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The Power of Student Discovery and Sharing

John Hilton III

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A Chinese proverb states, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” Rather than always “feed” our students, we can plan activities to help them learn how to feast for themselves on the scriptures.

In keeping with this idea, Elder David A. Bednar teaches, “An answer we *discover* or obtain through the exercise of faith, typically, is retained for a lifetime. The most important learnings of life are caught—not taught.”¹ On another occasion, Elder Bednar was fielding questions from students in a religion class at Brigham Young University–Idaho. While answering a question, Elder Bednar quoted a scripture but did not cite a reference for it. When a student asked for the reference, Elder Bednar said, “If I tell you, you’ll never remember. If you discover it for yourself, you’ll never forget.”² Powerful learning takes place when we discover truths for ourselves.

In addition to helping students find truth, it is important to let students share the truths they discover. Elder Richard G. Scott says it is important to “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.”³

Consider the importance of student discovery and sharing as they relate to the following points from the *Teaching Emphasis* of the Church Educational System: “We are to help students . . . identify and understand the doctrines and principles found [in the scriptures], and . . . to

help students learn to explain, share, and testify of the doctrines and principles of the restored gospel.”⁴

In this article, I will explore ways religious educators can increase the likelihood that their students will discover and share truth. But first I will address an important question about the task of the teacher.

The Task of the Teacher

Should teachers prepare lessons with the goal of imparting vital information via lecture or with the goal of helping students learn to make their own discoveries? How teachers respond to this question will significantly affect the way they teach.

Clearly, it is vital to maintain a balance between the teacher’s lecturing and the teacher’s facilitating discovery and participation. A teacher who is focused solely on helping students discover and participate should remember the following from the *Teaching the Gospel* handbook: “There are times . . . when the teacher needs to talk and the students need to listen. . . . Sometimes people talk about lecture or teacher instruction as if it were an undesirable method. This is not so when it is used correctly. Jesus often taught this way, as did many of the prophets.”⁵

A teacher who is prone to only lecture might benefit from the next sentence of the handbook: “If [lecturing] is overused in the classroom—or, as in the case of some teachers, only used—it can reduce teaching effectiveness.”⁶

Elder Richard G. Scott has repeatedly counseled religious educators regarding the importance of helping students participate in class. On one occasion he said, “Never, and I mean never, give a lecture where there is no student participation. A ‘talking head’ is the weakest form of class instruction.”⁷

On another occasion, Elder Scott commented on how he sometimes conducted the Saturday evening sessions of stake conference. He asked a question and invited responses from the audience. He said he might talk for only “seven or eight minutes” of a forty-five-minute talk.⁸ Though Elder Scott could undoubtedly lecture brilliantly for forty-five minutes, he often chooses to use his class time differently—in engaging his students in the process of discovery and sharing.

Religious educators possess knowledge that is vital for their students. Communicating some of the information through lecturing can be an important part of a lesson plan—some things are more efficiently explained or summarized by the teacher. The teacher often has insights that the students will benefit from. In addition, the Holy Ghost can help students make discoveries through the teacher’s words.

At the same time, religious educators must not monopolize the conversation in the classroom. The heart of gospel learning is students connecting directly to the scriptures and the Spirit—not passively listening to the connections a teacher has already made.

Though a few may believe that the role of the teacher is solely to impart his or her knowledge, most gospel teachers would agree that teaching is much more than telling. Because students will likely internalize what they discover and say more than what they hear, the teacher has two essential tasks. The first is to “help students . . . identify and understand the doctrines and principles,” and the second is to help them “explain, share, and testify of [these] doctrines and principles.”

At the core of both of these tasks is the doctrine that the Holy Ghost “shall teach [us] all things” (John 14:26). The Holy Ghost must be present with the teacher in preparation and with the students and teacher in the classroom “that all may be edified together” (D&C 84:110). Providing students with time to discover and share from the scriptures will help them feel the Holy Ghost. I will now consider seven ways teachers can help facilitate student discovery and sharing.

Multiply and Extend Student Participation

First, multiply and extend participation. The Lord said, “Appoint among yourselves a teacher, and let not all be spokesmen at once; but let one speak at a time and let all listen unto his sayings, that when all have spoken that all may be edified of all, and that every man may have an equal privilege” (D&C 88:122). Our goal as teachers should be to help all the students in class express their gospel insights. This process can be challenging, particularly when classes are large or when students are not accustomed to sharing. The following suggestions may help increase participation:

Have students respond to questions in writing. Not only does this allow all students to participate but also it improves the possibility of their willingness to share verbally.

