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When a student's mind, heart, and behavior are participating in gospel instruction, they are more likely to use their agency in order to be influenced by the sanctifying, enlightening, and edifying power of the Holy Ghost.

Using Elements of Narrative to Engage Students

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In recent years, religious educators have received guidance from Church leadership encouraging them to find ways to help students “act” and not be “acted upon” (2 Nephi 2:26). Elder David A. Bednar has taught, “A learner exercising agency by acting in accordance with correct principles opens his or her heart to the Holy Ghost—and invites His teaching, testifying power, and confirming witness.”¹ As a result of this emphasis, many teachers are seeking to help students exercise their agency in class by inviting them to be more involved in the learning process. Students are teaching one another more, writing more, speaking more in class, and asking more questions.

As religious educators work together to find ways to encourage students to become more engaged in gospel learning, it may be helpful to identify a distinction. In an attempt to implement the principles and techniques mentioned above, some teachers have focused on student *behavior* rather than focusing on student *agency*. In other words, some have assumed that students are internally engaged in learning if they are outwardly participating in activities such as answering questions, writing, or teaching. Often, these outward behaviors are an effective measure of sincere student involvement. However,

a learner can participate behaviorally in classroom activities but still refrain from opening his or her heart to the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, “There remains an inner zone in which we are sovereign, unless we abdicate. In this zone lies the essence of our individuality and our personal accountability.”² It is at this level we hope to reach the students who sit before us.

Ultimately, there is nothing that can be done to force a student to engage internally in gospel learning. Elder Bednar said, “The tuition of diligence and learning by faith must be paid to obtain and personally ‘own’ such knowledge. Only in this way can what is known in the mind be transformed into what is felt in the heart.”³ Nevertheless, a significant role of the teacher is to help create a climate where students are more likely to use their agency appropriately as they learn the gospel. This article will suggest the use of narrative-based teaching principles, one among the many available methods to draw upon, as an effective way to invite students to engage *inwardly* in gospel learning.

The Power of Narrative

One commonly recognized tool for capturing students’ attention is to tell a story. Often, when a student or teacher begins a powerful story, heads are raised and cell phones are put down. Dr. Thomas G. Long, a professor of preaching at Emory University, explained, “Not only do we like stories; we live our lives out of them. We remember in stories, dream in stories, shape our values through stories. And we see the world through evocative images. Long after the rest of a [lesson] is forgotten, many hearers can still recall the stories told and remember the images.”⁴ Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that our minds primarily interact with the world through the lens of story: “While we can be trained to think in geometrical shapes, patterns of sounds, poetry, movement, syllogisms, what predominates or fundamentally constitutes our consciousness is the understanding of the self and world in story.”⁵

Despite the power of storytelling, focusing on one method can lead to unbalanced teaching. Rather than encouraging the use of one technique (storytelling), this paper will analyze six *elements* of narrative that can be used to invite learners to engage as agents. In other words, this article is not concerned with describing how to tell “a good story.” Instead, what follows is a discussion on how some of the elements of narrative can be incorporated into gospel teaching as a whole.

In each section I will illustrate narrative teaching principles using Elder Jeffrey R. Holland’s October 2012 general conference address entitled “The First Great Commandment.” This talk draws upon the well-known conversation between the Savior and Peter near the Sea of Galilee when Jesus repeatedly asked Peter, “Lovest thou me?” Elder Holland used this scripture text to help listeners consider their discipleship and commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ. This talk effectively demonstrated many aspects of narrative teaching and will therefore serve as our model for the principles discussed below.

Anticipation

Narratives capture an audience’s interest by creating a sense of anticipation. Learning to use this principle in the classroom is particularly important for teachers who notice their students becoming fidgety during the last ten minutes of class. If anticipation is created properly, listeners will actually become more engaged as class time comes to a close.

