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Cultivating the Proper Classroom Climate

Alan R. Maynes

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If you live in a neighborhood that has a few gardeners, you have probably noticed this scenario. You will see one outstanding garden, a few average gardens, and a few weed patches. The differences between the outstanding garden and many others are a few simple things such as cultivating, fertilizing, mulching, and controlling weeds. Some observers say that the outstanding gardener has a green thumb. When you walk into her garden, you notice the absence of weeds and the lush, thriving condition of the plants. Things look beautiful, and the produce is large and abundant. Her garden appears so lush that you can almost see the garden grow. It is inviting, and it has a climate that causes things to grow, thrive, and produce. If you are a person who loves to garden, when you walk into the outstanding garden, you fall into a state of shock, admiration, and depression. You realize that your garden, although very good, is not nearly as good as the outstanding garden. You have become satisfied with some success, but the possibilities and potential are breathtaking. With just a little more care, understanding, and skill, your garden could also be outstanding.

The gospel classroom is much like a garden. When the teacher realizes what kind of classroom environment is healthy, desirable, and possible, he or she is ready to become an outstanding teacher. The teacher becomes desirous and determined to do the *right things* at the *right time*, so the classroom climate becomes an outstanding environment, ready for gospel learning to take place. Elder Gene R. Cook

has taught, “The single greatest thing a teacher does is provide the environment in which people can have a spiritual experience.”¹ Because providing the proper climate is of such importance in growing things—both plants and people—a teacher or gardener should do all he or she can to provide the best possible climate for optimum growth.

Any teacher soon discovers that the students’ willingness to learn has a tremendous impact on the success of the class and the learning that occurs. Some teachers give the classroom climate no thought at all, whereas others put all the responsibility upon the students. Still others attempt to manage or control the class with discipline and rules, and some resort to gimmicks or entertainment. A teacher can do many things to help students become willing and even desirous to learn. When the motivation comes from inside the students’ hearts and minds, the classroom experience changes into one that is exquisitely enjoyable, and all “are edified and rejoice together” (D&C 50:22). This article will explore some things a teacher can do to cultivate the best possible climate for gospel learning.

Believing in Students

The place to begin so this kind of climate can be cultivated is with the teacher. Into the heart and mind of the teacher must come a love for students and a deep faith that they are seekers of truth. President J. Reuben Clark Jr., in his now-famous presentation, “The Charted Course of the Church in Education,” states:

The youth of the Church, your students, are in great majority sound in thought and in spirit. . . . The youth of the Church are hungry for things of the Spirit; they are eager to learn the gospel, and they want it straight, undiluted. They want to know about the fundamentals I have just set out—about our beliefs; they want to gain testimonies of their truth. They are not now doubters but inquirers, seekers after truth. . . . These students crave the faith their fathers and mothers have; they want it in its simplicity and purity. . . . They are prepared to understand the truth. . . . These students are prepared to believe and understand that all these things are matters of faith. . . . These students hunger and thirst . . . for a testimony of the things of the Spirit and of the hereafter. . . . These students as they come to you are spiritually working on toward a maturity which they will early reach if you but feed them the right food. They come to you possessing spiritual knowledge and experience the world does not know.²

These are powerful words. Many of us let a few unbelieving or undisciplined students affect our faith in the 90 percent who are just

as spiritual as President Clark describes. Some of us have not paid the price to cultivate the classroom climate; therefore, we have not yet come to see the students in the light in which the Lord sees them.

In the garden, each gardener plants the same corn seed. However, one gardener has an abundant harvest, and another has weeds. The difference is in the cultivation, not the seed. Acorns grow into mighty oak trees; likewise, infants are children of a divine Father. When given the proper growing climate, these infants grow into people with Christlike characteristics. Faith in the students' divinity, in their potential, and in their being of the house of Israel are essential elements if teachers are to cultivate successfully the proper classroom climate.

