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Active Learning and the Savior's Nephite Ministry

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In October 2002, Elder M. Russell Ballard called for the preparation of “the greatest generation of missionaries in the history of the Church.”¹ This call for “raising the bar”² has had a significant effect on gospel teachers within the Church, and especially those within the Church Educational System (CES). As a result of increased expectations for Church youth, the standards of teaching for religious educators who instruct the youth have also risen. These higher teaching standards call for increased student participation in the learning process.

This heightened focus on student participation has, however, left some religious educators frustrated as they have struggled to understand how student participation is defined and how to best implement it in their classrooms. As student participation has been promoted, some teachers have felt that direct instructional methods, such as lecture, have been discouraged. These religious educators have interpreted student participation to be synonymous with students’ physical and verbal involvement, and therefore inconsistent with teacher lecture. As a result, some teachers have begun to wonder both privately and publicly, “If we aren’t supposed to lecture, then why did the Savior do it so much? Did the Master Teacher use active learning in his teaching? Did he use anything like group work, peer-to-peer instruction, or experiential learning exercises? If so, how? If not, then why are we being asked to?” Seeking understanding and answers to these questions is valuable for the success of today’s CES classroom.

In this paper, the following terms and definitions will be used as follows:

1. *Physical involvement.* When students become involved in the learning process by using one or more of the five physical senses.
2. *Active learning.* When a teacher provides opportunities in the classroom for students to become physically, mentally, and spiritually engaged.
3. *Student participation.* When students exercise agency and choose to become physically, mentally, or spiritually engaged.

Raising Our Sights: The Development of the Teaching Emphasis

To understand why increased student participation has recently become a standard of teaching excellence in CES, it is necessary to examine some of the events that precipitated this change. In 2001, Elder Henry B. Eyring called for a newly elevated standard for CES teachers, saying that we needed to “raise our sights” by seeking to have students “become truly converted to the restored gospel of Jesus Christ while they are with us.”³ In 2003 Elder Eyring repeated a similar theme to CES religious educators when he said, “I have felt as many of you have felt that what we have done and are doing will not be enough. We need greater power to get the gospel down into the hearts and lives of our students.”⁴ In conjunction with raising the bar regarding missionary worthiness and preparation, Seminaries and Institutes of Religion assistant administrator Randall L. Hall explained that at that time there also “came a request from the Missionary Executive Committee to the Church Educational System: What can CES do to help us better prepare missionaries?”⁵

Motivated by these combined events, in 2003 the Teaching Emphasis was released to seminary and institute personnel in an effort to meet the call for better-prepared missionaries and to “deepen [the] faith, testimony, and conversion”⁶ of the youth they teach. Brother Hall affirmed that the Teaching Emphasis received approbation from the Missionary Executive Committee and that the Church Board of Education called it “very timely.”⁷

While many principles of the Teaching Emphasis—such as encouraging the students to develop habits of daily scripture study, applying gospel principles from the scriptures, and mastering key scriptural passages—are not new, it has a heightened emphasis on increased student participation in the learning process. The document directly refers to students teaching, explaining, sharing, and testifying, and provides

direction to the teacher to “give [students] opportunities to do so with each other in class.”⁸ The Teaching Emphasis also speaks of *students* understanding, identifying, and applying gospel doctrines and principles, with the emphasis on the student doing the work, not the teacher doing the work for them. To emphasize this point of student-directed learning, the Teaching Emphasis uses the phrase “help students” in five of the six areas of emphasis when referring to the teacher’s role. Overall, there is a definite and deliberate focus on active learning in the Teaching Emphasis.

Additional Developments toward Active Learning

Following the creation and implementation of the teaching emphasis for seminaries and institutes, CES religious educators received back-to-back instruction during two landmark addresses on teaching and learning—one from Elder Richard G. Scott in 2005 and the other from Elder David A. Bednar in 2006. As in Elder Eyring’s 2001 address, both spoke of the need to get the gospel into the hearts of youth and deepen their conversion, and both leaned heavily on the idea of student participation as a key factor in helping this happen. Elder Scott’s words were direct and unequivocal when he instructed, “Never, and I mean never, give a lecture where there is no student participation. A ‘talking head’ is the weakest form of class instruction.”¹⁰ Elder Scott encouraged the use of peer-to-peer teaching and one-on-one interaction as means of involving students more in the learning process. He stressed: “Assure that there is abundant participation because that use of agency by a student authorizes the Holy Ghost to instruct. It also helps the student retain your message. As students verbalize truths, they are confirmed in their souls and strengthen their personal testimonies.”¹¹

