



The aim of a teacher is to inspire the individual and help students act as a result of what they learn in the classroom.

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## Helping Students Act as a Result of Classroom Lessons

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President Thomas S. Monson taught, “The goal of gospel teaching . . . is not to ‘pour information’ into the minds of class members. . . . The aim is to inspire the individual to think about, feel about, and then do something about living gospel principles.”<sup>1</sup> In this same talk he emphasized the importance of taking action as it relates to learning, saying, “I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I learn.”<sup>2</sup> Thus a key responsibility in the role of a religious educator is to help students *do* things as a result of what they learn in the classroom. President Howard W. Hunter explained one of the reasons why this is so: “Action is one of the chief foundations of personal testimony. The surest witness is that which comes firsthand out of personal experience [see John 7:16–17]. . . . This, then, is the finest source of personal testimony. One knows because he has experienced.”<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, in a roundtable discussion sponsored by Seminaries and Institutes, Elder Kim B. Clark said:

How do you create an environment where students can exercise agency and act in order to authorize the Holy Ghost to teach them? That means that for teachers—as they think about the question “How can I help the students have the Holy Ghost

more powerfully in their lives?”—it becomes a question of “Well, how can I create an environment or experiences where they can exercise their agency?”

One of the things that I think is so powerful, and we see it in the way missionaries are taught to teach, is teachers inviting students to make a commitment, to take some kind of purposeful action. It happens even when you’re teaching calculus—really anything—when you invite the student to make a commitment, to act in a certain way, or to undertake a certain set of activities by committing to do it. In that action the students then open their minds both to the Spirit and to the experiences that they are about to have. That’s how they learn. . . .

I think when we give the students the opportunity to exercise their agency, it sort of opens them to change in their hearts and in their minds. It’s an amazing thing to watch because you can really see the work of the Lord going on in that person.<sup>4</sup>

While serving as president of Ricks college, David A. Bednar gave a devotional address in which he focused on two lines of scripture that emphasize the importance of taking action as a result of learning. The first phrase was, “Act in doctrine” (D&C 101:78). After quoting this verse in the Doctrine and Covenants, President Bednar said, “Would you not normally think doctrine is something you study, something you learn, something you remember? It is interesting that the Lord in this revelation says doctrine is something you and I should *act in*. Ultimately, the Lord is interested not just in knowledge, but in spiritual intelligence—in applying what we know for righteous purposes.”<sup>5</sup>

The second line he focused on came from John 3:21: “He that doeth truth cometh to the light.” Speaking of this verse, President Bednar said, “Would you normally think of truth as something you do? The message from the Lord in this revelation is that truth is something we should *do*. Doctrine and principle are things we should *act in*. . . . You will find throughout the scriptures a pattern of knowledge being related to performing and doing and applying what we know for righteous purposes.”<sup>6</sup> Taking these foregoing quotes into account, it is clear that taking action should be a key outcome of students’ participation in religious instruction.

### General Principles for Helping Students Act

Sunday School general president Russell T. Osguthorpe said, “Elder David A. Bednar shared these three simple elements of effective teaching in a recent training meeting: (1) key doctrine, (2) invitation to action, and (3) promised blessings.”<sup>7</sup> The importance of the first point, teaching key doctrine, has been frequently emphasized.<sup>8</sup> It is clear that without an understanding of key doctrine, students will be much less likely to act. The next two elements

of effective teaching, invitation to act and promised blessings, are explicitly related to helping students act.

*Invitations to act.* The book *Preach My Gospel* states, “Rarely, if ever, should you talk to people or teach them without extending an invitation to do something that will strengthen their faith in Christ. . . . People will not likely change unless they are invited to do so.”<sup>9</sup> Brother Osguthorpe emphasized this importance of making frequent invitations, saying, “My question to each of us today is this: Is there anyone here who is receiving too many inspired invitations, invitations that help us improve? Is anyone’s e-mail inbox overflowing with inspiring invitations? Is anyone’s phone overloaded with text messages that invite us to come unto Christ? I don’t think so. . . . We can all invite others to do what they really want to do but can’t do without our help. And really, it’s not that they can’t do it—sometimes they just need to be invited.”<sup>10</sup>

An important part of inviting students to act is following up on their commitments to act. *Preach My Gospel* states, “Extending an invitation without following up is like beginning a journey without finishing it or buying a ticket to a concert without going into the theater. Without the completed action, the commitment is hollow.”<sup>11</sup>

*Promised blessings.* The third principle stated by Elder Bednar, “promised blessings,” is perhaps the least discussed of the three elements of effective teaching. When ancient and modern prophets teach, they often promise blessings.<sup>12</sup> *Preach My Gospel* states, “People need a reason to change their thoughts and actions. Promised blessings often provide powerful motivation to obey God. . . . As you testify of a commandment, talk about the blessings you have received from living that commandment. Promise those whom you teach that they can enjoy similar blessings.”<sup>13</sup>

### Helping Students to Act

Religious educators can, in a variety of ways, help students to act. Some find that assigning grades can be a helpful motivation. We, as seminary teachers, would like to share an approach we have tried.