The Bond of Charity

Once a teacher believes in the students, then the teacher is ready to cultivate charity. Love for students is closely akin to believing in students. Love for students manifests itself in patience, in long-suffering, in not being easily provoked, in not thinking poorly of students, and in believing that students will rise to the level the teacher and the Lord expect. A teacher needs to have a pure heart, care deeply about the students, pray for the students, and help the students understand, know, and believe. This love insulates a teacher from being argumentative, contentious, controlling, and opinionated. It insulates a teacher from being negative and critical because of occasional immature behavior. The teacher's tone becomes one of genuine interest, compassion, understanding, and meekness. Students feel this love and can see that the teacher really believes in them and has high expectations for them. The students respond accordingly, and their natural tendencies to be good, to participate, to learn, and to enjoy flower one after another.

The gardener who loves the garden prepares the soil, cares for and protects the plants, checks the water and nutrients, looks at the plant color, and watches for disease and bugs. Likewise, a teacher who loves the students provides a safe environment, personally watches over and knows each student, values each student, watches for signs of spiritual disease, and seeks to bring all to an understanding. Love of students is more than a feeling; it is doing things to help the students grow and progress because the teacher cares so deeply. When a teacher is filled with love and has cultivated the gift of charity, everything becomes easier and more effective. Then the efforts a teacher makes to help the students accept their role in gospel learning yield fruit. The students then desire to please their teacher, who loves them, and this translates

into the students' success in pleasing God. The outcomes make for a very edifying experience in the classroom.

Expectations

It is healthy for the average gardener to visit an outstanding garden to see the possibilities; likewise, it is healthy for a teacher to obtain a view of an outstanding classroom. To obtain this view, each teacher needs to consider a few questions: What should I expect of my students in the gospel classroom? What does God expect? What will students accept and do? What is pleasing to the Holy Ghost?

Many Church leaders have explained that we can have great faith and confidence in our students. President Henry B. Eyring has said: "One of the dangers of the times we are passing into is that we might be tempted to lower our expectations for ourselves and those young people we serve. . . . We might be tempted to expect less. . . . The Lord has given another signal, clear and powerful. It is that we can expect more, not less, of youth. . . . In the days ahead, the Lord will raise the spiritual bar again and again. And our youth will rise higher and higher to more than clear that rising expectation."³ The students will rise to the level of expectation. If a teacher has low expectations, the students succumb to the norm that exists in most school classrooms—the behavior of the natural man. The scriptures give the Lord's expectations of gospel classrooms. Doctrine and Covenants 50:10–35 and 88:118–37 are two of the best sources to help a teacher come to understand what the Lord expects. Some of the things the Lord expects are the following:

To be organized	To cease from light speech
To have one person speak at a time	To have all listen
To have all speak or participate	To love another
To not be idle, lazy, or asleep	To have the class pray always
To be prepared	To have the teacher pray
To welcome each other	To pray with thanksgiving
To teach as the Spirit gives utterance	To have a bond of charity
To reason together	To have no contention
To teach by the Spirit	To receive by the Spirit
To be edified and rejoice together	To bring all to understand

Each of these ideas needs careful study and consideration by the teacher. Many teachers have found it extremely profitable to study the scriptures and words of the Brethren⁴ concerning the Lord's expectations. The teacher must come to understand what the Lord desires and then believe it is possible. When a teacher believes the *right way* to teach is

the Lord's way and acts accordingly, the students will rise to the Lord's expectations because He will provide the way.

The outstanding gospel classroom is a sacred place where students can explore and share life-changing personal thoughts and feelings, where thoughtful discussions stimulate hearts and minds. It is a place where students are motivated to come unto Christ. It is a place where testimonies are born and nourished. It is a place where the Holy Ghost is the teacher. Distractions from the teacher, the students, or a teaching method must not be allowed to limit the students' ability to hear and feel the still, small voice of the Spirit. In large measure, the responsibility to cultivate this outstanding classroom climate lies with the teacher.