The primary way a narrative creates anticipation is through the use of ambiguity. In other words, stories introduce a problem, conflict, or issue that needs resolving. Speaking of the need to hear a resolution to ambiguity, Dr. Eugene Lowry, a professor of narrative preaching, said, “In mild doses it is a motivator both to attention and to action. One cannot breathe easily until some solution occurs. And when resolution comes, the result is both a knowing and a feeling.”⁶

Normally, teachers understand the need to gain students’ attention at the beginning of class. Teachers will often use activities or questions that send students searching in the scriptures as a way to pique interest. Within the first five to ten minutes of class, curiosity is created and then satisfied. However, in narrative-based teaching, attention is similarly gained at the beginning of class, but resolution is delayed until the end of the time students and teachers are together. For example, notice the sense of conflict created in the introductory paragraph of Elder Holland’s talk. Speaking of the eleven remaining Apostles after the Savior’s Resurrection, Elder Holland said, “Of course, to them [the Savior] hadn’t been with them nearly long enough. Three years isn’t long to call an entire Quorum of Twelve Apostles from a handful of new converts, purge from them the error of old ways, teach them the wonders of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and then leave them to carry on the work until they too were killed. Quite a staggering prospect for a group of newly ordained

elders.”⁷ At the beginning of this talk, the listener is introduced to the ambiguity or conflict of how the Apostles chose to proceed with their lives after the Resurrection. However, the listener is invited to *remain* engaged throughout the talk as Elder Holland delays the resolution to this ambiguity until the latter part of his address.

When these types of delayed resolution occur, there is often a powerful emotional and mental payoff. As Dr. Lowry has pointed out, “Ambiguity is not known simply as an intellectual matter; it is a mental ambiguity which is existentially felt. It becomes a part of [the listener’s] existence at that moment in time, and hence when it is resolved and the gospel proclaimed, the good news is not just something one now knows propositionally, but something one now experiences.”⁸

Distance

Another important element of narrative that can invite listeners to engage in gospel learning is what Dr. Fred Craddock, a professor of preaching, calls “distance.”⁹ Narratives are almost always told in first or third person. This creates an emotional and cognitive “distance” between speaker and hearer because the listener is not directly addressed. The listener is then free to “reflect, accept, reject, and decide” how the message relates to his or her own experience.¹⁰ The principle of distance may seem counterintuitive—would not storytellers or teachers want listeners to feel directly addressed? Speaking of the Savior’s parables, Richard Lloyd Anderson said:

The parable is a teaching method recognizing the fact that one sees his own weaknesses better by viewing others who display the same weaknesses. . . . Even the Lord was sparing in confrontation, generally reserving it until he had offered many other opportunities to understand. Even then his final warnings to his enemies used the “case system” to force them to think about his message. This technique should be remembered: an effective method is to use third-person examples that hit close to home. The technique works on the premise that stimulating thought is the most effective teaching tool. It avoids one-sided scorn that too often triggers the self-defense reflexes and helps induce desired self-analysis instead.¹¹

Dr. C. Terry Warner explained how the Arbing Institute (a consulting organization) taps into the power of distance by inviting the participants in their seminars to share true stories regarding the topics that are being taught. He asked, “What happens in such a setting? For the large majority of people, hearing others’ stories enables them to see their own experiences in a new, truthful light. They realize—usually instantaneously—that a story another

has told is their *own* story, only with different details. This realization seems to sneak past their defenses.”¹²

Many instructional theories maintain the importance of creating a sense of relevance in the early stages of instruction. But, if teachers emphasize the relevance of a topic too much, students may have a hard time opening up emotionally. Distance allows a listener to engage in lesson material without feeling coerced or manipulated. In 2012, researchers at Ohio State University published a study that explored a unique phenomenon called “experience taking.” When an individual starts to experience the emotions of a character as he or she reads a story and then begins to incorporate some of that character’s behavior into their own life, this is experience taking. The study found that if a reader identified with a character but was also given a chance to “lose themselves” in the story, then experience taking was more likely to occur. Interestingly, if a participant in the study had a mirror placed next to them as he or she read a story, they were less likely to “lose themselves” in the narrative. It appears that if readers are thinking too much about themselves, their internal defenses will remain intact.¹³

The implications of this study for gospel teachers are profound. Rather than trying to *directly* show how a student is supposed to connect with content, it might be important to speak in first or third person as long as possible before revealing the message of a lesson. For example, Elder Holland’s talk began by only discussing the early Apostles, allowing the listener to “enter” the world of Israel in AD 33. Attention is brought away from the listener, creating a distance that invites internal engagement. Elder Holland began his talk this way: “There is almost no group in history for whom I have more sympathy than I have for the eleven remaining Apostles immediately following the death of the Savior of the world.”¹⁴ Interestingly, Elder Holland did not directly address his audience regarding the main point of his talk until more than two-thirds of the way through when he said, “My beloved brothers and sisters, I am not certain just what our experience will be on Judgment Day, but I will be very surprised if at some point in that conversation, God does not ask us exactly what Christ asked Peter.”¹⁵

Distance can be created by a teacher when he or she uses the text of the scriptures, metaphors, imagery, parables, or simple examples from the lives of others. This type of content is more likely to stay in first and third person and thus create an emotional distance for listeners that encourages them to engage internally.