The following year, Elder Bednar expounded on the scriptural invitation to “seek learning . . . by faith” (D&C 88:118). Again, active learning was a primary focus. Elder Bednar explained that as faith is the principle of action in all intelligent beings, students must act in order to learn by faith: “Are the students we serve acting and seeking to learn by faith, or are they waiting to be taught and acted upon? . . . 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. Learning by faith requires spiritual, mental, and physical exertion and not just passive reception.”¹²

This spotlight on participatory learning has been evident not only in CES classrooms but also in other areas of religious instruction in

the Church. The Church's 2007 worldwide leadership broadcast was aimed at addressing teaching and learning in all Church classrooms, with suggestions from Elder Jeffrey R. Holland regarding how to get participants more involved in asking and answering questions.¹³ On the university level, BYU-Idaho has recently implemented the Learning Model, which emphasizes student participation in all its classes of higher learning, not just religion courses. One section of the Learning Model, intended for teachers, states, "Teachers organize class discussions and assignments so students have opportunities to act rather than just be passive participants in the learning process."¹⁴

This emphasis on active learning has led to some confusion and controversy among religious educators: does this mean that a teacher who doesn't use physical involvement methods is an ineffective teacher? If students are not paired off in groups discussing doctrines or principles with one another, does that mean they are not learning? If the teacher expounds on a point for more than twenty minutes without student comments or questions, has the teacher violated some sort of new teaching commandment? If there is an abundance of student verbalization and other physical activity, does that mean the teacher got it right and that the Spirit is present?

Although the answers to a few of these questions may seem obvious, they are in fact real and heartfelt concerns for some CES teachers who are struggling to understand and implement these new teaching directives from their leaders. The root of this confusion may be a misunderstanding of the definition of "student participation" and its ultimate purpose in spiritual learning.

Experience: The Best Teacher

Before the definition of student participation can be explored, it must be clarified that the purpose of active learning is to provide the student with spiritual experiences so that conversion may take place. Being involved in learning is a means, not an end. An important insight from both of the aforementioned statements by Elders Scott and Bednar is that it is the students' use of agency that opens their hearts to have an experience with the Holy Ghost. If students do not have the opportunity to *act* physically, mentally, or spiritually during the learning process (the *means*), they usually will not have a spiritual experience (the *end*). It is proverbially said that experience is the best teacher, and from a gospel perspective, we know that we are here on earth to gain experience. Metaphorically speaking, we can see life as a large participatory classroom where we can learn through experience

to choose good from evil (see 2 Nephi 2:27) and gain attributes that will enable us to become like God.¹⁵ To the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Lord said, “All these things shall give thee experience” (D&C 122:7). The Lord told the Saints in Missouri to wait for the redemption of Zion until they could “be taught more perfectly, and have experience” (D&C 105:10). At times, we even learn in this life “by sad experience” (D&C 121:39). Acting in this mortal sphere (the *means*) is what provides us with experience and enables us to learn, grow, and become like God (the *end*).

This principle of action is also true for acquiring spiritual knowledge. For this reason Alma tells us that in order to increase our faith we must “experiment upon [his] words, and exercise a particle of faith” (Alma 32:27). The action words *experiment* and *exercise* are keys for obtaining spiritual experience. Similarly, the Lord promised, “If any man will do [God’s] will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself” (John 7:17). President Howard W. Hunter taught: “Action is one of the chief foundations of personal testimony. The surest witness is that which comes firsthand out of personal experience. . . . This, then, is the finest source of personal testimony. One knows because he has experienced. He does not have to say, ‘Brother Jones says it is true, and I believe him.’ He can say, ‘I have lived this principle in my own life, and I know through personal experience that it works. I have felt its influence, tested its practical usefulness, and know that it is good. I can testify of my own knowledge that it is a true principle.’”¹⁶

For religious educators, the question becomes whether or not a student’s participation in the classroom fosters deeper spiritual experiences than listening to a teacher who lectures. Or are we confusing the issue altogether if we separate religious instruction into two seemingly opposing categories of student participation versus lecture? Is it possible to do both, having students participate *while* the teacher lectures?