Over the course of a semester we increased our focus on helping students act as a result of what they learned in class. We do not claim to have uncovered the most effective approach, and we do not suggest that others copy what we did. Our purpose in chronicling our efforts is simply to share our attempt to help students act, and more importantly, to let students share the impact

it had on them. We hope that other religious educators will be able to use the principles that we discuss to develop their own ways of helping students act. Although our approach took place in a seminary classroom, we believe that religious educators in all settings will be able to adapt the ideas to the settings in which they teach.

We teach released-time seminary on a block (A-B) schedule. This means that we see our students two or three times each week. Together we teach eight classes. Our approach has been as follows:

When planning a lesson we would focus on the question, “What do we want our students to *do* as a result of the things they learn in this class?” Sometimes there would be one clear application; on other days there would be multiple. We called them “challenges” and would issue them at the end of every class.<sup>14</sup> We would often extend one specific invitation (e.g., “Find a way in the next forty-eight hours to stand as a witness of Christ”) but also give students the option to choose their own challenge instead. We made sure that the last two minutes of class were reserved for making a clear invitation. Students were invited to write down this invitation or program it into their cell phones. At the beginning of the following class, students were given a 3 × 5 card and had the opportunity to report on their challenge. Typically they put their names on the 3 × 5 card, although they were told that if what they had done was personal, they could make their response anonymous or simply tell us it was personal. We found that rarely was the response so personal that the student chose to keep it anonymous. After students had reported in writing, they were given the opportunity to verbally report on their challenge by sharing with the class what they did and how they felt about it. This was an attempt to emphasize the promised blessings by having students hear from their peers how keeping commitments was helping them in their lives. Typically between one and five students would share their experience in applying the principle that had been taught in the previous class, and the whole process (including writing on the cards) usually took no more than five minutes of class time.

Table 1 illustrates statements about inviting, following up, and issuing promised blessings from *Preach My Gospel* and how we attempted to apply them in our classrooms.

**Table 1: Applications of Statements from *Preach My Gospel***

Statement from <i>Preach My Gospel</i> , 200	Our Application
“Have them write their commitment on something you leave with them, such as a pamphlet or a card with your names and phone number.”	We gave students a sticky note or invited them to tear out a piece of paper from their notebook to remind themselves. Having them write a note in their day planner or program the invitation into their cell phone was particularly effective. Students were also given a wristband that said “I will go and do” to help them remember to act.
“Make sure people know that you will make brief, daily visits between teaching appointments. Explain that your purpose is to support and help them. Give them an idea of what you will do during those visits.”	We explained to students that these invitations to act would be a regular part of the beginning and end of each class. On multiple occasions we shared prophetic quotes regarding the importance of <i>acting</i> as a result of what they learned in class.
“Make specific notes in the Notes/To-do list section of your planner to follow up tomorrow on every commitment invitation you have extended today.”	We made a note in our lesson plan or put a PowerPoint slide into a presentation that would remind us to follow up on the invitation from the previous class.
“Help investigators identify the blessings they have received as they have kept their commitments. Especially help them describe their feelings as the Spirit has testified of the truthfulness of the message.”	We gave students opportunities to both write down and vocally share what they experienced when they acted on the invitations. We often asked follow-up questions such as, “How did you feel when you were kind to your little brother?”
“Compliment and encourage people who are succeeding in keeping commitments. . . . Sincerely and frequently praise them.”	Students were complimented when they shared with the class. Additionally, we would sometimes pull students aside and compliment them on what they had written down on their 3 × 5 card or write them a brief note of encouragement
“Express concern and disappointment when people fail to keep their commitments and thus fail to experience the blessings.”	When students consistently failed to act, we talked to them privately or wrote them a note to encourage them to act on what they were learning in class.

