incidental to our serious scholarly concerns—they are the essence of our work. For some, perhaps, students get in the way of their research agenda, committee assignments, writing time, or quiet time. But being a teacher is first and last all about students. If we do not love and care for our students, and if we do not place them in the center of our thinking and doing, we’re missing the essence of our profession.

Over the years I have watched a noted religious education professor and colleague always make time for students and others. At times, we’d be in his office, intensely discussing a gospel topic or in the middle of some other “important” conversation, and the phone would ring or a knock would come at the door. Most often it was a student with a question—a question

not about the syllabus or a class assignment but about some doctrinal point that needed clarification, some personal worry or concern or inquiry that the student had. Very politely he'd chat for a moment and then say, "Let's set up a time we can talk"—and *then he'd do it*.

Once when the phone rang, I asked him, "Why don't you just let it ring?" Without a hint of self-righteousness, he unaffectedly answered, "That's why I'm here; I'm here for students." I asked a student, my TA at the time, why he liked this professor so much. He said to me, "I never felt that I was in the way or was a nuisance to him. I always felt like he cared about me and wanted to help me." This is why they open themselves up to him and trust him with their deepest questions. As a result, his teaching is able to reach them much more profoundly than it otherwise would. Students can sense how we feel about them.

Good teaching begins and ends with simple care and affection for our students. BYU's "founding father" and second president, Karl G. Maeser, said, "As nothing can grow without sunlight, so nothing can prosper in school . . . without love."<sup>12</sup> And Elder Dallin H. Oaks, the eighth BYU president and current Apostle, has said, "Those who teach out of love will be magnified as instruments in the hands of Him whom they serve. . . . [A teacher's] total concentration [should] be on the needs of the sheep—the good of the students. A gospel teacher does not focus on himself or herself."<sup>13</sup>

This need not be a complicated thing. Simply striving to learn the names of students and then calling them by name breathes life into both them and the class. Asking about their lives, trying to note when they are absent, commenting on their efforts, acknowledging them outside of class, and a host of other sincere gestures show that we truly care about them as individuals. The less distance students feel between themselves and the teacher, the more likely both will be taught and inspired by each other. The more authentic care and interest students feel from a teacher, the less likely they are to skip class or tune out.

Even teachers that may not be the most dynamic in the classroom can change the culture and spirit of a classroom by simply and sincerely loving and caring about each student.

### **Be Patient with Yourself and Take Advantage of Opportunities to Improve**

Faithful teachers understand that not every class will be a home run and that not each term will be a spiritual feast. But the Lord will bless us for our efforts,

not for the outcome. If our efforts have been sincere and earnest, if we have given our best to the students, and our teaching evaluations are not stunning and our classroom environment not electric, then we can have peace in the knowledge that our efforts are accepted of the Lord. If we are patient and perseverant, if we take advantage of opportunities to improve our teaching and continue to work at it, the Lord will magnify our efforts and seal our teaching with the Spirit.

All we can do is our sincere and earnest best. We're not competing with any other teacher—we're simply trying to improve and learn and do our personal best.

One Religious Education professor said this:

I'm sure my teacher evaluations are not the highest in the building. I may not be the most popular teacher. But I can honestly say that I really try to give each class my best effort. I try not to compare myself with other teachers who are smarter or more entertaining, but I do my best. I really feel that teaching is not a competition. I'm only trying to compete with myself and make each class excellent. After a good class, I thank the Lord, and after an average class, I don't give up but try harder next time.<sup>14</sup>

One of the best things about teaching is that it's full of new beginnings. Each day, each class, each term, gives us a renewed opportunity to change ourselves and the students a bit, to challenge ourselves and the students a little, and to take care of the students and ourselves.

How many other professions have so many built-in evaluation points? Not only do we receive feedback through student evaluation forms and occasional peer reviews, but we can also sense, if we are discerning, whether we've hit the mark at the end of each class. And if we haven't, then the next class or the next term or the next year is another chance.

Sometimes it may be tempting, out of frustration or weariness or pride, to dismiss negative evaluations or blame students for ineffective lessons. But even if we're right and they're wrong, if we insist on continuing to do things the way we always have, then we're doing a disservice both to our students and to ourselves. We need not view a less-than-stellar lesson or class as a failure—it's just a step in the journey of continuous improvement. We can read books about teaching, take time to observe the classes of other teachers, attend teacher-training workshops and conferences, and take advantage of other learning opportunities.

Religious educators have the blessing and privilege to know that principles of the gospel can be lived each day inside and outside the classroom:

faith and hope, perseverance and patience, charity and compassion. It is about so much more than one day, one class, one term, one school year. The kind of teaching excellence we aim for is not a one-time “performance” that we get through, but a lifetime of learning, sharing, and growing in the gospel. We teach and we live in the classroom of life, and so we must be patient and understanding with others and with ourselves.

## Conclusion

Breathing life into a dead class is a challenge for even the best teachers. And all teachers, from time to time, have a class that is less than lively and spirited. We have a greater opportunity to bring life to such a class if we enter the classroom spiritually and mentally prepared, if we stay current with our teaching subject, if we strive to make application to students’ lives, if we love and care about each one of our students, and if we unwearingly strive to become the kind of teacher our students need us to be. **RE**

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## Notes

1. Paraphrase of a conversation with the author.
2. Neal A. Maxwell, “Teaching by the Spirit—“The Language of Inspiration,”” in *Old Testament Symposium Speeches*, August 15, 1991, 3.
3. Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 57.
4. David McCullough, keynote speech at Dartmouth Commencement 2003, Hanover, NH, Dartmouth College, June 8, 2003.
5. See *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., “enthusiasm.”
6. See Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 9:25; D&C 88:33.
7. *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.
8. The students who are quoted in this paper come from my BYU religion classes during two semesters, fall 2010 and winter 2011, where students were asked to make thoughtful comments about their religion professors at BYU, without divulging names—either theirs or the professors. Comments are in the author’s possession.
9. Paraphrase of a conversation with the author.
10. See Ezra Taft Benson, “Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophet” (devotional address, Provo, UT, Brigham Young University, February 26, 1980).
11. Gilbert Highet, *The Art of Teaching* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), 26–27.
12. Karl G. Maeser, *School and Fireside* (Provo, UT: Skelton, 1898), 85, as quoted in *Inspire*, Fall 2008, 12.
13. Dallin H. Oaks, “Gospel Teaching,” *Ensign*, November 1999, 79.
14. Paraphrase of a conversation with the author.