Images

Narratives use imagery as a primary way to affect the listener. The Savior consistently used simple imagery throughout his ministry to convey gospel messages. He spoke of common things such as sheep, wheat, coins, banquets, and candles. Imagery is powerful because of its ability to help the listener identify with and internally experience the lesson material being presented. Rather than speaking in bland, general terms, imagery is specific and allows the listener to make connections from his or her own experiences, memories, and emotions. Dr. Craddock explained, “If the sermon revives the memory of the odor of burped milk on a blouse, it evokes more meaning than the most thorough analysis of ‘motherhood.’”¹⁶

When using imagery, it can be helpful to refrain from overdescription. In other words, distance must be maintained because the listener intuitively senses the teacher trying to help the hearer experience something. Using a few simple descriptive terms allows the listener’s mind to complete the imagery and maintain distance. Craddock said, “For the speaker to supply the total image . . . insults [the students’] intelligence, deprives them of a vital part of the process of arriving at new meaning and insight, and may well cause them to feel some revulsion toward the speaker.”¹⁷

Elder Holland used imagery when describing the interchange between the Savior and Peter: “Looking at their battered little boats, their frayed nets, and a stunning pile of 153 fish, Jesus said to His senior Apostle, ‘Peter, do you love me more than you love all this?’” Elder Holland also used potent images when he said, “Did you, like they, think the cross and the nails and the tomb were the end of it all and each could blissfully go back to being whatever you were before?”¹⁸

Far beyond just adding beauty to our lessons, imagery and metaphor connect gospel truths to students’ minds and hearts. Imagery acts much like a visual aid, which Elder Richard G. Scott suggested is “like a hook in the mind to which truth can be carefully secured so that it can be understood, remembered, and used in time of need.”¹⁹

Identification

Many times in gospel teaching contexts we speak of the end goal as application. Ultimately, we want our students to make specific changes in their behavior or beliefs. But trying to reach application too quickly can sometimes

make the lesson feel forced. Narratives may hold a key that can help teachers lead their students to application more naturally.

As mentioned above, distance is essential in helping a listener open up to a gospel message. For instance, when the Savior taught in parables he would use third-person examples. However, as the parable would unfold, the distance would diminish and the listener would begin to identify with the story. It is the combination of both distance and identification that allows the listeners to discover something for themselves and connect to the gospel internally.²⁰

The type of identification spoken of here is not created by using the same slang words of the students or by making pop culture references. Identification occurs when students begin to see themselves, their situations, their beliefs, and their feelings in a lesson. In order to encourage identification, teachers must have the gift of empathy. Dr. Patrick Parrish, an instructional-design theorist, said, “The most critical . . . skill [for those who design instruction] is the ability to step outside one’s own perspective and see the design through the learner’s eyes.”²¹

A teacher helps create identification by slowly unfolding how a message relates to the students’ current situations and experiences in life. This is not a guessing game or a teaching gimmick. Rather, the instructor is seeking to help the students discover gospel connections for themselves. As Elder Bednar said, “The most important lessons of life are caught—not taught.”²² If the teacher seeks to move to application too quickly, then many students may become defensive or may not have a chance to draw conclusions for themselves. In the following examples, notice how the Savior subtly helped his listeners identify with the message of his parables:

The Pharisees may have identified with this line in the prodigal son: “Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment” (Luke 15:29).

Luke says the parable of the Pharisees and the publican was directed to those “which trusted in themselves that they were righteous” (Luke 18:9). This audience probably heard their own thoughts echoing in the words of the Pharisee in the parable who said, “God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even this publican” (Luke 17:11).

When hearing the parable of the laborers, the listeners may have heard themselves when the workers in the parable murmur, “These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day” (Matthew 20:12).

It's hard to determine at what point the Pharisees began to identify with the parable of the wicked husbandmen, but Matthew records that "when the chief priests and Pharisees had heard his parables, they perceived that he spake of them" (Matthew 21:45).

As a gospel teacher unfolds the text or message of the lesson, he or she can use third-person stories, images, metaphors, or parables that maintain distance but also "hit close to home."²³ Towards the end of the lesson, these third-person examples will begin to reveal in a more obvious manner the message the teacher would like to communicate.