## Results

We used two ways to measure how this practice of invitation and follow-up influenced students’ actions. First, we administered a survey (see appendix)

to students at the end of the semester; and second, we kept track of student responses to the invitations to act.

In total, 203 students took the survey we administered. Eighty-six percent of these students said that receiving and reporting on these invitations helped them act on what they learned more than they normally would have. One student wrote, “I would have just gone on with my day and forgotten about seminary without the challenges. I even did that with challenges, but more often I was able to remember lessons because of challenges.” Another student wrote, “Having a challenge makes me think about the lessons more often!”

Of the students surveyed, 88 percent said that receiving a specific invitation at the end of class was either “very helpful” or “somewhat helpful” in helping them act on what they had learned during class. Eighty-four percent said that reporting in writing in the next class was either “very helpful” or “somewhat helpful.” Ninety-six percent of the students said that listening to other students say what they had done to fulfill the invitation to act was either “very helpful” or “somewhat helpful” in helping them act. A complete copy of the survey can be found in the appendix of this article.

In addition to the survey, we saved the 3 × 5 cards on which students responded to the challenges. This was both to keep track of how many students acted on the invitations and to collect qualitative data to see the students describe their experiences with acting on principles discussed in class. The number of students who successfully completed challenges varied from class to class and also from invitation to invitation. For example, in one class only 11 percent of students took the invitation to visit the general conference website (<http://lds.org/generalconference>) to reread a conference talk. In this same class 88 percent of students completed the invitation to “do something this Christmas season that would more fully invite the Spirit of Christ into your life.” Apparently some challenges were easier to complete than others.

One class focused on the importance of righteous traditions. Students were invited to start or strengthen a good new tradition or stop a bad tradition. This invitation was given just before a weekend so students had multiple days to act on it. What follows are responses from several members of one class. All comments are transcribed here as written down on the students’ 3 × 5 cards, with the exception of minor correction of spelling or grammatical errors and changing of students’ names.

- I’ve never really started the tradition of reading the scriptures every day. But now that I have, I hope to continue it for the rest of my life. Although I’m not perfect and have missed a few days, I am back on track again. It’s become a great tradition.
- I used to fall asleep in seminary all the time because I felt that I could because not listening would not affect my GPA. I am stopping this altogether and will not sleep in class.
- I started a good tradition because of Maria. I began to pray on my knees and *only* on my knees. I had a bad tradition of kneeling by my bedside and flopping half of my body onto the bed and would end up falling asleep. I now only kneel, and it helps my prayers out a lot. One tradition I want to pick up on is one Chelsea does: every Sunday she writes letters to people. [It is interesting to note that when the author of this statement references Maria and Chelsea, he is referring to things they verbally shared with the class regarding previous challenges.]
- I had a tradition of skipping Sunday School. I went, and I am not sure of what is to come because of that, but I am glad I went.
- I always did my homework on Sunday, and that was something I wanted to stop. So this week I did all my homework Saturday, and Sunday was so peaceful.
- I put a set of scriptures next to my bed to make sure I wouldn’t forget to read them.
- I’ve started going to church (or at least trying to) thirty minutes early. And last Sunday I was there forty-five minutes early.
- I started reading my scriptures at night because I have no time to in the morning. I am also starting to say my personal prayers. It has made me feel whole. I love that feeling.
- I decided to start a tradition to serve someone every day. Yesterday I gave someone a ride home. Although holding doors is great, I want to try and do things that will significantly bless the lives of the people I serve.
- My bad tradition was not always helping my family and saying my things were more important. But I put others before myself this week, and I realized that’s what I should be doing.

Of course, not all responses were helpful or successful. For example, a student wrote:

- I totally forgot. I've been so busy with relatives coming over and stuff. I guess my bad tradition is not fully doing the challenges.

Some invitations to act occurred multiple times throughout the semester. For example, one theme we looked for was how prophets in the Book of Mormon pray. At various times we found principles such as praying for others, including enemies (see 1 Nephi 1:5; 2 Nephi 33:3; Enos 1:11), praying with *all* your heart (see 1 Nephi 1:5; Enos 1:2), kneeling to pray (see Enos 1:4), and praying in a special place (see 1 Nephi 17:7; 18:3; Enos 1:3). The following are responses that came from students in different classes as they responded to invitations (given at various times) to “pray like a Book of Mormon prophet.”

