



As part of an active learning experience, student Natalie Manwaring creates an audio version of an article for the Religious Studies Center Web site.

# On Getting Engaged

*Kathy Kipp Clayton*

*Kathy Kipp Clayton is a member of the Religious Studies Center advisory board.*

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I did not grow up with the gospel in my home, but because of a teacher I had as a young woman, I gained a personal testimony of the reality of my Savior's love. My teacher did not live within my ward boundaries, nor did I ever attend her formal classes, but I claim her nonetheless. My teacher was a regular on the Church-speaking circuit, and she invited me to be her visual aid. After she had offered extensive, important instruction to her congregation, she invited me to sing "I Know That My Redeemer Lives" as an illustration of the principles she had taught. I was flattered to be invited, and I sang with my whole heart to please and honor my mentor, but something else happened in the process. As I sang those lyrics, I knew. I knew what I was singing was true. I knew He really did live and love me "to the end." I knew that He really was "my kind, wise heav'nly Friend."<sup>1</sup> I knew. As I committed my voice to that task and offered the best of my young talent, heaven burned into my soul the reality of the things about which I was singing.

At new student orientation at BYU that year, an energetic presenter began by telling the freshmen that there were many myths at BYU. She assured them that some of them are true, including that students get engaged a lot. "In fact," she continued, "I have been engaged several times. I make it a goal to get engaged at least five times per semester." The new freshmen were wide eyed and giggling. She continued, "I suggest that you call your parents at the end of the semester, even at the end of this class, to tell them that you got

engaged.” Marriage was not the topic. Engagement in learning was. My serving as a visual aid was not critical to the success of my teacher’s presentation, but being engaged in learning was critical to achieving a changed heart.

The goal of authentic student engagement might be illustrated by a lesson about an apple. A teacher who wanted her students to learn about an apple could simply stand before them and offer a well-researched, carefully prepared presentation documenting the characteristics of an apple. Likely, her students would leave the lesson with more information than they had arrived with. She could also show a picture of an apple. Those students would certainly know more still for having engaged themselves visually with the subject. The teacher might increase the breadth of the sensory connection by actually taking an apple to class for the students to see, feel, smell, and touch. But best of all, the teacher who expects to make a lasting impression on her students could take an apple to class—maybe several different types of apples—and offer tastes of them all. Those fully engaged students would leave the classroom knowing the subject personally because they had been invited to make it their own.

Psychological research demonstrates that people are more likely to “behave” their way into thinking than they are to “think” their way into behaving. Put simply, if we smile, we will actually be happier; if we whistle a happy tune, we will be less afraid; and if we count our blessings, we will feel greater gratitude. Or, as the Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “Faith is a principle of action.”<sup>2</sup> We receive a testimony of truth and grow in faith as we live the gospel. Learning and becoming happen best by doing because “if any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine” (John 7:17). I sang “I Know That My Redeemer Lives,” and as I sang those lyrics their truthfulness became my personal testimony. The message became my own as I did something with it. The doing afforded the Spirit the occasion to seal it upon my heart and promoted my knowing and remembering.

One thoughtful teacher who encouraged student engagement understood the difference between the impact of passive and active classroom environments. She planned her classrooms to be student workshops more than teacher presentations. To acquaint her eleven-year-old students with the priesthood, rather than lecturing those potentially restless young men on the duties and importance of the ordination they were about to receive, she escorted them to the empty baptismal font and invited them to step into that promising place and read the scriptures containing the baptismal covenant.

Together they recalled the details of their own baptisms. From there, the engaged group went to the sacrament table, where they read and discussed the scriptures relevant to the sacrament, including the sacrament prayers. They paraded to the bishop's office, where they each obtained a donation slip and proceeded to fill it out. They discussed together the importance of those donations and how they are used to help the needy. They concluded the activity with two missionaries sharing stories of spiritual experiences from their service. The eleven-year-olds were allowed to ask questions as well as handle the elders' daily planners, *Preach My Gospel* manuals, and name tags. By the end of the participatory lesson, those young men understood the priesthood more deeply and personally because they had been engaged in places and practices relative to the priesthood in an active, multisensory way.

