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Document Editing: Helping Students Quench Their Thirst

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Adapted from an address at the Mormon History Association Conference in Sacramento, California, in May 2008.

As a recently returned missionary, more intellectually hungry and spiritually alive than I had ever been, I enrolled in Religion 341 at Brigham Young University, a history course that covers the lifetime of Joseph Smith. It proved the most stimulating learning experience in my life to that point. I wanted to know all the professor knew. Moreover, I wanted to know *how* the professor knew. Together with my history courses, I studied American paleography (handwriting) and editing. I researched as often as possible in the Church Archives in Salt Lake City. I interned as an editorial assistant at *BYU Studies*, where among other assignments I verified the transcripts, indexed, and helped annotate the letters William Phelps wrote to his wife, Sally, in 1835.

Just then *BYU Studies* began collaborating with Jan Shipps on her edition of William E. McLellin's journals. My combination of experiences led John W. Welch, *BYU Studies* editor in chief, to assign me to help Professor Shipps verify the journal transcripts. For an intense week, Jan and I read the original journals against the transcripts. I am deeply thankful for that formative few days with Jan and the tiny but clear scrawl of the Tennessean schoolteacher-turned-Apostle William E. McLellin. These literally hands-on experiences with the historical record shaped my understanding of the past and fed my hunger to know early Latter-day Saint history. Ever since I worked with the raw

documents, secondary sources cannot sate the need to know that my professor fostered in me. I must know the historical record for myself.

I now teach the same course at BYU that profoundly influenced me. My experiences, together with my perceptions of what my students both need and crave, shape my curriculum. My course has two proximate purposes, both of which are ultimately and admittedly confessional. First, to help students remember, understand, analyze, and describe the history of the Church through 1844. Because the doctrine and truth claims of the Church are historical, knowledge of this history is essential to Latter-day Saint faith. Second, the course helps students grasp and implement a distinctively Mormon epistemology, described by Elder Dallin H. Oaks at the 2005 Library of Congress symposium on Joseph Smith as “the principle of independent verification by revelation.”¹ My job is to help my students learn how to learn and know by that principle, that is, to help them become independent, to take them to the well and explain how to drink but let them quench their own thirst.

The semester begins with two philosophical questions that the course answers by grounding them in the discipline of history. “What do you know?” I ask my students. “And how do you know it?” Then the rest of the semester features a documentary editing assignment that, according to one student, “helped me realize these important questions.” While they’re still wondering what I’m talking about, I explain that I’m asking what they know in an ultimate sense. What do they know about God? How do they know it? I’m also asking what they know about Latter-day Saint history. What role does Joseph Smith play in what they know and how they know it? Pretty soon we’ve established some basic premises of what we think we know. But figuring out how we know takes a while longer. The discussion turns to sources of knowledge and their transmission and accessibility to us. We recognize that without a historical record, we would not even know that Joseph Smith existed.

Then the discussion takes a turn. I show the students a purported October 1830 letter from Martin Harris to William Phelps that tells an unfamiliar and disconcerting version of a story they already know. It’s Hoffman’s sinister invention, the so-called salamander letter.² Who wrote it? we ask. When? To whom? The answers all seem readily apparent on the face of the document. Some of the students squirm as we read it. Revealing the nature of the forgery always generates a good discussion on the integrity of the historical record. For many students, this is their first consciousness of alternative ways of understanding or casting Joseph Smith. That recognition tends to cause them to be

more aggressively analytical and less passive. One student reported recognizing at this point that “history can be dangerous. History can be the weapon of a man’s hidden agenda.” So the students quickly learn that we are dependent on documents in every sense of the word *dependent*. They realize too that the historical record is wildly uneven, rich and sparse, true and false, illuminating and deceptive. They learn that not all documents are created equal or are capable of providing what they superficially claim. How can we know if a document is authentic? Authentic in what ways? Assuming authenticity, how do we know whether it accurately represents the past? In response to his own wrestle with these questions, one student recognized that “it must be hard to be a historian.”

The learning outcome (to use the current jargon) I seek is for each student to recognize that history is messier—or more “complex and nuanced,” as one student nicely put it—than they had likely assumed. They learn right away that the past is mediated to us by the severely limited historical record and our own cultural assumptions and human limitations. Before we’ve finished the first lecture of the semester I’ve implicitly asked the students to let go of the grand narrative most of them brought to class, where they were hoping to be reinforced rather than reoriented. But the course offers them something much more durable in return.

