

Rick Becker-Leckrone, *Girl Holding Bible*, 123RF.

Religious Literacies as Social Practice: A Latter-day Saint Perspective

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Although we are learning more about how young people make sense of religious truths,¹ there is a conspicuous dearth of research examining the meaning-making practices of Latter-day Saint youth. As a result, it is unclear, for example, how Latter-day Saint youth read scripture. What’s working for them? What’s not? How do we know? “Faith without understanding” may be the sardonic standard for religious literacy in the United States,² but I am confident that in the Church we can do better. We can help youth develop faith *and* understanding. Without a clearly articulated conception of religious literacy, however, the Church may be unintentionally leaving religious educators without a clear framework to guide youths’ construction of gospel knowledge and the development of their faith. In this article I offer a socio-cultural model of religious literacies that addresses the following questions:

1. What can religious literacies look like within a Latter-day Saint context?
2. How can religious literacies influence teaching and learning in the Church?

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These questions focus on the ways in which youth make sense of the sacred, which is the heart and soul of religious traditions and training.³ A clearer conception of what counts as meaning-making within a Latter-day Saint context could lead to more robust explorations of Latter-day Saint youths' literacy practices, which could inform religious educators' work with youth and youths' experiences with sacred texts. Failure to understand the place of religious literacies in youths' lives and religious learning and instruction may lead to uninformed instructional practices that may hinder youths' development of gospel knowledge and faith.

As a religious literacies framework, this model invites Latter-day Saint religious educators to examine the socially situated nature of key elements of gospel learning and instruction:

- Whom do we teach?
- What do we teach?
- How do we teach?
- Where do we teach?
- By what power do we teach?

How we think about and address these questions influences what it means to develop religious literacies, or socially situated understanding of the sacred. In what follows, I provide a brief overview of sociocultural literacy theory to set the stage for the development of a conception of religious literacies as social practice. I then present a model of religious literacy instruction by detailing the representation of its key components in a Latter-day Saint context and provide questions that can guide religious educators' literacy work with youth. I conclude with implications this model can have in gospel classrooms.

A Brief History of Literacy

Historically, literacy has been understood in a variety of ways, but its essential function—making meaning—has remained constant.⁴ Broadly conceived, literacy is the work we do to make sense of texts,⁵ where texts can be “objects that people intentionally imbue with meaning”⁶ and may include any medium or instance of communication.⁷ This includes, but is not limited to, print texts, electronic texts, speech, and nonverbal communications. One may read a book, “read” another's actions, or make sense of another's words. Making

meaning can also include the production of texts, as in the case of writing. We can, therefore, make or produce meaning as we create written texts. Often these various literacy practices are used in combination with one another to generate meaning.

Traditionally, literacy has been conceptualized in two ways: autonomous and ideological.⁸ The autonomous model of literacy views literacy as a technical and neutral skill for decoding words; essentially, recognizing words in print. This view assumes that literacy can be separated from time and place, and is therefore not influenced by social conditions. The autonomous, decontextualized model honors one conception of literacy, suggesting that there is one best way to be literate, or one best way to read, write, and speak. It also assumes that those who are not literate (in this particular way) are somehow deficient and in need of repair. In the autonomous model, one size fits all. Failing to capture the various and nuanced ways that individuals and societies engage with texts to generate meaning, the autonomous model fits uncomfortably in a diverse global community.⁹

In contrast, the ideological model of literacy is concerned with understanding literacy in terms of social practices that are always embedded in local environments.¹⁰ The term “literacies” is preferred, signifying that there is no single, universal model of what it means to be literate; rather, there are a multitude of ways to engage in meaning-making. Thus, there are various literacies or families of practices for making sense of texts. The ideological model suggests that individuals' literate practices emerge out of and are influenced by the societies in which they exist. As “a sequence of meaning-construction events,”¹¹ literacy acts as a tool for making sense of our environments and experiences in particular ways, at particular times, and for particular purposes.¹² We do not simply say words and call it reading; instead, the ideological model recognizes that we read certain types of texts (scripture), at certain times (in the evening or after the death of a loved one), in certain ways (silently or with a parent) and places (at church or at home), for certain purposes (to gain inspiration, to find peace, to draw closer to God), all of which influence the meaning we make and what we do with that meaning.

