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The Very Best Teaching: Reaching Out to Individuals

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The most powerful teaching moments can occur as teachers directly reach out to students as individuals.

President Monson showed his concern by reaching out to one in need. Often the individuals who need to be reached out to are those who contribute the least in class. President Howard W. Hunter cautioned, “Do not fall into the trap that some of us fall into by calling on the ones who are always so bright and eager and ready with the right answer. Look and probe for those who are hanging back, who are shy and retiring and perhaps troubled in spirit. If calling on such a person in class is not the best thing to do—and in some cases it may well not be—then find a reason to speak to him or her before class or after, in the hallway or, better yet, in your office. Remember that *the very best teaching is one on one and often takes place out of the classroom.*”²

It is acknowledged that a lot of powerful teaching does take place in the classroom. This paper discusses some of the ways teachers can facilitate the one-on-one teaching that takes place *out* of the classroom. This teaching can occur as we

1. know students by name;
2. contact the one;
3. find ways to serve students;
4. follow the Spirit; and
5. teach by the way.

Know Students by Name

One key that facilitates one-on-one teaching is to know students’ names. A pattern exists in the scriptures that heavenly ministrants know the names of those whom they are called to teach. Consider the following examples:

- “The angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias” (Luke 1:13).
- “The angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary” (Luke 1:30).
- “An angel came down and stood before me; and he said unto me: Nephi, what beholdest thou?” (1 Nephi 11:14).
- “An angel of the Lord appeared unto him, saying: Blessed art thou, Alma” (Alma 8:14–15).
- “One of them spake unto me, calling me by name” (Joseph Smith—History 1:17).

The Lord himself has said, “I know thee by name” (Exodus 33:12) and “I, the Lord, . . . call thee by thy name” (Isaiah 45:3). As William D. Oswald of the Sunday School general presidency taught, “Teachers who love their students and call them by name are following a heavenly pattern.”³

In some contexts, learning the names of students is quite simple. If a teacher has seven seminary students and sees them daily, learning their names should not be hard. But suppose there are an additional seven students who should be coming to class but are not active. Are their names known? If their names are not known, the likelihood that they will be ministered to is substantially decreased. Perhaps this is why amongst the Nephites “their names were taken, that they might be remembered and nourished by the good word of God” (Moroni 6:4).

Even those with large classes can strive to remember as many names as possible. One student said, commenting about how caring a particular teacher was, “I really liked how personable he was. . . . He really did learn everyone’s name in a class of about 130.”

Another student shared the following experience. “After my mission I returned to school full of excitement to take the classes to prepare one to be a seminary teacher. But my experience in the first class was not what I had expected. The teacher said that we should only be in the class if we were juniors and that most of us would not succeed as seminary teachers anyways. I was a sophomore and left the class feeling discouraged. I dropped the class but needed another religion class. I didn’t know which class to sign up for, and I was worried about it. I remembered that I had enjoyed my freshman Book of Mormon class and decided to take another class from that same teacher. As I walked into his classroom, feeling somewhat nervous after my experience the day before, I felt so happy as the teacher greeted me by name. I could not believe that after two years he still remembered my name. Although I still remember some things I learned in class, the thing that stands out to me the most is that he remembered my name.” Learning the names of students can open the door to the one-on-one teaching that occurs outside the classroom.

Contact the One

Related to knowing the names of each student is the willingness to reach out to individual students who may be struggling. President Hunter stated:

I . . . encourage you to think about the students you teach and try to reach them on an individual level. Even though I work with large units like stakes, regions, and areas of the Church, I have to constantly remind myself that those units consist of individual people with individual problems and individual hopes and dreams. You have large classes. You have preparations to make and examinations to correct. The numbers can be staggering, but you must remember that you are teaching and trying to reach individual students. . . . It will be hard for you to give all of the personal

attention some of your students both want and need, but try the best you can to think of them individually, to let them feel something personal and special in the concern of you, their teacher. Pray to know which student needs what kind of help, and remain sensitive to those promptings when they then come.⁴

The Lord has set a clear pattern of ministering to individuals. Consider the following examples:

- “Ye shall be gathered *one by one*, O ye children of Israel” (Isaiah 27:12; emphasis added).
- “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 . . . , going forth *one by one*” (3 Nephi 11:15; emphasis added).
- “He took their little children, *one by one*, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them” (3 Nephi 17:21; emphasis added).
- “Jesus . . . touched with his hand the disciples whom he had chosen, *one by one*, even until he had touched them all” (3 Nephi 18:36; emphasis added).
- “Jesus . . . spake unto his disciples, *one by one*” (3 Nephi 28:1; emphasis added).