It helps them understand and appreciate the beauties of what I consider a distinctively Mormon epistemology—their intellectual and spiritual inheritance—the principle of independently verifying transcendent claims by a process that is equally and inseparably intellectual and spiritual. This is begun by engaging what we intend to verify: historical claims and the documents that make them. The students encounter the historical record both philosophically and tangibly. But the course emphasizes that after all historical methods are employed, the ultimate veracity of the truth of claims made in the documents cannot be established by historical methods. The course is designed to give students respect for and skepticism of historians and their methods and to empower students to discern for themselves the claims made by historians and by the historical record—in sum, to become independent of mediators.

This learning happens as students work on a semester-long documentary edition. Each student selects a handwritten, Church-related document composed during Joseph Smith’s lifetime. They explain the historical significance of their document to justify their choice. They do a bit of reading in the standard works on documentary editing and

then transcribe their documents according to accepted practices and their own editorial preferences. They then write an introduction and annotation. I review and return the document at each stage, and they turn in a revised edition at the end of the semester.

Let me explain each step of the process in a bit more detail. Whenever possible, I take the students to the Church History Library and the L. Tom Perry Special Collections in the Lee Library at BYU. Nothing piques their interest quite like an archival show-and-tell. They like to see the marginal notes Elvis Presley made in his Book of Mormon but are even more awestruck by the April 3, 1836, entry in Joseph Smith's journal. In class we venture together into the online Selected Collections from the archives of the Church and into BYU's online collection of early missionary journals.³ We pull up on the screen the images of Joseph's Letterbook 1, as we call it, the first few pages of which are his earliest history. With these images before our eyes we notice Joseph's handwriting, his literary limitations, his first recorded attempt to document what he called "an account of his marvelous experience and of all the mighty acts which he doeth in the name of Jesus Ch[r]ist."⁴ As we read together the stream of profound consciousness Joseph poured onto the pages, the students get their first lesson on paleography. For nearly all of them the excitement is evident. The earlier abstract lecture becomes grounded in the tangible historical record in what is usually their first encounter with it. Joseph Smith begins to come to life as they see his writing and hear his historical voice with very little mediation. Over and over they comment about how "real" this exercise makes Joseph. Document editor and teacher Ann Hawkins called this kind of exercise "time well spent" because "students not only learn to pay attention to specifics when reading, but they gain . . . important theoretical understanding."⁵

Having been oriented to the resources available to them and awakened to a new world of possibilities, each student chooses a manageable document (sometimes part of a larger document). It has to be Church-related but not necessarily composed by a Latter-day Saint and dated from 1805 to 1845. Early in the semester the students turn in an image of the document they chose attached to a well-reasoned paragraph explaining why. This requirement gives them an opportunity, as one of them wrote, to "read many letters and journal entries written by Joseph Smith and other individuals around him," reinforcing the course's epistemological points. Students can know best by examining for themselves. We can tell stories about Joseph Smith all day long. But students do not become independent of my mediation until they

become immersed in his papers. My goal is to give them the power to verify his claims independently of me or anyone else.

Transcription comes next. Hawkins wrote that “teaching the skills of textual editing begins with helping students see the importance of specificity: specific words, meanings, contexts, and so on.”⁶ There is no better way to provide this help than to shepherd students through the process of transcribing a holograph (or in our case an image of a holograph). Students read about transcription from Stevens and Burg’s *Editing Historical Documents: A Handbook of Practice*, and we spend part of one class period discussing the particular problems their documents present. We meet one on one to work through challenges. The students both love and hate this process. They find it both fascinating and painstaking. Transcription requires them to become intimate with their slice of the historical record. One student wrote, “Transcribing the document forced me to use my own judgment and analytical thinking.” This student added, much to my satisfaction, “I came to discern for myself what the document stated and the events it described, without having to rely on anyone else. Of course it was helpful to see the insights of those who are more educated and learned in historical events, but this allowed me to take the knowledge I learned from them and formulate my own opinions.” Transcribing removes yet another mediator, raises awareness, and offers analytical opportunities. A student transcriber wrote, “I have learned to become more skeptical of the document editing that others have done by realizing that others’ interpretations of old documents are not to be completely trusted, but first analyzed and studied out.”