Literacy, then, can only be understood “in context” because what counts as literacy shifts from one situation to another, based upon contextual demands, circumstances, and purposes. Literacy, therefore, is social.¹³ From this perspective, literacy is messy, nuanced, and more representative than the autonomous model of how individuals and societies construct meaning. It

also provides an entry point for thinking about religious literacies as social and cultural practice.

Religious Literacies as Social and Cultural Practice

I conceptualize religious literacies as the processes involved in socially situated knowledge production, or the shared ways that religious individuals construct meaning of the sacred. To put a finer point on it, religious literacies are the social practices that religious individuals develop and use to construct meaning as part of their religious beliefs, experiences, practices, and values. In addition to knowing about religion, this view suggests that religious literacies are specific cultural representations of meaning-making or religiously appropriate ways of knowing and doing that include how and why we develop religious knowledge and practices. In church, for example, youth use literacy to learn and make sense of scripture as they read and discuss religious texts and engage in activities.¹⁴ What they learn, how they learn, and why they learn are embedded in religious environments that identify appropriate ways of being involved in the world.¹⁵

Religious literacies are important because the way we make meaning in specific (religious) contexts, for specific (religious) purposes, with specific (religious) people and texts may have broader social implications. For example, how a practicing Latter-day Saint youth interacts with Hester Prynne and other characters in *The Scarlet Letter*¹⁶ as she reads the novel in her high school English class may be influenced by her religious values, experiences, commitments, and practices as they relate to fidelity, chastity, honesty, motherhood, fatherhood, divinity, and so forth. How she reads *The Scarlet Letter*, how she interacts with it, how she understands it, and what she is willing to do with it are likely influenced by who she is, what she knows and feels about religious principles, and how she has learned to make meaning of texts as a practicing Latter-day Saint. Along with her Mormonism, she carries with her ways of making sense of her experiences in the world through her religious literacies. These religious ways of thinking and doing are not sloughed off because she is not in church or not reading a religious text. They stick with her, acting as a “constant lens” that informs how she understands and navigates the world.¹⁷ Religious literacies—when situated as social practice—can have profound influences in the lives of youth.¹⁸

A Model of Religious Literacies

The central purpose of instruction in the Church is to develop faith in Jesus Christ, which leads along the path to eternal life with God.¹⁹ What, then, can an understanding of religious literacies as social practice contribute to this? Learning is a lifelong process that involves the construction of gospel knowledge, which takes place as learners engage with doctrine through specific activities and experiences. The tripartite interaction of learner, doctrine, and activity is at the heart of religious literacies, which occur in specific social contexts, under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Attending to these five components—learner, doctrine, activity, context, and Spirit—can make religious instruction socially and culturally responsive and lead to the development of religious knowledge and faith (figure 1). To make better instructional decisions, it behooves religious educators to understand each of these components, their social and culture nature, and how they work together in religious literacy instruction. The interaction of these five components drives gospel teaching and learning.

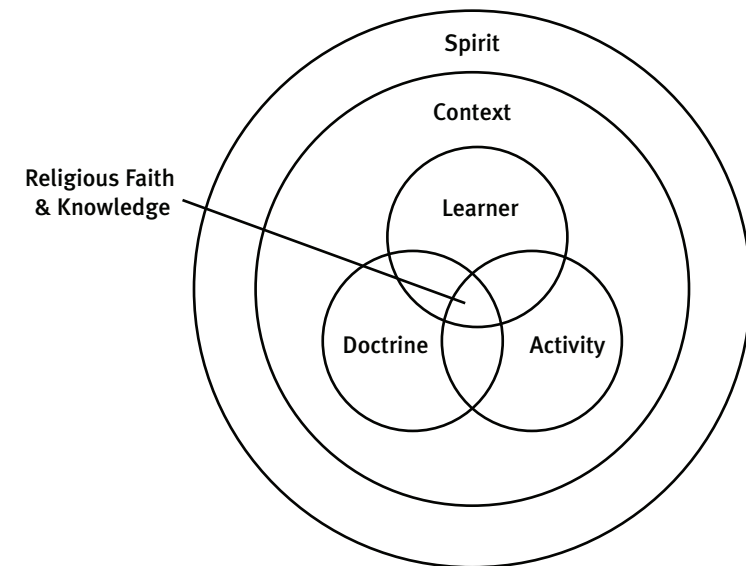


Figure 1. Model for developing religious literacies

Learner: Whom We Teach

Popular assumptions about adolescents suggest that they live capriciously in an “in between” state because of their “unfinished” bodies and brains.²⁰

Although long-standing,²¹ such views of youth can have unfavorable consequences on what young people can do and who . . . they can become.²² Viewing youth as “intrinsically valuable for who they presently are”²³ challenges popular conceptions of youth and moves us closer to valuing youths’ experiences, contributions, and concerns and creating “spaces for [them] to tell their own stories.”²⁴ As instructors of youth, we must understand the unique and valuable contributions young people can make to learning and living the fundamental tenets of their faith.