Interactive games can be satisfying, effective ways to engage students in learning. The age-old Cub Scout acronym, KISMIF (Keep It Simple, Make It Fun), remains a valuable guideline. *The Big Book of Team Building Games* by John Newstrom and Edward Scannell thoughtfully suggests that classroom games are useful to make a clear, memorable point; build class morale; encourage trust among class members as they share insights and develop common solutions; promote flexibility among class members; and reinforce appropriate behaviors such as cooperation, listening, and creativity. Games are also inexpensive, participative, and low risk. One teacher found that a game of "Getting to Know You Bingo" on one of the first days of early-morning seminary in a class that included students from five different high schools established common ground and built bridges between students who lacked immediate connection. A connection was made between two students who were both scuba certified—one student was a young woman from the high school located just through the parking lot. The other was a hearing-impaired young man from a magnet school several blocks away. They were both made aware of something they had in common rather than believing they were very different.

At a stake girls' camp, young women from five wards were bound together in playful cooperation as they worked together to untie the human knot they had made by joining hands in a tangled fashion across a circle. They talked and strategized, then ducked under, climbed over, and twisted around in a low-risk effort to create an untangled circle. In the process, they learned important but gentle lessons about cooperation, communication, trial and error, and sticking to a task. They also gained an appreciation for the

varied talents and insights of girls with whom they had not previously been acquainted. That simple, no-cost game provided a quick, playful, interactive way to encourage relationships among those girls without sitting them down for a heavy-handed lecture on the subject.

Although games have broad and compelling usefulness, several potential danger zones are important to remember. Be well prepared with all requisite props, manage time carefully, choose games that forward and fortify learning without becoming an end unto themselves, and avoid simplistic images that can be distracting, especially from sacred themes. For example, occasionally leaders invite young people to prepare extemporaneous skits using gospel themes. When the youth respond with silly presentations about sacred subjects like morality or prayer, the skits can quickly become irreverent.

Engaged learning adapts well to students' short attention span. One very able but very frustrated new Sunday School teacher returned from his first Sunday in a new class of lively adolescents ready to make an appointment with the bishop to request his release. In spite of the teacher's extensive preparation, those spirited young people had checked out barely moments into the teacher's presentation. Eager to redeem himself, that faithful teacher returned the next week with a fresh pacing strategy. He prepared his lessons in ten-minute segments titled "Into, Through, and Beyond." The "Into" section consisted of an attention-getting activity that might be as simple as a drawing, an object, a thought-provoking question, or a quick quiz. The "Through" section moved the students from that initial attention-getting activity to the concepts he sought to teach. That section might include carefully selected scripture reading, storytelling, or a comprehensible presentation of a doctrinal point. The final "Beyond" section included the all-important answer to the age-old question of teenagers, "So what?" During that segment, the teacher helped the students apply the principle to their own lives. Sometimes he began that important process by sharing a story from his personal life. Occasionally he tossed a beanbag and asked, "So what?" to the student who caught it. Always he asked carefully prepared, nonthreatening, open-ended questions to encourage thought and personal application. In the course of a thirty-minute lesson, the teacher generally moved through the cycle of "Into, Through, and Beyond" three times.

An engaged community of learners includes celebration—celebration of each other, celebration of the subject matter, and celebration of learning itself. Unfortunately, we often segregate work and play as if they were mutually

exclusive, when, in reality, engaging work in the form of learning is among the most satisfying forms of play. In his book *Happier*, Tal Ben-Shahar suggests that a skillful teacher can “create environments at home and school that are conducive to the experience of present and future benefit, pleasure and meaning.”<sup>3</sup> Especially as we engage in earnest study of the gospel, the essence of which is aptly called, the “plan of happiness,” our students should find happiness, satisfaction, and even fun.