Transcribing a text raises questions about its context, and the next step is to research the document and write an introduction and annotation for it. “How long must our introduction be?” They always ask. “Not a single syllable longer than necessary,” is my answer. “What’s necessary?” they wonder. I tell them their introduction must do four things efficiently and accurately: (1) It must immediately declare the historical importance of the document; (2) it must describe why the document was written; (3) it must describe the person(s) who composed the document and the historical circumstances in which they did so; and (4) it must clearly explain their editorial decisions, or how they mediated between the document and the reader. I explain that their job is to provide a service to readers and that in performing it they should be careful not to mediate unnecessarily. It is not their job to tell readers what to think about the document. It is their job to make the document accessible for readers to think about.

Annotation is the next step. Seasoned document editors debate the nature of annotation. My course is no place to settle the controversies. The students are simply assigned to notice where the document leaves unanswered questions in the mind of an apt but not necessarily expert reader. Those are the places that need annotation. Do not write a thesis, I tell them, but a brief, accurate answer and a citation of the best sources where readers can learn more. Most of these students are advanced undergraduates and all of them are smart, but they require significant help in the research and writing process. Many of them do not know how to use their software to embed a footnote in a text, and most are ignorant of basic issues of style and format. I require them to learn how to write footnotes per Kate Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. But the aim of requiring annotation is only partly mechanical. Its most important function is to cause them to engage the document and its potential readership. Hawkins explained, "The intellectual work that students engage in—marking, for example, things they do not know—helps them imagine themselves, the [text], and subsequent readers in a sort of conversation."⁷ Moreover, the process of asking the document questions reinforces the course's main epistemological issues: what do we know and how do we know it? The conceptual, research, and writing processes of annotation require students to focus on those fundamentals.

Finally, after a response from me at every step, the students revise their document edition and turn in a clean final draft on the last day of the semester. It's a substantial piece of work for them and for me. But the returns are satisfying and enduring. Hawkins wrote that "the results I have seen from integrating the skills of documentary editing far surpasses anything else I have tried for developing skills in critical reading, thinking, writing, and research."⁸ Playing on words taken from the document he and his students edited, Robert Lay described the results of their experience as "lessons of infinite advantage." Despite the admittedly audacious title, Lay nevertheless noted that the experience was "highly motivational and formative" for his students. He emphasized how the exercise sharpened their skills, opened their minds, and fostered respect for historians and document editors. He quoted one student saying, "I now know that footnotes do not just appear out of nowhere!"⁹ That's a small victory for those of us who have spent days composing a single footnote, but it's a lesson of great if not infinite advantage for the students who are now better able to answer the questions, what do we know, and how do we know it?

Returning to those questions, I am willing to go even further than Hawkins and Lay and assert that in the setting of Latter-day Saint history at BYU, document editing as an epistemological exercise produces infinitely valuable lessons. In other words, my ultimate pedagogical goal is to arm the children, as Arthur Henry King put it. The proximate skills and theoretical understanding the students gain are important. But they are means to the end at which I hope each student will arrive. That end is the ability to discern historical claims themselves.

This curriculum is designed in part to serve as the midwife for something close to what Judith Viorst has called “necessary losses.” In other words, students who have unfounded assumptions about Joseph Smith and early Latter-day Saint history often learn that what they “knew” is not grounded in the historical record. One wrote, “I came into this class with a fairly sound understanding of the history of my religion; that understanding, I have since come to learn, was founded upon unsure speculation and idealistic romanticism. Take polygamy for example. I had convinced myself wholly that Joseph Smith never himself practiced plural marriage and that the doctrine was nothing more than a means for the Lord to look after fatherless families and multiply the numbers of early Latter-day Saints. By reading through [documents] of the Kimball family, the Pratt family, and some of Joseph Smith’s wives, I have gained a whole new understanding of the doctrine and its purpose. I by no means fully understand it—perhaps only the Lord truly does—but I now feel more like a witness of its divine purpose and timing.”