Youth do not learn as blank slates.²⁵ They have entire histories of experiences—religious and otherwise—that inform how and why they learn and the uses to which they can apply their learning. Although all people share a fundamental similarity as children of God, to help young people make sense of their faith we must also understand them as social and cultural beings with unique and often conflicting sets of purposes, motivations, struggles, knowledge—and ways of knowing—as well as identities, desires, and abilities. Youth in and out of the Church, to borrow Walt Whitman’s phrase, are “large [and] contain multitudes.”²⁶

Young people carry their own parcel of preferences, contradictions, and complexities that inform and are informed by social settings. Social settings and interactions help shape who we are, want to be, or would like others to think we are from moment to moment.²⁷ At home a young man is a son or a brother, in algebra class he is a math whiz, in church he is a struggling reader of the Book of Mormon, and on a date he is a gentleman. Youth never stop being children of God, but how that identity is represented to one group or another and how it interacts with social demands and other identities remains a complex puzzle that highlights the constructed, social nature of today’s youth.

These numerous selves represent the multiple identities youth possess as part of what it means to exist in a complex, social world.²⁸ Young people are divine and deeply spiritual, yet they are also wonderfully human and deserve to be taken seriously on their own terms. By recognizing the messy,

Table 1. Guiding questions about youth

- What can my students teach me about the gospel and gospel learning?
- What do I know about the students in my class and how can that inform my instruction?
- What kinds of people am I helping students become?
- What evidence is there that I take students seriously?
- How do my views of youth reflect their intrinsic value as learners and people?

vibrant, and complex nature of what it means to be a teenager in today’s world, religious educators can convey the value they place on youth as learners and people.

Doctrine: What We Teach

Religious educators help youth construct deeper, richer understandings of their faith. This means focusing on the doctrine of Christ²⁹ and the Church’s other core doctrines.³⁰ These doctrines lie at the heart of teaching and learning in the Church. The following statement explains where to find doctrine and the promise of learning it:

Your commission, your charter, your objective in religious education [is] to teach the scriptures. . . . If your students are acquainted with the revelations, there is no question—personal or social or political or occupational—that need go unanswered. Therein is contained the fullness of the everlasting gospel. Therein we find principles of truth that will resolve every confusion and every problem and every dilemma that will face the human family or any individual in it.³¹

In the model of religious literacies presented in this article, gospel doctrines answer the *what* questions: What do we teach? What do students learn? To some degree, this seems obvious: youth make meaning and construct a testimony of the core doctrines contained within the seminal texts of the Church. Yet there may be some complexity about “doctrine” and therefore what we teach and what students learn.

Surely, the nature of God, the fall and redemption of his children, and the Atonement of Christ are core doctrines, but what are we to make of loving one another, serving one another, and attending to the poor? All these truths are found in scripture, taught by modern prophets, and are unlikely to change, so all may be firmly within the bounds of core, eternal doctrine, but how much space do each of them occupy doctrinally? How are each of them—and our faith in them—manifest? Are they the same kinds of doctrine? Instructionally, how much weight should each of these truths receive in religious education classrooms? Answers to these questions are complex and are informed, in part, by “what is understood and officially taught . . . as prophets come to comprehend core doctrines more clearly”³² and by virtue of the affordances and expectations of the social and cultural contexts in which we teach.

How doctrine is understood and what it might mean to individuals and communities is personally, socially, and culturally informed. Because we

construct meaning according the contexts in which we live,³³ what counts as core doctrine and interpretations of core doctrine is likely to be influenced by the local contexts in which doctrine is learned and used. Ostensible conflicts between what counts as doctrine and local, cultural interpretations of it can be of particular concern for the Church, given its centralized authority and the primacy of particular doctrine at particular times. One way to attend to the relationship of centralized doctrine and local understandings and interpretations of it is through greater attention to how doctrine is taught.

