

Learning and Teaching: To Know, To Do, and To Become

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I am grateful for this opportunity to speak to you today. I am thankful for you and want to express my love and gratitude for your support and prayers. I love you very much and look forward to the opportunity to be with you again.

I feel impressed to share with you a thought and a promise. A couple of years ago I invited you to do four things: begin each class with prayer; attend devotional; be exemplary in your dress and demeanor; and take the opportunity to teach your students about their covenants and their promises. You have acted on that invitation, and I want you to know what a great impact you are having on our students.

Here is the promise: as you continue to do these things, the Lord will work through you to save souls. I know that your students will watch you. They will be influenced not only by what you say to them, but also by what you do. If you do these four things, you will help them and save them. I know that's true.

Today I would like to share a few thoughts with you about learning and teaching.



LEARNING: INCREASING POWER — TO KNOW, TO DO, AND TO BECOME

My starting point is a concept of learning based on a talk given in 2000 by Elder Dallin H. Oaks entitled “The Challenge to Become.” Elder Oaks said:

The Apostle Paul taught that the Lord’s teachings and teachers were given that we may all attain “the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). This process requires far more than acquiring knowledge. It is not even enough for us to be convinced of the gospel; we must act and think so that we are converted by it. In contrast to the institutions of the world, which teach us to know something, the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to become something. . . .

To testify is to know and to declare. The gospel challenges us to be “converted,” which requires us to do and to become. If any of us relies solely upon our knowledge and testimony of the gospel, we are in the same position as the blessed but still unfinished Apostles whom Jesus challenged to be “converted.”¹

I have found this framework very useful in thinking about learning in the university. When I speak of learning today, I speak of it as an increase in the capacity or power to Know,² to Do, and to Become.

When we humble ourselves before the Lord, seek His help, and act in faith to diligently do what is in our power, we qualify for the enabling or strengthening power of the Atonement of Christ.⁴ Through His marvelous grace we may receive His power and His strength.

I encourage you to pay particular attention to the word “attend” in the Lord’s promise. Attend means to wait upon, to accompany, to take care of, to minister, to watch over, to look after. When the Lord promises “my grace shall attend you,” He is promising to walk with us, to minister to us, to watch over and care for us with His almighty power.

In His agony and suffering Jesus descended below all things and rose triumphant over all things.⁵ He received from His Father all power both in heaven and in earth.⁶ He blesses us with His power and bestows upon us the ministry of angels and spiritual gifts of discernment and insight, wisdom and judgment, patience and love. When we feel we are doing all we can do but nevertheless move forward in faith to do His will, the Savior works miracles in our lives. He reaches for us and lifts us and strengthens us so that we have capacity to do much more than we could do on our own.⁷ This is the grace of Christ, and it is essential to deep learning and inspired teaching.

LEARNING IS A SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

Now I would like to say a word about our students. We are blessed to work with wonderful young people. They bring a wide range of abilities and also a wide range of interests in learning. We know that the students are children of God. We know they were born to learn. We know if the Atonement is working in their lives, their potential for learning is unbounded.

Because we know who our students really are and because we, too, have access to the grace of the Savior, we can help them Know, and Do, and Become just the way the Lord wants. As I have thought about the influence that we have on them, I am reminded of a talk President Eyring gave many years ago entitled “Teaching is a Moral Act.” In the talk he quotes one of his Harvard professors, C. Roland Christensen, about students and learning. This is Professor Christensen:

I believe in the unlimited potential of every student. At first glance they range, like instructors, from mediocre to magnificent. But potential is invisible to the superficial gaze. It takes faith to discern it, but I have witnessed too many academic miracles to doubt its existence. I now view each student as ‘material for a work of art.’ If I have faith, deep faith, in students’ capacities for creativity and growth, how very much we can accomplish together. If, on the other hand, I fail to believe in that potential, my failure sows seeds of doubt. Students read our negative signals, however carefully cloaked, and retreat from creative risk to the ‘just possible.’ When this happens, everyone loses.⁸

As we ponder the unbounded potential of our students, I think it is important to recognize that learning is a conversion experience. Learning is, in its very nature, a spiritual experience.

In the first place, the Light of Christ mediates all learning of this kind. The Lord taught the Prophet Joseph that the Light of Christ is “the light which shineth, which giveth you light, is through him who enlighteneth your eyes, which is the same light that quickeneth your understandings.”⁹

Even more power comes to those who qualify for the companionship of the Holy Ghost. As the Lord taught: But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things...¹⁰

Second, deep learning engages the total person—the immortal spirit, the heart, the mind, and the body. It involves changing the way the student sees and understands the world, but also affects attitudes and values and the student’s virtues and character.

It is for both of these reasons that I believe deep learning is a spiritual experience.