I emphasize *necessary* losses. The students need not part with anything that is essential to their faith, as they come to see for themselves. In the process they become discerning; they learn the difference between folk memory and documented history and also between hostile interpretation and documented history. As painful as parting with cherished versions of the past may be, students appreciate the process and its results. They express a newfound confidence in the historical integrity of their faith and feel empowered by their increased consciousness of what they know and how. The course walks them through the process and illustrates how successfully history can be negotiated by those who believe Joseph Smith’s claims. I illustrate by citing my own experiences with the McLellin journals. They were published in the wake of the Hoffman forgery scandal, partly to answer critics who were sure they contained evidence damaging to Latter-day Saint truth claims. Trust me, they do not. They’re about how many miles McLellin walked each day, the biblical texts on which he preached, the meetings he attended,

and whether he slept well. And every once in a while they're about how he learned for himself that the Book of Mormon was true or how a revelation to him through Joseph Smith answered his secret questions and gave great comfort to his heart.

Grant Palmer's manipulation of Joseph's 1832 history in his *Insider's View of Mormon Origins* is another vivid illustration by which students learn both their dependence on the historical record and skepticism for mediators. The students are very smart, and with the documents only a few clicks away they need only some orientation to gain the skills to be independent of other scholars as they arrive at their own answers to the course's key questions.

The course insistently works to empower the students to read and reason and analyze and know for themselves, so that they become independent of both sentimental folk memories and hostile interpretations of the historical record. Students come to class having read a narrative of the history slated for discussion. So class meetings become something more akin to a lab than a lecture. "Many history courses have you read, memorize, and repeat history," one student wrote. "This was a way for me to dissect history for myself." Over the course of the semester we examine Joseph Smith's histories, journals, and letters; the Hurlbut affidavits; Ezra Booth's letters; passages of Lucy Mack Smith's memoir; the mountain of hearsay testimony of the Book of Mormon witnesses; chunks of Wilford Woodruff's journal; the letters of Delilah McCoy Lykins; of course the McLellin journals; and dozens of other documents. We end the semester listening to Wilford Woodruff's voice as captured by Edison's phonograph. Very quickly the students become accustomed to the hermeneutic. They know that we're always asking, what do we know and how do we know it? as we sort our way through the contested past by the light of the historical record.

From the outset most of the students could relate the general outline of the canonized account of Joseph's First Vision. But they could not tell when it was written or under what circumstances. They could not compare it to Joseph's other accounts or the several hearsay accounts. They did not know Reverend Walter's critiques or Milton Backman's painstaking responsive research. But they know all that at the end of the semester. They know that there are several accounts of the vision, they have found them in the Selected Collections database and read them, and they know how they compare and how they combine to make Joseph's theophany arguably the best documented in history.

Even so, the philosophical and hands-on work of assessing historical claims, closely reading the historical record, and listening to a

variety of voices contest the past is all preparatory. It does the work of clarifying that documents testify of the historicity of the vision but that the documents do not and indeed cannot prove or disprove its historicity. In other words, the preparation empowers students to know the historical record for themselves and, very importantly, to know its limitations. They recognize that transcendent questions cannot be answered by the documents, but also that the very documents they study to arrive at that conclusion vividly describe a way of knowing that many of them choose to act out for themselves. Many of them decide to adopt the distinctively Mormon way of knowing that Moroni and Elder Oaks described.¹⁰ One characteristic student reported, “Through my document editing process, I have gained a stronger, more meaningful testimony of Joseph Smith the Prophet than I’ve ever known possible. He is more alive to me than ever before, and I look forward to learning more.” **RE**

Notes

1. Dallin H. Oaks, “Joseph Smith in a Personal World,” *BYU Studies* 44, no. 4 (2005): 167.

2. See Richard E. Turley’s chapter on this letter in *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hoffman Case* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

3. <http://www.lib.byu.edu/cgi-bin/SubsUtility/dbresources.pl?letter=S>, <http://www.lib.byu.edu/dlib/mmd/>.

4. Joseph Smith, Letterbook 1, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

5. Ann R. Hawkins, “Teaching the Skills of Documentary Editing,” *Newsletter of the Association for Documentary Editing* 28 (Summer 2006): 71.

6. Hawkins, “Teachings the Skills of Documentary Editing,” 69.

7. Hawkins, “Teaching the Skills of Documentary Editing,” 72.

8. Hawkins, “Teaching the Skills of Documentary Editing,” 69.

9. Robert F. Lay, “Lessons of Infinite Advantage: Introducing Undergraduates to Historical Editing,” *Documentary Editing* 29 (2007): 45–49, quote on page 49.

10. Oaks, “Joseph Smith in a Personal World,” 167.