Table 2. Guiding questions about doctrine

- What is the place of doctrine in my instruction?
- How do students' cultures influence what counts as doctrine and their understanding of doctrine?
- Which doctrines seem to resonate in the community I teach in?
- What conflicts exist between doctrine and local interpretations of doctrine? How can I address these conflicts?
- What local understandings can improve my ability to teach doctrine?

Activity: How We Teach

As the key instructional component of the model, “activity” focuses on how learners and doctrine interact with each other. This interaction is essential in the construction of gospel knowledge and faith. How these interactions occur rests on an understanding of what qualifies as appropriate instructional activities. Reading scripture, for example, is a common and critical activity for learning doctrine in the Church. President Boyd K. Packer stated that scripture could provide readers with a testimony of Christ.³⁴ Scripture, however, does nothing to develop religious knowledge, nor does it transmit truth, or produce testimony.³⁵ The thrust of President Packer’s words, and the crux of the issue, may be that reading mediates sacred truths and young people’s learning. Scripture has no meaning outside of our interaction with it. What youth know, the skills they have, their interests and desires, where they come from, and their entire lifetime of experiences come to bear upon how they read scripture, what it means to them, and what they do with their understanding of it. In a word, youth and scripture interact with one another in social contexts to construct gospel knowledge. As such, how one reads scripture matters.³⁶ The nature of the doctrine-learner interaction is subject to important social and cultural influences, such as the following:

- Social arrangements: reading scripture individually, in pairs, as small or large groups, or as a class;
- Socially and culturally privileged processes: reading scripture by skimming, identifying confusions, solving problems, annotating, making connections, or summarizing;
- Social and cultural purposes: reading scripture to finish a chapter, find or answer questions, build faith, identify obscure doctrines, glorify God, or be moved by the Spirit; and
- Social and cultural value: reading scripture to impress a teacher or peer, learn scriptural narratives, develop faith, make a parent happy, or become (or want others to see us as) a certain type of person.

Because activities such as reading are tools for facilitating learners’ interaction with doctrine to develop gospel knowledge, activities mediate gospel learning. These cultural tools are important for Latter-day Saint youth because learning doctrine like a Latter-day Saint may be different from learning like members of other faiths, in part because of different social and cultural contexts.³⁷ That is, Latter-day Saint youth read and interact with scripture in ways that may be different from ways other faith communities use to produce the knowledge and values that are privileged in their faith. Moving forward, instructional activities, such as reading, should not only be informed by the youth we teach, they should reflect the values of the larger faith and local communities in which we teach.

Table 3. Guiding questions about activities

- How do students’ lives and experiences inform my selection of activities?
- How are activities influencing students’ interaction with doctrine?
- Which activities are likely to generate faith?
- How are students’ social and cultural experiences likely to inform their understanding of instructional activities?
- What types of knowledge are the activities I use likely to produce in students?

Context: Where We Teach

Religious instruction must occur within a space that invites spiritual learning, where everybody feels “loved, trusted, valued, and safe”³⁸ and is willing to listen to the Holy Spirit’s promptings and where teachers and students “understand one another, and . . . are edified and rejoice together.”³⁹ When

these conditions are met, a context is created that supports the development of religious literacies.

Traditionally, context has been understood as physical space such as a building or a room, but context can also be a way of thinking, such as a political ideology, as well as “an event, . . . a social group, a realm of knowledge, or a moment in time.”⁴⁰ Teaching the Resurrection of Christ in the spring, for instance, is a way of contextualizing the Resurrection in a moment in time: we learn about Jesus’s triumph over death as we observe seasonal rebirth. The issue—and the trouble—is that this contextualization is far from universal. Contextualizing the teaching of the Resurrection during one notion of springtime is itself situated within a geographic location, a way of thinking about the Resurrection, and certain social groups. As such, it may not translate well across contexts or cultures. A springtime view of the Resurrection may lack resonance for Latter-day Saint youth whose local climates experience only the slightest variations from one season to another. In various instructional contexts, constructing knowledge of the resurrection may necessitate situating it in a more appropriate realm of knowledge, way of thinking, or moment in (seasonal) time, such as the time of year local fish stocks soar, or seasonal fruit ripens, or following other, local weather events that revive the earth, which may or may not occur in spring.