Spiritual, Mental, and Physical Exertion

One idea causing misunderstanding is the belief that active learning is synonymous with physical involvement, and that student participation is something that can be *seen or heard* by the casual onlooker. Some teachers have concluded that if a teacher is lecturing and students are not verbally participating, then they are not participating at all. Elder Bednar, however, used an expanded definition of student participation that broadens our understanding of the term and opens new possibilities. He said, “Learning by faith requires *spiritual, mental, and*

physical exertion and not just passive reception.”¹⁷ While each of these three elements constitutes a form of active learning, neither mental nor spiritual exertion is discernible to an outside observer. A learner may have a profound experience in the classroom and be fully engaged in mind or spirit but not necessarily in body. In this case, student participation happens even though the student is silent and appears less physically active in class. This realization calls for a philosophical shift among religious educators who measure student participation only by physical or verbal involvement. In a sincere effort to understand and implement principles of active learning, some of these teachers have overreacted in the very ways that Randall L. Hall warned about in his talk “The Importance of Maintaining Balance,”¹⁸ adopting a distorted view of what student participation means.

Let us closely analyze and not misinterpret Elder Scott’s statement on lecturing. This statement has been used to wrongfully disparage excellent teachers who are branded as “lecturers” (and therefore are now assumed to be ineffective teachers). Elder Scott told religious educators never to give a lecture “where there is no student participation.” He didn’t say, “Never give a lecture.” In fact, a teacher could be doing much of the talking and the students primarily listening, and the students could still be actively involved. Students listening to a lecture could simultaneously be participating physically (looking at a visual aid or handling an item), mentally (following along in the scriptures, taking notes, analyzing rhetorical questions, and pondering points), and spiritually (having ideas come to their minds and feelings come to their hearts as they reflect on what is being said). This is why effective learning can still take place in large-audience formats such as general conference and devotionals, where verbal or physical participation is limited due to logistics and appropriateness. What Elder Scott taught is consistent with the principle of “learning by faith” in that it is indeed possible to give a lecture *and* have abundant student participation at the same time.

This expanded definition of participatory learning does not give us as religious educators license to drone on hour after hour as a “talking head.” We are responsible for providing active learning opportunities for the students that stimulate and invite them to become physically, mentally, and spiritually involved. Effective teaching most often happens when the teacher encourages involvement in all three of these areas, regardless of the methods employed to facilitate them. The *Teaching the Gospel* handbook emphasizes that teachers should “stay focused on the learner and not just on teaching. The difference between focusing

on the learner and focusing on teaching or on the teacher is illustrated by the difference in a teacher who says, 'What shall I do in class today?' and one who says, 'What will my students do in class today?'"¹⁹ This principle of remaining focused on the learner and facilitating spiritual, mental, and physical exertion holds true even when giving a lecture.

To further validate this expanded definition of physical, mental, and spiritual involvement in student participation, let us follow President Boyd K. Packer's counsel and "analyze our ideals and goals and methods [of teaching] and compare them with those of Jesus Christ"²⁰ as he ministered to the Nephites.

Jesus Expounds and Involves

The Lord's ministry among the Nephites presents an excellent case study of Jesus' teaching methods. While there are limitations in its comparison to daily classroom teaching (such as the events surrounding his appearance and the size of the multitude he taught), it is nonetheless a worthy study. The Lord's personal Nephite ministry has a definite beginning and end, similar to that of a class period or a semester of teaching. He had definite purposes in mind and, apparently, a time frame in which to accomplish them (see 3 Nephi 17:1). Viewing these sacred chapters as a lesson in effective teaching is inspiring and enlightening, especially when seen through the lens of the Savior's use of active learning methods in his teaching. In his ministry to the Nephites, the Lord demonstrated a wonderful pattern of teaching that facilitates and invites physical, mental, and spiritual effort on the part of each of his learners. For the purposes of this study, we will define Jesus' personal Nephite ministry as beginning with his resurrected appearance in 3 Nephi 11 and ending with his second ascension from the multitude in 3 Nephi 26.

Jesus' teaching methods among the Nephites can be broken down into two categories: (1) *group involvement* and (2) *Jesus expounding*. "Group involvement" is defined as any time the multitude physically participated in something together. "Jesus expounding" (see 3 Nephi 26:1) is defined as any time the Savior verbally taught and explained truths of the gospel as the multitude listened. When his teaching methods are separated into these two categories, an interesting pattern emerges regarding the Savior's ability to incorporate lecture with physical, mental, and spiritual participation:

- 3 Nephi 11. Group involvement (all feel the Savior's wounded side and the prints in his hands and feet)