- My challenge was to make all my prayers “mighty prayers.” I never realized how I just recite my prayers instead of really thinking about what I’m saying. I feel like this really helped.
- I tried to follow the example of Enos to pray for myself, friends, and enemies. It made it easier to focus on what I was saying.
- I prayed in my backyard, in a special place. It was *way* cool. There were no distractions and it was very fulfilling.
- I prayed for the first time in two weeks, and I prayed on my knees instead of in my bed.
- I prayed last night with my family, and I said the prayer. I prayed about things I’ve never prayed about before, and when I finished I felt very humble.
- I did pray like a prophet, and it was like I was talking to God on the phone, as in I could feel it stronger. And I knew he was listening.
- I’ve been praying on my knees lately. I used to just turn over in bed but not anymore. I’ve also been praying more for the kid that stole my iPod.
- I prayed for the person that cut me off in traffic—and for the two people I accidentally cut off. It helped me to not get angry.
- A lady at my ward lost her keys. I helped her but we couldn’t find her keys. Then she went back to her car. While she was walking, I knelt in a room and prayed for her to find her keys. Then I walked outside to

- see what had happened. She found her keys. So because of my prayer for her, she found her keys.
- I have been kneeling for the first time, and my prayers have been a ton better.
- I took the challenge to pray vocally. I found that I stayed focused more, and I could feel the Holy Ghost.
- I prayed like a prophet. I went to the Jordan River Utah Temple and prayed and listened!

### Benefits Seen

We noticed several benefits from our focus on inviting students to act. Significantly, it appears that this approach helped students act and consequently helped principles taught in class sink deeper into their hearts. We believe that hearing students talk about how fulfilling an invitation to act had blessed their lives encourages other students to act. In addition, reading the students’ responses from the challenge helped us get to know each student more personally and also alerted us to students who needed extra attention.

One difficulty associated with the system we implemented was that it took planning to make sure we had a specific invitation for the students and followed up with them. But the reality is that it did not take too much time, and we felt that issuing and following up on invitations to act was helping us with a core purpose of gospel teaching—“to inspire the individual to think about, feel about, and then do something about living gospel principles.”<sup>15</sup>

Another difficulty with the approach we took was that it was sometimes hard to tell if students had done something as a result of the invitation or if they were writing down things they would have done anyway. For example, if there had been an invitation to serve others, when students came to class the next day and wrote down, “I set the table for my sister,” it would be hard to tell if they consciously did that as a result of the seminary challenge. Ultimately we determined that it was not bad for students to fulfill the challenge unconsciously, and that having the time to write about it the next day could solidify in their minds the blessings that came as a result of that action.

We found that the consistency of issuing and reporting on invitations to act helped the students fulfill them. At first, many students forgot; however, as they began to sense that it was an ongoing part of class, more students remembered. We also believe that having students write their names on the

3 × 5 card increased the accountability students felt. There are many ways our approach could be improved. For example, we could have involved parents by letting them know about the invitations we were giving. Another approach we did not try that might have been effective was having students send each other text messages as reminders to accomplish the challenges.

### Conclusion

One of the most important things religious educators can do is invite students to act on the doctrines and principles presented in class. Elder David A. Bednar discussed the importance of helping people act in terms of parent-child relationships. Consider how the following quotation could be applied to the teacher-student relationship:

We put way too much importance on what we say. We think that by telling people things that somehow that will connect and get inside. My observation is that the role of a parent [teacher] includes talking and telling, but it extends beyond that to inviting a child [student] to act in accordance with truth. And only when the child [student] acts in accordance with the truth that has been explained or taught can the child [student] come to know for himself or herself the truthfulness of what they have heard and what they are doing. . . . It's only when in that process of communicating, loving, and working with a child [student] you help them act in accordance with truth that they get it for themselves. It moves from their head to their heart.<sup>16</sup>

We hope our attempts to invite students to act can assist other teachers in helping their students act as a result of doctrines and principles taught in class. We believe that as principles of invitations and promised blessings are implemented, more students will act as a result of what they learn in class—and this action will help the gospel penetrate their hearts and lead them to increased conversion. **RE**

### Appendix: Survey

What follows is the survey administered to the students as well as the quantitative results. The qualitative responses are not included due to space requirements; however, they can be obtained by contacting the authors of this paper.