Have students share with a partner or in small groups. A teacher had students read verses from Doctrine and Covenants 3 and 10 and asked them to look for ways we can overcome the traps Satan lays for us. Then, the teacher asked the students to find somebody in the class they did not know very well and share with that person what they found. This simple technique gave every student in the class the opportunity to share—even in a large class.

Create a space for students who are less prone to share. At times teachers may find that the same students are consistently volunteering

to share, leaving some without the opportunity. After asking a question, a teacher could say, “I’d like to hear from somebody who has not yet had the opportunity to speak today.”

Help students say a little more than they do at first. A skillful teacher can also help draw additional insights from a student. For example, after a student responds to a question, the teacher could ask, “Could you say a little more about that?” or “What is an experience you have had that relates to what you just said?”

Naturally, each teacher will have his or her own challenges with respect to multiplying and extending student participation in the classroom. The key principle is that the teacher prayerfully seeks to know how to help “all . . . be edified of all” (D&C 88:122).

Help Students Teach

A second way to increase discovery and participation is to help students teach each other. Often, teachers say they learn more than their students from lessons taught. Why is this? Because teachers are the ones studying, synthesizing, and making connections between what they have learned in the past and what the scriptures are teaching them today. In addition, teachers share what they learned with the class, driving their discoveries deeper into their own hearts.

Religious educators can take advantage of this phenomenon by giving students opportunities to teach. For example, a few days before a class, a teacher could give a brief section of the curriculum to a student and ask him or her to prepare to teach that segment. Giving students the opportunity to teach can bring powerful spiritual experiences into the classroom. As Elder Robert D. Hales teaches, “Faith promoting incidents occur in teaching when students take a role in teaching and testifying to their peers.”¹⁰

Let Students Find What Is Meaningful to Them

Third, let students find what is meaningful to them. A simple but powerful teaching technique is to ask students to read a few verses silently and mark phrases that stand out to them. This method puts students directly in contact with the scriptures and allows them the opportunity to connect with revelation in their own way.

The scriptures provide examples of this form of teaching. When the Savior taught a certain lawyer, He said, “What is written in the law? how readest thou?” (Luke 10:26). In teaching Nephi, the angel asked, “What beholdest thou?” (1 Nephi 11:14; see also 1 Nephi 13:2).

Recently, I observed an institute teacher ask his students, “What beholdest thou?” when as a class they read Joseph Smith—History 1:5–15 aloud. Then, the teacher invited the students to silently reread the verses and carefully look for new insights. Though I had read those verses many times, as I reread them, I saw several things I had never seen before. The teacher then asked students to share what they found. Several students raised their hands; I was impressed by the depth and originality of their thoughts. The teacher then invited the students to read more carefully in their personal scripture study. These students were being taught how to fish.

Have High Expectations

A fourth way teachers can influence student discovery and participation is to raise their expectations of their students. For example, some teachers may hesitate to ask their students to read verses silently because they doubt that their students will actually read the assigned verses or even that their students will bring scriptures to class. It requires extra work and faith for a teacher to expect students to bring scriptures and to believe that the students want to learn, and the teacher risks being disappointed if the students do not rise to the expectations. Teachers cannot control what their students will do, but what the teachers expect of their students can make a significant difference in whether students find and apply truth. Elder Henry B. Eyring teaches the following:

You can make it far more likely that [your students] will choose what will let them claim a constant companionship of the Spirit. . . .

It begins with expectations, yours and theirs. If you expect little, they will feel your lack of faith in them and in the Lord’s promised outpouring of the Spirit. If you communicate, by word or action or even by your tone of voice, that you doubt their spiritual capacity, they will doubt it. If you see in them . . . potential . . . , they will at least have the chance to see it in themselves. Your choices of what you expect will have powerful effect on their choices of what to expect of themselves.¹¹

One early-morning seminary teacher chose to make her high expectations explicit to her students and their parents. They met together to discuss the CES *Teaching Emphasis*. In a subsequent class when students were reluctant to participate, she brought out a copy of the emphasis and reminded students of their responsibility to share and testify. She reported that the students began to participate more.

One institute teacher communicated higher standards in the form of a syllabus. He invited his students to write a paragraph each week about their personal scripture study. At first few students responded, but with

continued love and emphasis from the teacher, more and more students began writing their responses. Several students reported that their scripture study improved because they were asked to report on it.

