

Matthew O. Richardson, “What Is Education?” in *Religious Educator* 2, no. 1 (2001): 72–81.



Elder Holland warned, “Inspired teaching must never become a lost art in the Church.”

Portrait of Elder Jeffrey R. Holland © by Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Used by permission

---

## **What Is Education?**

*Matthew O. Richardson*

*Matthew O. Richardson was Assistant Professor of Church History and Doctrine at BYU when this was published.*

While encouraging religious educators associated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to excel in teaching, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland warned, “Inspired teaching must never become a lost art in the Church, and we must make certain our quest for it does not become a lost tradition.”<sup>1</sup>

I find it interesting that while Elder Holland expressed concern over preserving religious education, secular pedagogues share similar worries. For example, Neil Postman called his provocative analysis of education “The End of Education” and explained that this title was carefully selected “with a view toward its being an ambiguous prophecy.”<sup>2</sup> Postman is neither a pessimist nor a cynic. Although he is an educational critic, he is hopeful—yet worried. Another interesting, yet controversial, commentary on education that hints of similar worry is David Solway’s *Education Lost*.<sup>3</sup> The title speaks for itself.

These authors are not alone with their concerns over the changing face of education, for there are many who believe we are losing something in the way we approach education. Though we may not join the ranks of the anxious, it behooves us as educators to at least consider what education was, what it has become, how we define education, and how that might affect our teaching.

### **What Has Happened to Education?**

Education has changed. At least what we perceive education to be has changed. I first noticed the change as I read pre-twentieth-century stories and accounts from journals. It wasn’t so much the pedagogy or even the form of education that struck me as being so different as much as it was the way people *felt* about education. It was viewed differently; and, as a result, it was esteemed differently. Tevye, a character in *Fiddler on the Roof*, characterized this disposition well as he pondered how his life would be different if he were a rich man. Of all the imagined benefits, he felt the sweetest thing of all would be to discuss the holy books with learned men seven hours every day.

In earlier times, education was by no means an entitlement, and thus it was somewhat mysterious. Those lucky enough to experience the exercise of education were referred to literally

as “educated” men and women. Fathers in every successive generation hoped their children would be more educated than the generation before them. Obviously, they hoped the next generation would enjoy a better lifestyle materially, but there was more to it than that. Education was viewed as a necessary ingredient of a fulfilled life. It was not valued merely for the tangible benefits as much as it was valued for the intangible benefit—an almost indescribable attribute of empowerment. Brigham Young once described education as “the power to think clearly, the power to act well in the world’s work, and the power to appreciate life.”<sup>4</sup> In this respect, the power of education broadened perspective and greatly influenced not only how individuals lived their lives but also how individuals approached life, in general.

### **No Longer Living in the World**

It seems that our values have changed over the years. I have heard people lament that modern society has turned into a culture without values. I do not believe we have lost our values as much as we have come to value something else instead. Thus, it is not that education no longer holds value today; however, somewhere along the line, it was *devalued*. Something has displaced education in terms of relevance and importance; and, as a result, education has changed.

In earlier times, the expressed value of education was that it helped man define the world and establish his role in the world around him. Ultimately, this would help him find some measure of fulfillment in that relationship. Oddly enough, we now find the tables turned. It is the world that defines man and sets the agenda, methodology, ideals, patterns, and expectations for fulfillment within that new relationship. We have shifted our role in the world by becoming of the world—defined by it, driven by it, and shaped by it. “The encroachment of the world into our lives is threatening!” Spencer W. Kimball warned. “How hard it seems for many of us to live in

the world and yet not of the world.”<sup>5</sup> I can’t help but think of Wordsworth’s haunting verse:

“The world is too much with us;

late and soon, Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: Little we see in Nature that is ours; We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!”<sup>6</sup>