At times it can be simple to be content with those who are present in class, forgetting those who are not. Elder Clayton M. Christensen shared an experience of a mission president in France who made an effort to reach out to those individuals who had not attended church:

At the end of Sunday meetings, the branch councils and missionaries together named the members and investigators who could have been there but didn't come. They each took an assignment to contact one of those individuals that same day with this message: “We sure missed you today. Are you OK? It's not the same for the rest of us when you can't come. Can I help? Can you come next Sunday?” Within two years, sacrament meeting attendance in the district increased from 540 to 725 — in a region where convert baptisms are infrequent.⁵

Elder Christensen went on to point out that many less-active members got that way because they didn't return to the fold one Sunday and nobody seemed to notice.⁶ Reaching out to individual students who have missed class can be as simple as e-mailing or calling them. Many teachers have also found power in following the example of President Monson described previously by physically going out to visit students who are missing. One institute teacher shared the following experience:

At a training meeting we were invited to make occasional home visits to students who were not attending classes. I was quick to justify why this was not feasible with my schedule but eventually decided to give it a try. I had not visited the home of a student for several years, and so I approached the visits with trepidation. Over the course of a semester I probably visited five or six students. I never found a student at home—but I always left a note. Three of those students—each of whom I had called several times previous to visiting them—starting coming back to institute when they saw I had been to their homes. One of those students is on a mission right now.

Contacting students individually can open the door to one-on-one teaching opportunities outside of the classroom.

Find Ways to Serve Students

In a sense, reaching out to individuals is a form of service. Serving individuals facilitates the very best teaching not only because it can potentially prepare the heart of the person being served but also because it changes the heart of the person doing the serving. One need look no further than the ministry of Ammon to see the power that can come in teaching as a result of service (see Alma 17–18).

As the teacher's heart becomes filled with love for individual students it becomes easier to teach them. President Henry B. Eyring shared the following insights about the connection between serving and loving students:

I bear you my testimony that you can prepare the hearts of your students: serve them; find little things to do for them. You have heard stories of a seminary teacher who shows up at the track meet, or wherever a student is performing. I will tell you this: It does not matter whether the students see you in the stands. Do not worry about that. Just go. Pay the price of service for them, and God will honor it. I will make you that promise. Do not worry if your students are not lovable. They will not be lovable many times. And you will say, "There was something in an in-service lesson once about how I am supposed to love them." Do not worry about that. Serve them. Just serve them. Do something for them, and they will seem a little more lovable to you; it will be a gift. It will be a gift from God. . . .

Never, never underestimate the spiritual value of doing temporal things well for those whom you serve. . . . Pray to God and tell him that you love him and ask him what you could do for him. I will tell you something. Be silent for a moment after you ask that in prayer and see what comes into your heart. The name or the face of one of your students may come to you, and you will know something you can do for them. To love God and your fellowman are not two different things; they are related. As you love one, you will love the other.⁷

By serving individual students, even in small ways, teachers increase the likelihood that they will have opportunities to influence these students for

good. Chad H. Webb, administrator of Seminaries and Institutes, shared an experience about a teacher who found a very simple way to serve a struggling student named Patrick. The teacher noticed that although Patrick slept in class, he was always excited about soccer. Although the teacher was not particularly interested in soccer, he expressed interest in watching Patrick demonstrate his soccer skills. Later Patrick loaned the teacher some soccer movies. Simply showing interest helped a friendship develop and improved Patrick's experience with seminary.⁸

Undoubtedly the seminary teacher in this story was busy and would have preferred to do something besides watch some soccer videos. But the simple act of showing interest sparked a student's willingness to learn. The student in this story began learning in the classroom because of a simple one-on-one service activity that took place outside the classroom.

Follow the Spirit

As teachers strive to serve their students so as to facilitate "the very best teaching," it is vital that they follow the Spirit. In 1988, Elder M. Russell Ballard spoke to the Church Educational System on the subject of following the Spirit. In his talk, he emphasized how the Spirit will guide us to reach out to individuals.

In one experience he shared, he felt impressed to go visit a friend in the hospital. Although he had a very busy schedule that afternoon, he followed the prompting. When he arrived, his friend had just suffered a massive heart attack. Elder Ballard was able to give him a blessing, and the man recovered.

A short time later, Elder Ballard was returning home from a stake conference in Georgia. Although he was very tired, he kept thinking about this same man and his wife and felt impressed to go to their home before returning to his own. This couple was planning to take a cruise to China while en route to pick up their son from his mission. Elder Ballard had felt impressed to tell them not to go. They had already made a deposit on the cruise, with the balance of the money due the next day. The wife was not very happy with Elder Ballard, but they nevertheless decided to follow his counsel. About a week later, they found out that the cruise ship they were going to take had been taken and held in port at Hong Kong because of payments that had not been made. Given the man's recent heart condition, the stress of having been stranded in a foreign country would have been devastating for them.

At first, these stories might not seem to apply to teachers. Good examples of personal ministry, yes, but how do they relate to what a teacher can or should do regarding “the very best teaching”? After sharing these two stories, Elder Ballard made the connection by saying to teachers:

Suppose a student sitting in your class is hurting, struggling within, and you have a prompting to write a note or to call on the telephone or just to ask that student to stay after class for a minute where you can give encouragement. Do you heed those promptings? To me, when my ministry is all over, it will not be any talk that I gave that will be very important in the sight of the Lord; but what will be important to him will be my hearing his voice and responding to his promptings. I constantly pray that the Spirit might direct me to be an instrument in the hands of the Lord to do his will and his bidding. God bless each one of you in your great challenge and responsibility as you work with others, many of whom may be struggling, searching to come to a testimony of the truth on their own. When you receive a prompting from the Spirit, whatever it might be, may you recognize it and then be willing to respond in order that you might bless someone’s life.⁹

Most of the opportunities to have one on one teaching outside the classroom will occur only as teachers make room to receive promptings of the Spirit. The simple practice of asking God who needs help and pausing to ponder on the needs of individual students can create opportunities for the Spirit to communicate to teachers how they can facilitate one-on-one teaching outside the classroom.