Contexts are myriad and overlapping, and we exist within a multitude of dynamic social contexts whose influence fluctuates in relationship to one another as we move through life. Understanding the nature of contexts and how they influence religious teaching and learning in the Church is critical, in large part because the Church’s membership is increasingly diverse.⁴¹ We might, therefore, consider situating youths’ construction of gospel knowledge within the contexts, broadly conceived, of whom and where we teach.

Table 4. Guiding questions about context

- How do the instructional contexts of my classroom influence students’ gospel learning?
- How can the contexts be changed to improve students’ gospel learning?
- How does my instruction align with the cultures and practices of the local community?
- What can the local community teach me about the gospel?
- How might the community I teach in influence my gospel instruction?



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President Lorenzo Snow directed members to listen carefully to the whisperings of the Spirit and seek to “understand the nature of its language.”

Spirit: By What Power We Teach and Learn

The Holy Spirit is a fundamental part of teaching and learning.⁴² As the “Spirit of truth,”⁴³ the Holy Ghost “maketh alive all things; . . . knoweth all things, and hath all power.”⁴⁴ It enlightens our minds, teaches, testifies of Christ, and is the means through which we “may know the truth of all things.”⁴⁵ The Holy Ghost is so critical for constructing meaning that we are told, “If ye receive not the Spirit ye shall not teach.”⁴⁶ In gospel instruction, the core interaction of learner, doctrine, and activity must take place in an environment where the Spirit can whisper truth. This means that the Holy Ghost must surround all things and be in and through all things for learners to develop faith in Christ and construct knowledge of gospel principles. If youth engage with doctrine through particular activities, then they may learn *about* the gospel—that is, they may learn facts and stories—but without the Spirit, deep, personal, transformational learning is unlikely to occur, despite the muscle of particular methods or instructional efforts.

President Lorenzo Snow directed members to listen carefully to the whisperings of the Spirit and seek to “understand the nature of its language.”⁴⁷ Jacob provided some insight on the language of the Spirit. He said, “The Spirit speaketh the truth and lieth not. Wherefore, it speaketh of things as they really are, and of things as they really will be; wherefore, these things [that the Spirit speaks] are manifest unto us plainly, for the salvation of our souls.”⁴⁸ One way the Spirit conveys truth is by providing insights and using means of expression that cohere with our experiences and ways of knowing, which are drawn from the ways we think and live our lives. Typically, the Spirit helps us understand truth by speaking in a language that we understand, using words, ideas, metaphors, images, and feelings that adhere with the way we make meaning, or can make meaning.

Instructionally, understanding the social and cultural nature with which the Spirit reveals truth provides a keener understanding of the construction of gospel knowledge as social practice. Just as there is no one way for

Table 5. Guiding questions about the Spirit

- How clearly can the Spirit be felt in my classroom?
- How sensitive are students to the language of the Spirit?
- What are the local manifestations of the Spirit in the community I teach in?
- What are the common ways the Spirit communicates with my students?
- Do students recognize how the Spirit produces gospel knowledge and faith (in them)?

the Spirit to reveal truth, there is not one way to learn gospel truths, develop faith, or construct a testimony. Developing religious knowledge is a social practice situated within and informed by institutional, personal, social, and cultural phenomena.

Implications for Practice

This model of religious literacies provides a simple, dynamic model for thinking about and engaging in religious instruction. For youth to develop an understanding of sacred truths, each of the elements in the model must be in place and working appropriately. To neglect any one of them may assure failure in the development of young people’s gospel learning. If, for example, we engage youth in activities that are not centered on the doctrine of Christ, then they may practice a skill or play a game, but the activities may not produce faith because there is no doctrine on which to support them, and consequently, there is likely to be no witness provided by the Spirit. If, however, we engage youth with doctrine through culturally appropriate activities within a spiritually and emotionally safe environment, inviting the presence of the Spirit, then faith is likely to grow and knowledge of gospel truths is likely to develop.

The primary value of this model is the way in which it represents the relationships among the fundamental elements of religious teaching and learning in the Church. It is important that each of the elements of the model is understood and applied in relationship to one another; it is their interaction that allows for the construction of deep, personal gospel knowledge and the development of faith. Understanding the relationships among these elements is critical because it is nearly impossible to identify reified borders among what is taught, how it is taught, the role of the Spirit, what and how youth learn, and so forth. In practice, the boundaries among learner, doctrine, activity, context, and Spirit blur as students develop gospel knowledge (figure 1). Exactly what this looks like will vary from place to place, depending upon the needs and experiences of the youth, the social and cultural contexts, and the direction of the Spirit. By attending to the elements identified here and the way they interact with one another, youth may more readily make meaning of gospel truths.