As the world redefined man, education lost its charm, its esteem, its meaning, and its relevance. The value of being educated has been replaced with the value of being employed. While recruiting potential university students, James R. Kearl asked the candidates to tell him about their dreams and aspirations and hopes. “It’s always about ‘money and a job,’” Kearl says. “None of them dream of becoming educated people. That just never comes up.”<sup>7</sup> As you can see, even some of those who consider education to be important actually feel that education is nothing more than a tool of acquisition. It is a means to a vocative end. Since the world deals mostly in tangibles, knowing things has become important because that is how we get things. But underlying this notion is the cold reality that having things is far more important than understanding things. This attitude has made education expendable. I have met many individuals who feel that since they have the valued things of the world, they no longer need to seek education. I guess that education’s general relevance had been reduced to individual relevance.

Alfred North Whitehead, considered as one of the most original educational philosophers of the twentieth century, wrote: “In the history of education, the most striking phenomenon is that schools of learning, which at one epoch are alive with a ferment of genius, in a succeeding generation exhibit merely pedantry and routine.”<sup>8</sup> I believe this phenomenon is directly connected with the way we perceive education. If our perceptions and disposition of education change, we will approach and practice education differently. This is an important point I cannot emphasize

enough. The way we define, perceive, and value education will directly determine how we approach education.

The world's view of education seems to bestow the term "educated" according to what people have done and where they have been—rather than by what type of person they are and what their contributions to family and society have been. For example, we rarely refer to individuals as "educated" unless, of course, we are speaking of someone with several degrees or someone who has attended a school of reputation.

Similarly, while education has always been connected with knowledge, we now consider educated people not only as those who know something but also as those who seem to know more than anyone else. The obsession with comparative knowledge has directly affected the way we teach. Our pedantic obsession with facts has fueled a deep-seated educational philosophy and approach. As a result, educational pedagogy is obsessed with—as Richard Mitchell described it—"filling up the registry." The "registry," of course, refers to the mind, which Mitchell presented as "a perpetual catalogue of whatever presents itself."<sup>9</sup> For me, this conjures images of an educational service station where poised instructors stand with a nozzle in hand next to the pumps of knowledge. I can see students arriving and matter of factly stating, "Fill 'er up!"

Our fascination with comparative knowledge has been embraced with such zeal that it is now an unwitting part of us. For example, when children return home from school, we routinely ask, "What did you learn in school today?" If they can recite something new that has been cataloged in their registry of knowledge, we assume they are becoming educated. We feel satisfied because we can actually see education in action. After all, that tidbit of information they just shared with us was not in the registry earlier that morning when they left for school. I must, however, point out that gaining knowledge isn't bad. In fact, we are exhorted to learn theory,

principle, and doctrine pertaining to things both in heaven and in the earth (D&C 88:77–78). It is not the quest for knowledge that causes problems as much as it is the pedantic approach.

If the sole purpose of education is to fill the registry with facts, figures, dialogue, etc. and if that is the end we seek to foster, then it seems fitting that those at the front line of teaching are often called instructors. The term *instructor* is derived from the Latin *instruere*,<sup>10</sup> literally meaning to “pile on.” You would be hard pressed to find a student who wouldn’t agree with this historical definition—at least at one time or another during the student’s instructional career.

### **Now What?**

I have felt unsettled with the changes in education, especially in the way we perceive, esteem, and frame it. I must point out that I am not necessarily longing for the “good old days of yesteryear,” nor am I trying to forecast an educational apocalypse (although both ideas might have some merit). I have concluded that the way we define education directly affects the way we approach education; thus, it is important to reevaluate what education really means. As an educator, or, in other words, as one whose profession is education, I believe I should know what my profession is—or, at the very least, what it ought to be.

### **Education Defined**

The term *education* is derived from the Latin *ducare* (coming from the root *ducere*)—literally meaning “to lead or draw out.” This definition makes it clear that education is more than filling registries. It is an endeavor of leading or drawing individuals out. I have found it is one thing to know an etymological definition and quite another to understand what it really means.