- 3 Nephi 12–16. Jesus expounds (the Nephite Sermon on the Mount)
- 3 Nephi 17. Group involvement (Jesus heals the sick; angels minister to children)
- 3 Nephi 18. Group involvement (sacrament administered)
- 3 Nephi 18. Jesus expounds (teachings on the sacrament)
- 3 Nephi 19. Group involvement (disciples' baptisms, ministering angels, marvelous prayer with Jesus)
- 3 Nephi 20. Group involvement (second sacrament, Jesus provides bread and wine miraculously)
- 3 Nephi 20–23. Jesus expounds (words of Isaiah)
- 3 Nephi 24–25. Jesus expounds (words of Malachi)
- 3 Nephi 26. Jesus expounds (all things from the beginning)
- 3 Nephi 26. Group involvement (tongues of babes and children loosed and they utter marvelous things)

In all, there are six times the group was physically involved and five times the Master expounded doctrine to the Nephites. This is a wonderful blend, incorporating both physical involvement and “lecture.”

The Lord encouraged physical, mental, and spiritual exertion as he taught, both while he expounded and as the multitude was physically active. The following are categorized examples of the means the Savior employed that could fall under the headings of physical, mental, and spiritual participation. (Note: Although each method falls under only one heading, many of them could be classified into two or all three categories of involvement.)

Physical Participation (Sight, Sound, Touch, Taste, and Smell)

- 3 Nephi 11:15. The multitude touches, sees, and feels Christ’s wounded side and prints in his hands and feet.
- 3 Nephi 11:16–17. The multitude cries out “Hosanna!” and worships Jesus.
- 3 Nephi 17:9–10. The sick and afflicted are healed, and some bathe Christ’s feet with their tears.
- 3 Nephi 17:24. The multitude sees and hears angels minister to their children.
- 3 Nephi 18:1–4. The multitude partakes of the sacrament.
- 3 Nephi 19:2–3. The multitude goes home and tells others that Jesus will minister again tomorrow.
- 3 Nephi 19:18. The multitude and disciples pray out loud.

- 3 Nephi 20:1–9. The multitude partakes of the sacrament and witnesses Jesus' miraculous provision of bread and wine.
- 3 Nephi 20:9. The multitude cries out and gives glory to Jesus.
- 3 Nephi 26:14. Children and babes open their mouths and speak marvelous things to their fathers.

Mental Participation

- 3 Nephi 12–14. Jesus asks twelve analysis-type questions of those he taught.
- 3 Nephi 17:3. The multitude ponders on Christ's words at home and prepares their minds for the morrow.
- 3 Nephi 23:11–13. The disciples are commanded to write Samuel's words according to Jesus' reproof.
- 3 Nephi 24:1. The disciples are commanded to write the words of Malachi that Jesus quotes.

Spiritual Participation

- 3 Nephi 17:2–3. The multitude is told to pray in their homes to understand Christ's words.
- 3 Nephi 17:9. Jesus heals all the sick and afflicted.
- 3 Nephi 17:16–17. The people's souls are filled with joy as they see and hear Jesus pray for them.
- 3 Nephi 19:15–36. Jesus prays with and for the disciples; the people's hearts are opened.
- 3 Nephi 20:9. The multitude is filled with the Spirit after the sacrament.

These are merely a few examples of the diverse methods used by the Savior to invite physical, mental, and spiritual exertion. The Lord utilized a variety of involvement methods in these chapters, such as peer-to-peer teaching, tactile experiences, student verbal expression, silent pondering, question analysis, visual stimuli, auditory experiences, writing and note taking, and prayer. These are all methods we can employ in our daily classes. This variety of involvement methods not only appeals to different learning styles and helps keep students attentive, but more importantly it provides multiple opportunities for students to exercise their agency in the learning process.

Perhaps more exemplary than Jesus' teaching methods is his ability to invite *individual* participation on all levels of physical, mental, and spiritual exertion. A wonderful example of this is found in Jesus' initial

appearance to the Nephites in 3 Nephi 11. In this example, it appears that Jesus purposely chose to individually involve the Nephites when more passive involvement might have sufficed. That the first thing the Savior did upon his appearance was allow the entire multitude to individually feel his wounds is a testament to the power of individual engagement in the learning process. Notice the words that imply individual involvement in these verses:

Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world.