Conclusion

Historically, one of the most influential ways to improve youths' development of gospel knowledge and faith is by identifying and developing their religious literacies, or as this article argues, the socially and culturally appropriate ways in which they make meaning of the sacred. Because religious literacies represent the practices and purposes for constructing religious knowledge, there is much at stake with regard to the development of young people's faith. Teaching and learning in the Church must therefore be informed by and responsive to the social and cultural nature of whom we teach, how we teach, why we teach, where we teach, and by what power we teach. In the end, this model of religious literacies can contribute to our understanding of how faith shapes religious learning and instruction as a socially situated practice. **RE**

Notes

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2. Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn't* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 1.
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5. See Moje, "Youth Cultures, Literacies, and Identities."
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 7. See James Paul Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses* (London: Routledge, 2012); Amy A. Wilson, "A Social Semiotics Framework for Conceptualizing Content Area Literacies," *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 54, no. 6 (2011): 435–44.
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 10. See Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies*; James Paul Gee, "Reading as Situated Language: A Sociocognitive Perspective," in *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading*, 136–50.
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 16. See Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1850).
 17. See Jenny Small, "College Student Religious Affiliation and Spiritual Identities: A Qualitative Study" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008).
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 22. See Vadeboncoeur and Stevens, *Re/Constructing the Adolescent*.

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24. Elizabeth Birr Moje, "But Where Are the Youth? On the Value of Integrating Youth Culture into Literacy Theory," *Educational Theory* 52 (2002): 114.
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27. See Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies*; James Paul Gee, *Teaching, Learning, Literacy in Our High-Risk, High-Tech World: A Framework for Becoming Human* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2017).
28. See Skerrett, "Religious Literacies in a Secular Literacy Classroom."
29. See 3 Nephi 11:32–33; 27:13–14.
30. See Anthony Sweat, Michael Hubbard MacKay, and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, "Doctrine: Models to Evaluate Types and Sources of Latter-day Saint Teachings," *Religious Educator* 17, no. 3 (2016): 101–25. The authors provide a model for examining the various types of Latter-day Saint doctrine. Core doctrine is the central-most doctrine, followed by supporting doctrine, then policy doctrine. Esoteric doctrine is on the periphery. The present article focuses on core doctrine, raising questions about the social and cultural influences that can inform youths' understanding of it.
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32. Sweat, MacKay, and Dirkmaat, "Doctrine," 106.
33. See Gee, *Literacy and Education*.
34. See Boyd K. Packer, "The Key to Spiritual Protection," *Ensign*, November 2013, 26–28.
35. See Louise M. Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* (London: Heinemann, 1938; repr. 1968); Louise M. Rosenblatt, "The Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing," in *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading*, 923–56. Transactional theory argues that texts do not transmit knowledge to readers, nor do readers impose meaning on texts. Instead, meaning is constructed as readers and texts "transact," or engage in a relationship with one another through, for example, the act of reading. In the model of religious literacies presented in this article, I draw upon transactional theory to conceptualize the nature of religiously situated activities, specifically how activities influence religious youths' relationship with religious texts.
36. See Rackley, "Scripture Reading Practices of Methodist Youth."
37. See Eric D. Rackley, "Scripture-Based Discourses of Latter-day Saint and Methodist Youths," *Reading Research Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (2014): 417–35.
38. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Teaching the Gospel: A Handbook for CES Teachers and Leaders* (Salt Lake City: Author, 1994), 5.
39. D&C 50:22.
40. Elizabeth Birr Moje, Deborah R. Dillon, and David O'Brien, "Reexamining the Roles of Learner, Text, and Context in Secondary Literacy," *Journal of Educational Research* 93, no. 3 (2000): 167.
41. See The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Facts and Statistics" (n.d.), <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics#>.
42. See David A. Bednar, "The Spirit of Revelation," *Ensign*, May 2011, 87–90.

43. John 15:26.
44. Moses 6:61.
45. Moroni 10:5; see Moses 6:61; D&C 11:13–14; John 14:26.
46. D&C 42:14.
47. *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow: Fifth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012), 141.
48. Jacob 4:13.