As I began fussing with the various possibilities, I first thought that maybe education was supposed to draw out the natural gifts from within a student. In this sense, education would be defined as an endeavor of “drawing *something* out *of* students.” Although this is a worthy

approach, it tends to discount the importance of adding anything to one's register because it suggests everything is already *in* the student waiting to be drawn out. Typically, sparsely filled registers make it difficult—if not impossible—to draw something out that isn't even there. No wonder that some teachers are discouraged with a lack of participation from students or find that relevant comments during class discussion are almost nonexistent. We must recognize that sometimes students cannot discuss something they have never thought of, known, or don't understand. With this in mind, I decided that there must be more to the etymological definition of education, and I continued to think it over. Before moving on, I feel I must point out that we have an obligation to be aware of and sensitive to latent talents, gifts, and potentials of our students.

After considerable fussing, I concluded that education must be an endeavor that “leads or draws the student out *of* something. That “something” could be ignorance, poverty, lifestyle, attitudes, unhappiness, or even sin. I believe this definition is striking because it is purposeful. By purposeful, I mean that education—when understood correctly—is driven by an intended purpose. It is designed to actually *do* something. Thus, knowledge, in and of itself, is of little value if it doesn't draw the possessor *out* of some previous condition.

### **Religious Education**

To assume that religious education has remained unsullied and unchanged would be either a demonstration of naivete or denial. For even with a cursory comparison, we find that religious educators have embraced many of the same educational pedagogies, methodologies, philosophies, and dispositions as their secular colleagues. We soon realize that we (secular and religious educators) not only are from the same family tree and share the same family secrets but

also discover we are roommates living in the same house. Thus, in many ways, the only difference between secular education and religious education is the topic.

David O. McKay, esteemed for his insights and perspectives on education, felt the religious educator bore a responsibility that was greater than the high ethical standards and responsibilities required of other teachers.<sup>11</sup> I do not believe President McKay was intimating that religious educators are better than other teachers. I do, however, believe he was reminding those in religious education that they have the responsibility to literally educate their students. Religious education, by definition, is more than teaching and beyond filling the registry with religious information (instruction). We must embrace the core meaning of education and teach in ways that literally draw our students out. “There is true nobility,” President McKay taught, “in the soul of that man or woman who sincerely desires and strives to lead children out of contaminating influences into an environment of high ideals and lofty endeavors.”<sup>12</sup>

Although “drawing students out” is the general etymological core of education, drawing individuals out of the world is at the heart of religious education. Christ lived and taught this principle superbly. Although a mortal resident, Christ never claimed the world as His home. Though He did say He was *in* the world (see John 17:11–12), Christ always clarified that He was never *of* the world (see 17:14–15, 17). You see, He may have lived here, but He was not of—defined by—the world. After triumphantly declaring that He overcame the world (16:33), Christ prayed that those left behind would be kept from evil, sanctified, and eventually become one with Him (17:15–26). I believe this is what religious education is all about—providing disciples with enough information that draws them out of the world and leads them unto Christ.

Because of Christ’s desire that we become one with Him, the disciples of Jesus have been urged to avoid the world. Joseph Fielding Smith said, “If we are living the religion which the

Lord has revealed and which we have received, we do not belong to the world.” He then emphasized, “We should have no part in all its foolishness.”<sup>13</sup> Consider how Abram, after entering into an oath with the Lord, refused to take a thread to a shoe latchet from the king of Sodom (Genesis 14:21). He wanted no part of Sodom’s world. In restorative times, the Lord commands the Saints again that they should not “live after the manner of the world” (D&C 95:13). I suspect that religious educators would do well to shun the world and its forms of teaching with the same fervor as Abram.