One bright and fun-loving early-morning seminary teacher organized an annual “Granny Awards” every spring, correspondent to the “Grammy Awards.” For several months before the celebration, she served her family pancakes and waffles daily, smothered with Mrs. Butterworth’s syrup, then saved the empty granny-shaped bottles to paint gold and use as clever awards at her seminary celebration. Students nominated characters from the volume of scripture they had been studying that year, then presented to the class their reasons why that scriptural character deserved to be awarded the “Granny” for “Best Leading Lady/Man,” or “Best Supporting Lady/Man,” or which scriptural story deserved the prize for “Best Overall” or “Best Story.” The class voted to identify the winners, after which the student who had made the nomination accepted the golden syrup bottle. The annual celebration served as a review, involved restless students, and promoted a community of learning.

Active learning also addresses the needs of students with various learning styles. As a hopeless left-brainer, a classic linear thinker, I like lectures and find pleasure in worksheets. School in its traditional, rote rigidity is a perfect fit for me. Desks in neat rows and binders with exacting subject divisions please me. Increasingly, however, our classrooms are filled with students who learn differently. Efforts to engage students with creative and diverse strategies are essential for the nonlinear learners and refreshing for all the rest.

One Jewish convert to the Church delighted his students by providing them with an authentic Passover feast to familiarize them with the symbols of that event. Those students had a multisensory experience with bitter herbs that enabled them to understand and literally taste something of bitterness.

Another teacher appealed to the learning style of her class by creating simple rhymes and musical phrases for each of the scripture mastery verses. Those students will forever know where to find the story of Joseph fleeing from temptation. Who could forget “Genesis 39, Potiphar’s wife’s dirty mind”?

Students who are especially physical learners came to life in a seminary class when their teacher invited them to come to the whiteboard in groups of six until all had had a turn. After having read a scriptural passage, they were asked to write a single word or phrase in response to a question, such as “What quality do you admire about the character?” or “What is an important theme of that passage?” or “What do you appreciate about your dad/mom/bishop?” When the entire board was filled, the class read and discussed the results of their combined effort.

An unforgettable Sunday School teacher extended himself beyond the normal bounds of a formal presentation with imaginative, unpredictable “Into” activities. To familiarize the class with the elements of Daniel’s dream, he brought into the Relief Society room a giant Michelin Man with all the bulgy body parts labeled to represent the various kingdoms that would be destroyed by the stone cut out of the mountain without hands. On another Sunday, class began when a noisy kazoo player began to march down the aisle blaring a raucous tune on his annoying instrument. The teacher engaged the musician in an interview to learn that he was off to pay his tithing and wanted to be sure he received appropriate credit for his good works. After that engaging “Into” activity, the class turned to Matthew for the “Through” part, a discussion of doing alms to be seen of men.

Csikszentmihalyi, in his book, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement With Everyday Life*, writes: “Neither parents nor schools are very effective at teaching the young to find pleasure in the right things. Adults, themselves often deluded by infatuation with fatuous models, conspire in the deception. They make serious tasks seem dull and hard, and frivolous ones exciting and easy. Schools generally fail to teach how exciting, how mesmerizingly beautiful science or mathematics can be; they teach the routine of literature or history rather than the adventure.”<sup>4</sup>

How much more “mesmerizingly beautiful” is the gospel than even the best of science or mathematics! With creative engagement, students can taste the delicious fruits of active learning—sometimes even literally. Faith is a principle of action. As teachers facilitate classrooms that promote authentic, active student engagement, students will find learning as delicious as a ripe apple, as memorable as a favorite song, and as personal as a visit to the baptismal font. They will “behave” their way into “knowing” and get happily engaged again and again.

**Notes**

1. "I Know That My Redeemer Lives," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 136.
2. Joseph Smith, *Lectures on Faith: Delivered to the School of the Prophets in Kirtland, Ohio, 1834–35* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 1:9.
3. Tal Ben-Shahar, *Happier* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 86.
4. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, quoted in Ben-Shahar, *Happier*, 94.