LEARNING THROUGH INSPIRED TEACHING

Since learning is a spiritual experience that depends on the Atonement of Christ, it makes sense that teaching that leads to such learning also is a spiritual experience and depends for its power and success on the Atonement of the Savior. To teach diligently, therefore, means:

- ◆ *That the Atonement of Christ is working in our lives—purifying, sanctifying us, qualifying us to receive the gifts and blessings of the Holy Spirit.*
- ◆ *That we have prepared ourselves in our own Know-Do-Become process—that we might be prepared with content knowledge, curriculum design, good lesson plans, and powerful learning activities—that we might be and become inspired teachers.*
- ◆ *That we have entered into the world of the students with love in our hearts for them, with empathy for their fears and their hopes, and with a desire to help the students to Know, to Do, and to Become.*
- ◆ *That we pray for the Lord’s help and then get up and go to work and do our very best.*

When we do these things, His grace will attend us. He will magnify our efforts and lift us and our students beyond our own talent and capacity to a much higher level of performance and a much deeper learning than we could ever achieve on our own.

I have seen you teach diligently in just this way over and over again, for a long time. This pattern is at the heart of BYU–Idaho. It is a pattern of faith in the Savior. It is a pattern of the broken heart and the contrite spirit. It is a pattern of consecration, obedience, sacrifice, and professional competence. It is a pattern of love for the Lord and for the students.

Let me quote President Eyring about teachers and students and this love:

Students, when they learn, have an experience like discovery. It can be frightening to them. To them, that first course in a subject is an unknown continent, strange and frightening and threatening, because not only is it hard to learn, but exploring it may convince them that they can’t learn. It may tell them something about themselves that can devastate them. The teachers who will make the difference are the ones who somehow can enter into that world with the student and feel what they feel, know what they fear, care about their fear, and help them move through the fear to learning.¹¹

Brothers and sisters, through the Atonement of Christ, we can enter into the world of the student, with love for him or her and for the Lord. When we do, we can indeed help the student learn. You know that because you have been doing just that. It is who you are. It is your identity as teachers for the Lord. And some of you have been doing it for a long, long time.

LEARNING ABOUT LEARNING

I am convinced the Lord is reaching out to us to lift us to even higher ground. He has prepared the way for us to become much more effective and powerful in our learning and in our teaching. The way forward is for us to do ourselves exactly what we want our students to do—to act in faith in Christ to diligently seek increased power to Know, to Do and to Become the learners and teachers the Lord has prepared us to be.

This is a time for each of us to act—to find out and then do what the Lord wants done. We are empowered to learn, to increase in capacity and power. I am confident the Lord will guide each of us and bless us according to our desire to learn and our faith and diligence.

I believe we learn about learning and teaching and become the Lord's teachers in two ways. Both are essential; neither is sufficient in itself.

The first is individual learning. As a teacher you have many, many opportunities to learn from your own experience. Learning of this kind occurs as you reflect on your experience, get ideas about things to change, and then make adjustments and observe the outcomes. This kind of learning goes on all across the university. It is the stuff and substance of our daily walk. It is critical to the progress of the university on the steady, upward course.

The second kind of learning occurs when we work together in systematic inquiry directed at learning. Ten years ago Elder David A. Bednar spoke at a faculty meeting on this topic.

In my mind the overarching theme for all of our scholarly work at Brigham Young University-Idaho should be inspired inquiry and innovation. . . . Our scholarship

should be focused on the processes of learning and teaching. We will not be a recognized and highly regarded research institution. . . . We will, however, emphasize a wide range of scholarly endeavors and excel in and play a pioneering role in understanding learning and teaching processes with faith and hard work, and in the process of time.¹²

This is systematic inquiry. It is a set of directed learning activities, including experiments, collection and analysis of data, observation, action research, and much else. It is most effective when conducted by a group of faculty who bring diverse experiences and perspectives. It can be done in departments and colleges, but may be even more powerful when done by faculty from across the university.

Some of you have been doing this for a long time and doing it very, very well. For example, we continue to see wonderful work coming out of the CFS (continuing faculty status) process. In addition, over the last two years under the leadership of Kelly Burgener, the deans and chairs have created more formal mechanisms to foster and sustain this kind of systematic inquiry. Driven by a profound belief that the scholarship of learning and teaching is a primary responsibility of all faculty, a growing number of deans and chairs have begun to incorporate discussions of the scholarship of learning and teaching into their meetings. Out of that have grown a number of new initiatives, including teaching teams, retreats focused on learning, and so forth.

We have also seen some wonderful things happening in our Foundations teaching teams, in the Learning and Teaching Council and its various committees, in the recently launched effort in outcomes for programs

and courses, and in our work in Online Learning. As we move now to develop and implement more hybrid courses involving elements of both face-to-face and online learning, we will have a rich opportunity to deepen our understanding of learning and teaching in all modes of delivery.

While the primary focus of our inspired inquiry and innovation will be on the processes of learning and teaching, we also need to learn about curriculum, including the content and design of individual courses as well as the design of programs and majors.