### **Religiously Educating People**

“The most vital knowledge you can learn,” according to Ezra Taft Benson, “is the saving truths of the gospel—the truths that will make the difference in your eternal welfare.”<sup>14</sup> I expect that most religious teachers believe this to be true. But I also suspect that some teachers are distracted by personal interests, specialized training, languages, emotion, pedagogy, etc. and become religious instructors rather than religious educators. They seem to value the tidbits while discounting the greater connections. Wilford Woodruff warned: “Men may labor to make a great display of talent, learning, and knowledge, either in printing or preaching. They may try to preach the mysteries and to present something strange, great, and wonderful, and they may labor for this with all their might, in the spirit and strength of man without the aid of the Holy Spirit of God, and yet the people are not edified, and their preaching will not give much satisfaction.”<sup>15</sup> In truth, the people are not educated, for they are left in their previous state and not drawn out of their fallen situation.

Religious educators should, therefore, be vigilant in what is taught and in what is *not* taught. “There is much reading material that is available which is either time-wasting or corrupting,” President Ezra Taft Benson taught. Although an instructor has little regard for what

is taught—as long as there is plenty of it—educators constantly seek the best material that will connect students with the greater principles and accord possible change.

The notion of a seminary has always intrigued me. Typically thought of an institution where religious instruction takes place, a seminary literally means a “seedbed.” Consider how appropriate that name is for religious education. Educators carefully plant seeds that will bring forth a calculated future harvest. This process reflects nicely Alma’s metaphor of sowing seeds of truth with hopes of a swelling growth (Alma 32). John Dewey, a favorite in many educational circles, wrote: “Hence it is nonsense to talk about the aim of education—or any other undertaking—where conditions do not permit of foresight of results, and do not stimulate a person to look ahead to see what the outcome of a given activity is to be.”<sup>16</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Education, properly understood and appropriately administered, draws or leads individuals to new territory. “The most cherished opportunities of the religious teacher,” David O. McKay taught, “should be to lead the child to see, through the trouble and turmoil of a physical world.”<sup>17</sup> Religious education draws individuals out of the world and leads them to God through the gospel of Christ.

When asked “What is true education?” President McKay responded: “It is awakening a love for truth; giving a just sense of duty; opening the eyes of the soul to the great purpose and end of life. It is not so much giving words, as thoughts; or mere maxims, as living principles. It is not teaching to be honest, because ‘honesty is the best policy’; but because it is right. It is teaching the individual to love the good, for the sake of the good; to be virtuous in action because one is so in heart; to love and serve God supremely not from fear, but from delight in his

perfect character. No one can successfully controvert the fact that upon the teacher rests much of the responsibility of lifting society to this high ideal.”<sup>18</sup>

Finally, I return to Elder Holland’s exhortation that inspired education can never become a lost art in the Church. If religious educators will be true to their profession by planting seeds of truth in the seedbed of their students and remaining aloof to the world and its methods, then authentic education will always be found in the Church of Jesus Christ.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey R. Holland, Conference Report, 4 April 1998, 31.

<sup>2</sup> Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 195.

<sup>3</sup> David Solway, *Education Lost: Reflections on Contemporary Pedagogical Practice* (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Brigham Young, quoted by George H. Brimhall, “The Brigham Young University,” *Improvement Era*, July 1920, 831.

<sup>5</sup> Spencer W. Kimball, Conference Report, 5 April 1974, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, ed., *The Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250–1918* (New York: Oxford University, 1955), 549.

<sup>7</sup> “Brigham Young University: Five Views,” *BYU Today*, April 1987, 47.

<sup>8</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1967), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Mitchell, “Why Good Grammar?” *National Forum* 65, no.4 (fall 1985): 5.

<sup>10</sup> The actual roots are as follows: ttt (< in- on + struere to pile).

---

<sup>11</sup> *Gospel Ideals: Selections from the Discourses of David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1953), 435–36.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 442. [p.81]

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, Conference Report, 4 April 1952, 28.

<sup>14</sup> Ezra Taft Benson, “In His Steps,” *1979 Devotional Speeches of the Year* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1980), 62.

<sup>15</sup> *The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff*, ed. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 20.

<sup>16</sup> Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander, eds., *The Essential Dewey* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998), 1:251.

<sup>17</sup> *Gospel Ideals: Selections from the Discourses of David O. McKay*, 439.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 437.