Teaching Expectations

One of the best ways to help the students accept their role in gospel learning and rise to the Lord's expectations is to teach three to four lessons at the beginning of the year that are model perfect. See that all students have scriptures; then teach several days of engaging lessons, teach doctrines and principles, and help the students discover for themselves. These first lessons set the tone and create the proper attitude in the hearts and minds of the students for the rest of the year. After these first few days, a well-planned and well-taught "expectation lesson" can unite the class and create the proper climate.⁵

When an expectation lesson is taught carefully and thoroughly so the students accept their responsibility, the class is on course to have a wonderful experience together. Reminders are occasionally needed. These reminders are best given as incidents arise instead of allowing the class to drift slowly from doing things the Lord's way. At the end of the quarter or semester, a short follow-up lesson is sometimes needed and helpful.

Teaching expectation lessons without believing in students or loving students is just another list of rules. It is managing and controlling. But when it is done with a pure heart, deep faith in the students, and the bond of charity, it empowers students because they come to believe. The motivation comes from within. After the students understand what is expected and have accepted their responsibility, the single greatest way to maintain the proper classroom climate is to teach enjoyable, engaging, edifying lessons. Get in the scriptures, discover doctrines and principles, ask great questions, have edifying discussions, and make application. Guide the students toward discovery as they participate, and have them share, teach, and testify to each other and to the class.

Training the Class

The next three weeks in the gospel classroom are very important. The teacher needs to realize that people are creatures of habit and that the class becomes trained in its attitudes and behaviors. When the teacher is aware that in the first weeks the class will become trained for good or ill, he or she will be especially careful to maintain the Lord's expectations until the class is trained. Similarly, all plants need extra care until they are established, and some plants require training—pole beans, cucumbers, and grapes, for example. A little help is usually sufficient to get these plants growing where the gardener wants them to grow. Students are much the same; carefully training the students in a few simple things the first few weeks will make the class better the entire year.⁶

Once the climate has been cultivated and the class has been trained, compliments and praise from the teacher are two of the best ways for the teacher to maintain the proper climate. Whenever students do well, thank them. Write individual letters home to parents, thanking them for allowing you to teach their child. Every day, in some way, praise and compliment their best efforts. Even when a student is struggling, find a way to be complimentary. These inspiring, motivating words must come from a profound belief in students and a deep love for the children of men. When the teacher's heart is pure and the bond of charity permeates the classroom, the classroom environment is ready so powerful teaching and learning can take place.

We all have had life-changing moments. One of those moments came into my life when I was taught that through our teaching, we train our class and that I, as the teacher, had trained my class to behave the way they did, either by what I was doing or by what I was not doing. I realized that the teacher held the key to making a great class, an average class, or even a poor one. After teachers have had considerable experience and success in cultivating the proper classroom climate, many find they do not need to teach a lesson on expectations. The rapport and the reputation of the class, along with the careful training the teacher orchestrates are sufficient. The real keys are believing in students and teaching great lessons. When the teacher understands the Lord's expectations, believes in the students, and expects the students to rise to their potential, they usually do. In fact, the students thrive in such a class. The result is just like a lush, beautiful garden. The observer can see the healthy attitudes, willingness to learn, and even excitement and enthusiasm.

Conclusion

Elder and Sister John Hess, potato farmers from Ashton, Idaho, were called to serve in Belarus, where government plots of ground were yielding only a meager fifty sacks of potatoes per hectare. With Idaho potato experience and lots of faith and prayer, Brother Hess rolled up his sleeves and went to work with the same seed, tools, and fertilizer that were available to everyone. When harvest came, the Hesses' plot produced a whopping 550 sacks per hectare—over a 1,000 percent increase.⁷ The difference was knowledge and experience and then doing a few simple things very carefully. They used the same seed, land, tools, and fertilizer, yet the yield was one of great abundance. The same is true in the gospel classroom. A few things done with skill and carefulness cause the yield to multiply by hundreds, even thousands.

Cultivating the climate of the classroom until an environment results that invites the Holy Ghost multiplies the yield. This environment comes when students desire to learn spiritual truths. It must come from inside the students—from what they have come to understand and believe. The teacher has the responsibility to teach, generate, and cultivate the climate that causes the students to rise to the level the Lord expects. The teacher must desire this environment and must pray, seek, and work until this blessing is obtained for the class, for each student, and for the teacher.