There is much to learn about learning and teaching, but there is another important benefit of systematic inquiry. When we do this kind of work, especially when we do it in small groups of faculty (with support from students), we also will increase in our capacity to collaborate. As we get better at collaboration, the quality of our inquiry and scholarship will increase and we will get better at collaboration. This becomes a virtuous cycle of great power.

May I suggest some things you might do to engage in this great learning process?

- 1. Keep a journal of impressions you receive from the Spirit about learning and teaching. Act on them under the guidance of the Holy Ghost.*
- 2. With the help of the Best Practices committee, identify a best practice that you can implement. Act on what you learn and put it into practice.*
- 3. Join or create a team to develop outcomes and assessments for a module or a course.*
- 4. Develop a pre- and post-test for a module or course and administer it to students. Use the data to guide changes.*
- 5. Make sure you have a five-year development plan. Identify skills, content areas, and creative work you would like to develop.*

I recognize that going where we need to go will require investment. There must be investment in faculty development and in new designs for courses, in new modules, and in new materials. This takes time and resources. Over the next several months, you will hear much more about this. I am confident the Lord has prepared the way; in the great spirit of frugality that has always characterized this place, I believe we will have the modest resources we will need.

THE PROPHECY OF JOHN TAYLOR

When John Taylor was President of the Church, he made this remarkable prophecy:

*You will see the day that Zion will be as far ahead of the outside world in everything pertaining to learning of every kind as we are today in regard to religious matters. You mark my words, and write them down, and see if they do not come to pass.*¹³

I believe BYU–Idaho will be an important part of the fulfillment of that prophecy in our day. I take President Taylor at his word: if we continue to build Zion here, the Lord will bless us with new understanding of learning of every kind. With it will come new understanding of teaching, and the Lord will bless us to know how to implement what we learn.

We have three great blessings from the Lord as we pursue this work.

First, it will not be just a few who will do this. Hundreds of faculty will be engaged, both on the campus in Rexburg and among our many online instructors. Many, many other employees who teach and work with students will be involved. We will have a literal army of students who will participate in this work. The entire university will be a place of inspired inquiry and innovation in learning and teaching.

Second, we will have an integrated curriculum with common designs across many different modes of delivery—face-to-face, hybrid, online, competency. This is a great blessing. Out of it will come rich, comparable data on common outcomes and common assessments. Out of it will come a rich context for experiments and action research.

Third, and most importantly, we have the supernal blessing of the Lord's grace. His grace will attend us. The Holy Ghost will minister here in our work on learning and teaching; and the Lord will watch over us, guide us, and strengthen us beyond our own talents and capacities.

You have been prepared to receive these great blessings. Ten years ago Elder Bednar saw it. I reaffirm it today—this university will be a beacon on a hill. It will be a light in a dark world, a light of learning and teaching. It will come with hard work and diligent seeking. It will come because of your faith in Jesus Christ, your submission to His will, your humility, your consecration, your willingness to sacrifice, and your devotion to the Lord. It will come because we will be focused on blessing the lives of our students, and students everywhere, with our eyes single to the glory of God. It will come because of the grace of the Redeemer.

I bear witness of Jesus Christ. In sacred moments in recent days, I have felt the power of His mercy and His grace. I know He lives. I know He watches over our families and over us. May our Father and His Beloved Son bless us to rise to the great privileges They have prepared for us in my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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1. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Challenge to Become," Ensign, Nov. 2000, 32-34
2. A more complete statement of this framework would incorporate different kinds of knowledge. For example, it might be sufficient to distinguish between Know What – facts, categories, distinctions and so forth; Know How – skill in applying knowledge to accomplish something; and Know Why – fundamental concepts and principles, root causes, and so forth. A simple example: 1) We might learn what a lens is, including its parts, and its function; this is Know What. 2) We might learn how to design a simple lens to accomplish a particular purpose; this is Know How. 3) We might learn about the properties of light, its interaction with materials placed in a particular form defining curvature and thickness, and the principles of optics that govern those interactions to produce the effect of the lens; this is Know Why.
3. D&C 88:78
4. See Jacob 4:7, Ether 12:27, and Alma 26:12 for examples of the strengthening power of the Atonement of Christ.
5. D&C 88:6
6. Matthew 28:18; D&C 93:7
7. Isaiah 40:28-31
8. Henry B. Eyring, "Teaching is a Moral Act," Speeches, BYU Annual University Conference, Aug. 27, 1991
9. D&C 88:11
10. John 14:26
11. Henry B. Eyring, "Teaching is a Moral Act," Speeches, BYU Annual University Conference, Aug. 27, 1991
12. David A. Bednar, as quoted by Henry B. Eyring, "A Steady, Upward Course," BYU-Idaho Devotional, Sept. 18, 2001
13. President John Taylor, Journal of Discourses 21:100, April 13, 1879