#### Survey about “The Challenges”

This semester we have focused on the importance of taking action as a result of what we learn in class. We want to know if the things we have done have been helpful to you. Please honestly answer the following questions:

1. How helpful were each of the following activities for you in terms of helping you *to act* on what we learned in class?
  - a. Receiving a specific challenge at the end of class of something you could do.
    - i. Very helpful . . . . .42%
    - ii. Somewhat helpful . . . . .46%
    - iii. Not very helpful . . . . .10%
    - iv. Not helpful . . . . .1%
    - v. No answer . . . . .1%
  - b. Having the opportunity to give yourself your own “personal challenge.”
    - i. Very helpful . . . . .41%
    - ii. Somewhat helpful . . . . .44%
    - iii. Not very helpful . . . . .7%
    - iv. Not helpful . . . . .2%
    - v. Did not give myself personal challenges. . . . .5%
    - vi. No answer . . . . .1%
  - c. Writing down the challenge on a piece of paper or typing it into your cell phone to help you remember it.
    - i. Very helpful . . . . .46%
    - ii. Somewhat helpful . . . . .33%
    - iii. Not very helpful . . . . .12%
    - iv. Not helpful . . . . .3%
    - v. Did not write challenges to remind myself. . . . .6%
    - vi. No answer . . . . .1%
  - d. Reporting in writing on a 3 × 5 card during the next class.
    - i. Very helpful . . . . .42%
    - ii. Somewhat helpful . . . . .42%
    - iii. Not very helpful . . . . .12%
    - iv. Not helpful . . . . .3%

- e. Making comments in class about what you had done with the challenge.
  - i. Very helpful .....48%
  - ii. Somewhat helpful .....32%
  - iii. Not very helpful .....9%
  - iv. Not helpful .....2%
  - v. Did not make comments about what I did ....9%
- f. Listening to what other students have done with the challenge.
  - i. Very helpful .....67%
  - ii. Somewhat helpful .....29%
  - iii. Not very helpful .....3%
  - iv. Not helpful .....1%
- 2. Do you think that the process of receiving and reporting on challenges helped you to act on what we were learning more than you normally would have?
  - a. Yes .....86%
  - b. No .....11%

Note: 1.5% wrote in “maybe,” and 1.5% gave no answer.
- 3. Was there one challenge that was most meaningful for you? If so, what was it and why was it so meaningful?
- 4. How could we improve the process of giving and reporting on challenges so that you would be more likely to act as a result of what we discuss in seminary?

Notes

1. Thomas S. Monson, in Conference Report, October 1970, 107.
2. Monson, in Conference Report, October 1970, 108.
3. Howard W. Hunter, in Conference Report, April 1967, 115–16.
4. Kim B. Clark, Seminaries and Institutes of Religion Satellite Broadcast, August 2009, 2.
5. David A. Bednar, “Gain Spiritual Intelligence,” devotional address given at Ricks College, September 9, 1997; emphasis in original.
6. Bednar, “Gain Spiritual Intelligence”; emphasis in original.
7. Russell T. Osguthorpe, “Teaching Helps Save Lives,” *Ensign*, November 2009, 15.
8. For example, President Boyd K. Packer has taught, “True doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior. The study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior.” “Little Children,” *Ensign*, November 1986, 17.
17. Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote, “Since it is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance of God and his laws, and since man is saved no faster than he gains knowledge of Jesus Christ

- and the plan of salvation, it follows that men are obligated at their peril to learn and apply true doctrines of the gospel.” *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 5. See also Alma 3:5.
9. *Preach My Gospel* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 196.
  10. Russell T. Osguthorpe, “The Invitational Call of the Father and the Son,” devotional address given at BYU—Idaho, May 12, 2009.
  11. *Preach My Gospel*, 200.
  12. For example, Alma gave both instruction and promised blessings when he taught, “Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings, and he will direct thee for good; yea, when thou liest down at night lie down unto the Lord, that he may watch over you in your sleep; and when thou risest in the morning let thy heart be full of thanks unto God; and if ye do these things, ye shall be lifted up at the last day” (Alma 37:37). In general conference, Elder Neil L. Andersen said, “For those who are truly repentant but seem unable to feel relief: continue keeping the commandments. I promise you, relief will come in the timetable of the Lord. Healing also requires time.” “Repent . . . That I May Heal You,” *Ensign*, November 2009, 40.
  13. *Preach My Gospel*, 197–98.
  14. Although in this semester we called them “challenges,” they might more appropriately be termed “invitations to act.”
  15. Thomas S. Monson, in Conference Report, October 1970, 107.
  16. David A. Bednar and Susan Bednar, *Conversations*, “Episode 1” (mp3 audio file), [radio.lds.org/eng/programs/conversations](http://radio.lds.org/eng/programs/conversations).