Over the years, I have learned much from other teachers. Believing in the students, loving them, having high expectations, and training the class are bedrock principles of great gospel teaching. I have witnessed these principles in action and have been truly amazed at the results. Every effort to improve gospel classrooms and get the gospel into more heads and hearts will hinge upon the classroom climate. Obviously, some improvement will come as we strive to improve in various teaching methods and skills, but until the climate has been cultivated that allows the Holy Ghost to teach, all our efforts will yield only a meager harvest. The abundant harvest will come when the students are with us—when they feel safe to share, teach, and testify to each other. This abundance will come when the gospel is taught by the Spirit, when it is received by the Spirit, and when all are edified and rejoice together (see D&C 50:14–22). **RE**

Notes

1. Gene R. Cook, *Teaching by the Spirit* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 15, 135, 192.
2. J. Reuben Clark Jr., “The Charted Course of the Church in Education,” in *Charge to Religious Educators*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1994), 4–5.
3. Henry B. Eyring, *Raising Expectations*, CES satellite training broadcast, August 2004.
4. A study of the following addresses helps a teacher gain the Lord’s view of the proper classroom climate necessary to learn spiritual truths: Boyd K. Packer, “Reverence Invites Revelation,” *Ensign*, November 1991, 21; Ezra Taft Benson, “The Power of the Word,” *Ensign*, May 1986, 79; Richard G. Scott, “Four Fundamentals for Those Who Teach and Inspire Youth,” CES Symposium, August 14, 1987; Richard G. Scott, “Helping Others to Be Spiritually Led,” CES Symposium, August 8, 1998; J. Reuben Clark Jr., “The Charted Course of the Church in Education,” address to seminary and institute of religion leaders, August 8, 1938; Joseph B. Wirthlin and Gene R. Cook, “Teaching by the Spirit,” *Ensign*, January 1989, 12; Howard W. Hunter, “Eternal Investments,” address to CES religious educators, February 10, 1989; Robert D. Hales, “Teaching by Faith,” address to CES religious educators, February 1, 2002; Henry B. Eyring, “The Lord Will Multiply the Harvest,” address to CES religious educators, February 6, 1998; Henry B. Eyring, “We Must Raise Our Sights,” CES Conference, August 14, 2001; Jeffrey R. Holland, “Therefore, What,” CES Conference, August 8, 2000; Henry B. Eyring, “Raising Expectations,” CES Satellite Training Broadcast, August 4, 2004; Richard G. Scott, “To Understand and Live Truth,” address to CES religious educators, February 4, 2005; David A. Bednar, “Seek Learning by Faith,” address to CES religious educators, February 3, 2006.
5. An excellent expectation lesson is found in *Teaching the Gospel: A CES Resource for Teaching Improvement* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2000), 44–45. The following expectation lesson also seems to be very effective. Start by asking students, “Whose class is this?” They usually respond “yours” or “the teacher’s.” When you question their response, some will say “ours” or “the Lord’s.” Write at the top of the board: *The Lord’s Class*, and then divide the board in half. On one side, write *Teacher’s Responsibilities*; on the other side, write *Student’s Responsibilities*. Now have the students list all the things they feel the teacher should do to make a great class. Even if students suggest things a teacher should not do, write all their responses. Add any items the students missed by having them look at various verses. Erase items that you cannot do as a teacher because you represent the Lord and the board of education and explain why. Now promise the students you will do the best you can to fulfill the responsibilities they have listed under *Teacher’s Responsibilities*. Promise them you will work very hard to make the class enjoyable and instructive—not boring but engaging. Promise the students you will do your best to give them a great experience and please the Lord. Next, have the students list all the things they feel are student responsibilities. Add any items they do not include by having the students look at individual scripture verses. If you feel strongly about something, add it to the list, and tell the students why. Again, erase any item that is unreasonable or inappropriate.