Raising expectations can be hard for both teachers and students. Students who are used to passively listening to teachers may initially resist putting more effort into the class, and teachers who raise expectations might be tempted to lower them if they encounter opposition. But if teachers continue to expect the best from their students, students “will at least have the chance to see [high potential] in themselves.”¹²

Get Excited about Students’ Ideas

Fifth, teachers can help their students discover by getting excited about students’ ideas. Sometimes a student will share an insight the teacher has never considered; other times students will discover what the teacher has already found. The teacher should get excited in both cases. Eleanor Duckworth, professor of education at Harvard University, writes, “I see no difference . . . between wonderful ideas that many other people have already had, and wonderful ideas that nobody has yet happened upon. . . . The more we help [students] to have their wonderful ideas and to feel good about themselves for having them, the more likely it is that they will some day happen upon wonderful ideas that no one else has happened upon before.”¹³

In a class I took with Professor Duckworth, students were required to watch the moon on a regular basis and keep track of its shape and movement. Occasionally, we watched the moon together during class. One week we observed the moon from a courtyard adjacent to our classroom. The next week at the beginning of class we looked at the moon from a garden on the other side of the building. As class ended, Professor Duckworth and five or six students remained in the garden. It occurred to me that it would be interesting to look at the moon from where we had been the week before, to see what the moon looked like from that vantage point. When I told Professor Duckworth I was going to observe the moon from that spot, she seemed excited and told the other students, “John has a great idea. Come on. Let’s walk to the other area!”

Professor Duckworth herded all the students to the previous week’s spot. Her words and actions conveyed genuine enthusiasm about my idea. In reality, it probably was not such a great idea, but my teacher’s simply being excited about my idea motivated me to continue studying the moon more deeply—and I did!

Think of the enthusiasm the Spirit of the Lord demonstrated when Nephi gave an answer that the Spirit surely already knew! (see 1 Nephi

11:4–6). We can be equally excited about our students' discoveries. As I teach, I'm sometimes tempted to respond to a student's insight by saying, "Yeah, I had that idea" or "When I thought about that I . . ." because I want to share my own wonderful ideas. It would be much better to get excited about *their* ideas and ask, "Could you explain what you mean? That sounds interesting!"

Give Students Assignments or Challenges to Do Outside of Class

A sixth way teachers can help their students discover and share is to give them challenges to do outside of class. The *Teaching Emphasis* of the Church Educational System states, "We are to help students develop a habit of daily scripture study. . . . We are to encourage [students to explain, share, and testify of gospel principles] outside of class with family and others."¹⁴

There are many ways teachers can accomplish these objectives. One simple technique is to give a reading assignment for the next class with something specific for the students to find. For example, teachers could assign students to read Alma 5 and look for the number of questions Alma asks in the chapter. Teachers could also ask students to come to class prepared to share their three favorite questions from the chapter. And teachers could also ask their students to prepare a presentation for the next class or to set a specific goal related to one of the principles discussed in class.

One seminary teacher gave her students a daily challenge related to what they had studied in class that day. For example, after a class on gossiping, she challenged them over the next twenty-four hours to count the numbers of times they avoided gossip by walking away or changing the subject. Giving these challenges was not easy—it took additional thought to create assignments; also, this teacher took time to create and implement a variety of ways to follow up on these challenges. Some days she asked for volunteers to share what they had done. Other times she had students write down how they fulfilled the challenge, or she called a student the night before class to invite him or her to share.

This teacher was willing to take the risk that no students would take the challenge. It could be embarrassing for the teacher to ask, "Who took last night's challenge?" and have nobody respond. But she did it anyway, and the days she got a response more than made up for the days she did not. Elder David A. Bednar teaches:

Consider how missionaries help investigators to learn by faith. Making and keeping spiritual commitments, such as studying and praying about the Book of Mormon, attending Church meetings, and keeping

the commandments, require an investigator to exercise faith and to act. *One of the fundamental roles of a missionary is to help an investigator make and honor commitments—to act* and learn by faith. Teaching, exhorting, and explaining, as important as they are, can never convey to an investigator a witness of the truthfulness of the restored gospel. Only as an investigator's faith initiates action and opens the pathway to the heart can the Holy Ghost deliver a confirming witness.¹⁵

When those words are applied to the classroom, we might paraphrase, "One of the fundamental roles of a teacher is to help students make and honor commitments—to act." Giving students challenges to do outside of class, sincerely expecting them to complete those challenges, and following up with students are extra-mile efforts that help students discover that the scriptures really do apply to their lives. Teachers can then provide students time to share their experiences with the challenge, which can increase other students' resolves to apply gospel principles in their lives.