In order to show how the listener could identify with different aspects of Elder Holland's talk, I will separate the details of the story in John 21 and show how some of the different events touch upon common human experience.

In John 21, the main characters

1. are not in the presence of the Savior physically,
2. fall back into old habits,
3. are not as diligent as they should be in their Christian duty,
4. are given an opportunity to reconsider their love and devotion towards the Savior.

As the details of the story in John 21 unfold, the identification points begin to work internally on the listener. Since the main ideas are not stated directly until the end, the listeners are given a chance to use their agency and choose how they identify with the message for themselves.

Movement

Perhaps the most fundamental way narrative teaching is different from typical instruction is in its sense of "movement." In a story, characters begin with a set of beliefs, feelings, and worldviews. As the story advances, however, the characters encounter new ideas and experiences that change the fundamental paradigms of the characters. This reflects how people change in everyday life. Most people do not feel and think differently based on well-argued ideas, fun learning activities, or tightly arranged PowerPoints. Rather, people wrestle with ideas and experiences, *moving* from one state of being to another.

In book 4 of *On Christian Doctrine*, St. Augustine discusses what leads to effective preaching. Instead of simply making a series of points, "Augustine leads the reader through an experience of considering and rejecting, as though bridges were being burned behind the traveler through the pages until finally all is consumed except the destination. This focus on the reader puts the

writer in the role of narrator, making possible a certain movement for the reader who is overhearing Augustine talk to himself, entertaining and then rejecting his own thoughts. The reader begins to do the same, and the writer's experience is reproduced in the reader."²⁴

Elder Holland's talk "moves" from a state of uncertainty regarding Christian duty to a feeling of loyalty to the Lord and his work. One segment of Elder Holland's talk depicts Peter speaking "to his associates."²⁵ During this exchange, Peter is not characterized or stereotyped as lazy or unfaithful. Instead, the listeners can actually identify with Peter's point as he explains his decision to return to fishing. In Elder Holland's recreation of the conversation, Peter says, "I don't know more to tell you than to return to your former life, rejoicing, I intend to 'go a fishing.'"²⁶ The listener moves next to a moment of sacred confrontation. Instead of a feeling of complacency, we sense urgency as the Savior seeks to remind Peter of what's most important: "Looking at their battered little boats, their frayed nets, and a stunning pile of 153 fish, Jesus said," in Elder Holland's words, "Peter, do you love me more than you love all this?" Peter responded, "Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee."²⁷ The intensity is raised as the Savior responds by saying (again in Elder Holland's words), "So, Peter, for the second and presumably the last time, I am asking you to leave all this and to go teach and testify, labor and serve loyally until the day in which they will do to you exactly what they did to me."²⁸ Next, Elder Holland moves to the application of the message. As listeners hear this portion of the talk, they know they have arrived where they originally set out for: "So we have neighbors to bless, children to protect, the poor to lift up, and the truth to defend. We have wrongs to make right, truths to share, and good to do."²⁹ By the end of Elder Holland's talk, the listener has moved from complacency to a declaration of adoration: "'Yea, Lord, we do love thee.' And having set our 'hand to the plough,' we will never look back until this work is finished and love of God and neighbor rules the world."³⁰

A sense of movement is essential for learner engagement. Bryan Chappell, author of *Christ-Centered Preaching*, says, "Listeners need to know that their thoughts and understanding are advancing throughout a message. If a point sounds too much like an idea that has already been covered, or if various points do not seem to build to a higher purpose, ire grows and interest withers. . . . [Teachers] must maintain a sense of progression by keeping each point distinct and by making each point advance toward a culminating idea."³¹

The effective use of movement invites students to make similar “moves” in their own thinking and feeling. Perceptive teachers will carefully discern ways to craft lessons in such a manner that will help listeners act as agents and move from one set of beliefs and feelings to a “fresh view about God, about oneself, and about the world.”³²

Conclusion

There is no magic formula for teaching the perfect lesson. There are only effective teaching principles that can be learned and applied, such as the elements of narrative. These elements have been used throughout history to engage listeners. It seems as if the human mind and heart cannot help but be engaged internally when a good story is told. As teachers learn and incorporate the elements of narrative into instruction, they will help students engage in lessons more than behaviorally; students will open their hearts and minds to the truths of the restored gospel. When a student’s mind, heart, and behavior are participating in gospel instruction, they are more likely to use their agency in order to be influenced by the sanctifying, enlightening, and edifying power of the Holy Ghost. **RE**

Notes

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