Teach by the Way

Another way that teachers facilitate one-on-one teaching is to preach by the way. Ten times in the Doctrine and Covenants, missionaries are exhorted to “preach by the way,” or in other words, preach along the route they are traveling (see D&C 52:9, 10, 22–23, 25, 26, 27; 58:47, 59, 63). Rather than rushing to get to their next location, they were to share the gospel on the way with people while they were en route. Put differently, this phrase could mean that what would happen *on the way* was just as important as the *destination*. Sometimes the experiences that happen “by the way” may be even more meaningful than those tasks that we initially set out to do.

This principle could be applied in many ways. For example, suppose a teacher is on his way to an appointment. Along the way he runs into a student and feels impressed to stop and talk with him for a few minutes. A teacher focused on the destination might say to himself, “I do not have time; I am going to be late.” However, a teacher willing to preach by the way might

discover that this student had been praying to connect with somebody who could help him and that the few additional minutes spent talking to this student do not significantly affect his other appointment.¹⁰

The Savior set the example in this one-on-one teaching as he preached by the way. Several miracles recorded in Matthew 9 happened while the Savior was en route to another destination. Thus he “gave us the example of ministering as *He went*.”¹¹

Preaching “by the way,” even while in the midst of other pressing activities, can help us focus on one-on-one teaching.

Conclusion

Elder L. Tom Perry said, “I would encourage you to think of your assignment as teaching a group of individuals—not just a class. . . . Most of all, each must know of the love and appreciation you have for them.”¹²

As teachers it is often easy to lose focus of what it is we are teaching. A person might say, “I teach Old Testament” or “I teach four classes” as opposed to focusing on the individuals he or she is truly teaching. There is no doubt that lesson preparation is important, and students’ lives change because of what happens in the classroom. In addition, however, the one-on-one teaching moments that take place outside the classroom can have powerful effects on students’ lives. Teachers can facilitate this teaching as they know their students by name, contact individuals, follow the Spirit, find ways to serve their students, and teach by the way.

President Monson has repeatedly shared stories and experience in which he and others sought after individuals.¹³ Although it can be tempting to think of the class as a collective whole, we are in fact teaching individuals. Elder Neal A. Maxwell eloquently expressed this idea when he said, “Our impact is less likely to emanate from the pulpit—more often it will occur in one-to-one relationships, or in small groups where we can have an impact on an individual.”¹⁴ As teachers reach out to individual students, more of the very best teaching described by President Hunter will occur. **RE**

Notes

1. Thomas S. Monson, “They Will Come,” *Ensign*, May 1997, 44.
2. Howard W. Hunter, “Eternal Investments,” address to CES Religious Educators, Temple Square Assembly Hall, February 10, 1989; emphasis added.
3. William D. Oswald, “Gospel Teaching: Our Most Important Calling,” *Ensign*, November 2008, 97.

4. Hunter, "Eternal Investments."
5. Clayton M. Christensen, "My Ways Are Not Your Ways," *Ensign*, February 2007, 54.
6. Christensen, "My Ways Are Not Your Ways," 55.
7. Henry B. Eyring, "The Book of Mormon Will Change Your Life," Fourteenth Annual CES Religious Educators Symposium, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, August 17, 1990.
8. Chad H. Webb, "Deepening Conversion," CES satellite broadcast, Conference Center Theater, Salt Lake City, August 7, 2007.
9. M. Russell Ballard, "Respond to the Promptings of the Spirit," address to CES Religious Educators, Temple Square Assembly Hall, Salt Lake City, January 8, 1988.
10. This principle is also applicable to parents. Consider a mother who needs to have a private talk with a child. At the same time, a church assignment requires that the mother drive 30 minutes to pick up food from a cannery. This parent might "preach by the way" by inviting the child to go on the trip; perhaps adding in a stop for ice cream to sweeten the moment. This is more than just multitasking. As Sister Colleen K. Menlove taught, "It may be during the informal one-on-one times that the Spirit will prompt us to ask just the right questions or to say just the right thing to help our children know and feel the light of the Lord. If we make the opportunities, the Spirit will guide us." "All Thy Children Shall Be Taught," *Ensign*, May 2005, 14.
11. Bonnie D. Parkin, "Personal Ministry: Sacred and Precious," devotional address, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, February 13, 2007.
12. L. Tom Perry, "Bearing Down in Pure Testimony," address to CES Religious Educators, Temple Square Assembly Hall, Salt Lake City, February 2, 1996.
13. In fact, his life story is aptly named *To the Rescue: The Biography of Thomas S. Monson*.
14. Neal A. Maxwell, *"A More Excellent Way": Essays on Leadership for Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1967), 74.