And it came to pass that the multitude went forth, and thrust their hands into his side, and did feel the prints of the nails in his hands and in his feet; and this they did do, *going forth one by one* until they had *all gone forth*, and did see with their eyes and did feel with their hands. (3 Nephi 11:14–15; emphasis added)

Providing this sacred, intimate, and individually involved experience was no small task, as the record indicates that there were 2,500 men, women, and children present (see 3 Nephi 17:25). Why, then, did the Savior take the time to engage them individually, when he could have simply held up his hands and shown the multitude that he was the Redeemer? Perhaps it is because his invitation to “arise and come forth” (3 Nephi 11:14) allowed each Nephite to employ exertion physically (to walk up to him to see and touch the prints), mentally (to think about the meaning of the prints), and spiritually (to feel reverence for and sense the spiritual significance of the prints while in his resurrected presence). Although this individual involvement took more time and effort, note the result for each person involved: “And [they] did *know of a surety* and did bear record, that it was he, of whom it was written by the prophets, that should come. And when they had all gone forth and had *witnessed for themselves*, they did cry out with one accord, saying: Hosanna! Blessed be the name of the Most High God! And they did fall down at the feet of Jesus, and did worship him” (3 Nephi 11:15–17; emphasis added). It is quite possible that this sacred experience resulted in increased testimony because it was an individual experience that combined all three areas of participation: physical, mental, and spiritual.

Although we cannot recreate in our daily classes many of the miraculous experiences the Savior provided during his Nephite ministry, we can nevertheless learn from and seek to emulate the principles of effective teaching the Savior employed. His masterful ability to facilitate and

invite physical, mental, and spiritual effort on the part of all his learners is a pattern we can following to make our teaching spiritually effective.

Broadening Active Learning

As CES continues to discuss and promote active learning, perhaps we should expand our definition of the term. Active learning is more than just physical or verbal involvement. It is, as Elder Bednar taught, physical, mental, and spiritual exertion. Those three elements all constitute forms of student participation and can promote “learning by faith.” Two of the three areas of involvement are not always discernible to an outside observer. A student may be fully engaged mentally and spiritually and participatory learning may be happening even though physically the student does not appear active. We might also remember that it is possible to give a lecture *with* abundant student participation, as the Savior demonstrated so effectively and as Elder Scott suggested. As religious educators, we do ourselves and our colleagues a great disservice if we think student participation is limited only to physical or verbal involvement, thus disparaging the idea of any teacher lecture. In the same way, we also do our students a great disservice if, thinking that the Savior did not involve his learners as active participants in a variety of ways, we decide that neither should we.

It is clear from studying the Savior’s ministry and teaching methods among the Nephites that his students were abundantly involved, physically, mentally, and spiritually. This type of student participation is what the Teaching Emphasis, the Learning Model, Elder Scott, Elder Bednar, and other Brethren have encouraged us to implement, regardless of the methods employed, because it helps foster spiritual experiences. The more we model our teaching after the Master Teacher, the more our students will be able to exercise their agency in learning, thus opening their hearts to the Holy Ghost and becoming “converted unto the Lord” (4 Nephi 1:2). **RE**

Notes

1. M. Russell Ballard, “The Greatest Generation of Missionaries,” *Ensign*, November 2002, 47.
2. Ballard, “Greatest Generation of Missionaries,” 48.
3. Henry B. Eyring, “We Must Raise Our Sights,” CES conference on the Book of Mormon, August 14, 2001, 2.
4. Henry B. Eyring, “The Spirit Must Be Our Constant Companion,” address to CES religious educators, February 7, 2003, 1.

5. Randall L. Hall, "The Current Teaching Emphasis: An Update," address given at the CES satellite training broadcast, August 2003, 2.
6. Church Educational System, "Teaching Emphasis for the Church Educational System" (2007), paragraph 2.
7. Hall, "Current Teaching Emphasis," 2.
8. "Teaching Emphasis," paragraph 6.
9. "Teaching Emphasis," bulleted paragraphs.
10. Richard G. Scott, "To Understand and Live Truth," address to CES religious educators, February 4, 2005, 3.
11. Scott, "To Understand and Live Truth," 3.
12. David A. Bednar, "Seek Learning by Faith," address to CES religious educators, February 3, 2006, 3.
13. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Teaching and Learning in the Church," *Ensign*, June 2007, 101–3.
14. Brigham Young University–Idaho, "Learning Model," section 1:10–11.
15. *True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 115.
16. Clyde J. Williams, ed., *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 47.
17. Bednar, "Seek Learning by Faith," 3; emphasis added.
18. Randall L. Hall, "The Importance of Maintaining Balance," *A Current Teaching Emphasis for the Church Educational System: Inservice Training* (CES video, 2003).
19. *Teaching the Gospel: A Handbook for CES Teachers and Leaders* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001), 13.
20. Boyd K. Packer, *Teach Ye Diligently* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 18.