*The Lord's Class**Teacher's Responsibilities*

Be prepared
 Make interesting, fun lessons
 Don't be boring
 Have videos
 Plan games
 Have the Spirit
 Have students participate
 Don't let a few ruin the class
 Teach important, applicable truths
 Have good order and control

Student's Responsibilities

Be on time
 Have scriptures at desk and use them
 Participate
 Don't talk out of turn
 Do not sleep or do homework in class
 Have journals and manuals, and use them
 Sing with energy
 Attend daily (no sluffing)
 Pray and read personally, daily
 Receive revelation
 Have a prayer in heart

Now ask, "Can you as a class promise each other and the Lord that you will do your best to make this class pleasing to the Lord?" Most will respond accordingly. Before you finish, show a video clip from *The Three Witnesses* where the four men are unable to receive an answer until Martin leaves. Explain that Martin did humble himself and receive the manifestation.

Now ask, "What can we learn from this story that applies to the discussion today?" Discuss how one or two can affect the Spirit, and point out that by enrolling in the class, they are obligated to accept the items under "Student's Responsibilities" so the whole class can have the best experience possible. The best results are achieved when this conclusion is drawn out from the students. The following questions seem to work to accomplish this outcome: "What if there is a student who really does not want to be in seminary or what if parents are making a student come—why should this student still come with a great attitude?" Or ask another way: "What would you say to a student who feels this way?"

During this discussion, if the teacher is able to get the students to express their feelings and desires to have a great class, the result is a powerful impact on every student in the class. They realize that their peers want to learn by the Spirit. They also come to understand that effective gospel learning requires a different kind of class. It is sometimes helpful to read a scripture or two on the blessings of unity (see D&C 6:32; Moses 7:18). Again, ask: "Will you promise each other and the Lord that you will do the best you can to make this class one that is wonderful, spiritual, and pleasing to the Lord—one that is enjoyable, engaging, and edifying?"

6. Two examples of training the class are included in this note.

Devotionals. Model the way you would like the devotional for a couple of days. Greet each student. Take care of business, announcements, and chitchat before the devotional starts. Select the hymn before the students arrive. Write the hymn number and the scripture chapter on the board. Ask students to have both books open before the devotional begins. Expect the students to sing with energy. If necessary, stop the singing and have the students start over singing with more energy. After the prayer, invite all to turn to the scripture, read the scripture, and express what they like about the scripture or how the scripture inspires them, and close in the name of Jesus Christ. After a couple of days, ask some students privately to look for a scripture they could share. On the third day, share a scripture and ask if any

students would like to share theirs. Allow two or three to share. Tell the class this is how you would like the devotional to be conducted. Ask students to read their scriptures, ask them to look for a scripture that inspires them and that they could share. Allow two or three each day. As students share, make sure they write the reference, let all turn to the scripture, read the scripture, share how the scripture helps them, and close in the name of Jesus Christ.

This carefulness in the devotional starts the class out on a very high spiritual level. One of the reasons this process yields such a high return is that students who watch and listen to their peers share scriptures find the outcome to be extremely motivating. As more and more students individually read the scriptures, the Spirit is invited into more of the students' lives. The students themselves are feasting upon the word of God and being filled with the fruits of the Spirit.

Participation. Teach your students that all are expected to participate in everything the class does: singing, scripture searching, and discussing. Expect all students to have open scriptures at their desk every day. Have the students all move forward, filling in the empty chairs so that groups and pairs can be utilized. This procedure also helps all be included and makes it difficult for students to hide or hold back. Have the students write in their scriptures. Start by telling them something to write, and, on another occasion, ask them what might be written next to a verse to help them remember. Sometimes share something you have written. At other times, have students write on their own and then share. Do not read many verses aloud, but ask a question and have students look individually for answers. Have students make a comment or give an answer to their partner and then share their thoughts with the entire class. You should train the class by how things are done so they are expected to participate every time, every day. Have the students write in their journals, and then share their thoughts or insights with their group. This high level of participation starts on day one. The students come to understand that in this class, everyone participates. This level of participation is unusual in school classrooms; therefore, participation becomes its own motivator. Time flies in such a class. The students feel it and thoroughly enjoy it. They look forward to coming to class every day; it gives them a shot in the arm; and it makes their day better. The students' participation brings the Holy Ghost into their lives with all the abundant blessings the Spirit offers.

7. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Witnesses unto Me," *Ensign*, May 2001, 14.