Plan Lessons Sufficiently Ahead of Time

In the 2007 worldwide training broadcast, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught: "If I were going to teach a class on Sunday, I would read through and begin praying about that lesson the Sunday before. That gives me a full week to pray, to seek inspiration, to think, to read, and watch for real-life applications that will give vitality to my message. You won't finalize the lesson that early, but you will be surprised to find how many things come to you during the week, how much God gives you—things that you will feel to use when you do finalize your preparation."¹⁶ Teachers can help students make and share discoveries by planning lessons far enough in advance that they can give students time to participate. This advance preparation may be inconvenient, and it certainly requires careful planning, particularly for those who teach each day. But when a teacher prepares a lesson ahead of time, he or she can thoughtfully delegate parts of the lesson to students.

For example, at a recent faculty meeting, one institute teacher shared how he had set a goal to plan his lessons in advance to help increase student participation. As he prepared his lesson, he decided that class should begin with a discussion on the Fall. He contacted two of his students and invited them to do a topical study on the Fall and to summarize their study in a three-minute talk during the next class. The students agreed, and the teacher observed that the few minutes the students shared their discoveries about the Fall were the most powerful of the class. If the teacher had finished his lesson preparation five

minutes before class began, he still could have asked students to share their insights on the Fall, but giving them advance notice gave them the opportunity to study outside of class and made their experience more positive.

Planning lessons in advance can also increase student participation by giving the teacher additional time to reflect on and improve the lesson plan. For example, a teacher may have planned a lesson in which he or she closes by summarizing the lesson and bearing testimony, but with time to review the lesson plan, that teacher might decide to ask a student to summarize the lesson and bear testimony, which would give the student the opportunity to “verbalize truths” as Elder Scott has encouraged.¹⁷

Questions

As teachers reflect on their teaching practice and ponder ways they can help students make discoveries and share what they learn, the teachers may have some of the following questions:

How can teachers tell if they are helping their students discover and share? Naturally, the best way for teachers to get feedback on how well they are doing is to ask the Lord in prayer. The following barometers may also help teachers recognize whether they are giving students sufficient opportunities to make discoveries and share what they learn. First, what percentage of time is the teacher talking? The more a teacher talks, the less likely it is that students are making their own connections to the scriptures. A second question teachers could ask themselves is, Are students given opportunities to make important discoveries? For example, are they reading scriptures looking for inconsequential facts, or are they looking for principles and doctrines that are meaningful to them? Third, how many students share what they learned? Teachers should creatively plan so they elicit participation from as many students as possible.

Isn't group work and sharing just a way to fill class time? The principle to remember is that true learning happens when students “discover . . . through the exercise of faith.”¹⁸ It is true that the same methods that can be used to increase discovery and participation can also be used simply to fill class time. That does not mean the methods are bad but simply reflects the fact that teachers need to use them in such a way that helps students really learn.

If I let students share their insights, won't I lose control of my class and not be able to cover everything in my lesson? This question raises two important issues. Some teachers worry that if they let students share

with each other what they have discovered, the students will simply goof off and the teacher will lose control. Teachers with this concern can raise their expectations for the students. Most students, with proper structure, can discover truth from the scriptures that they value enough to share with others.

It is true that when teachers relinquish class time to students, teachers may not be able to cover everything they had planned. But, as Elder Scott explains, “Your highest priority is not to get through all the material if that means that it cannot be properly absorbed. Do what you are able to do with understanding. . . . If a key principle is understood, internalized, and made part of the students’ guidebooks for life, then the most important objective has been accomplished.”¹⁹

Conclusion

Student discovery and sharing are vital components of learning. Therefore, teachers should help their students discover and share truths from the scriptures. This process takes preparation and class time; therefore, teachers may need to limit the amount of time they lecture. Teachers facilitate discovery and sharing when they multiply participation, help students teach, and let students connect directly with the scriptures by finding what is meaningful to them. Teachers also help their students by having high expectations and by being genuinely excited about their ideas. By giving their students challenges and by preparing their lessons in advance, teachers can help their students share in meaningful ways.

Increasing student discovery and sharing are not easy tasks; indeed, in some teaching situations, they may be quite difficult. It will take much prayerful pondering, work, and experimentation to learn what works best in individual classrooms. This effort will pay off as students no longer depend on the teacher for spiritual food but learn to take nourishment directly from the scriptures and the Spirit of the Lord. **RE**

Notes

1. David A. Bednar, “Seek Learning by Faith,” Church Educational System broadcast, February 3, 2006, 5; emphasis added.

2. David A. Bednar, in Mark Beecher and Robert I. Eaton, *Becoming a Great Gospel Teacher: Bringing the Gospel Classroom to Life* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2007), 30.

3. Richard G. Scott, “To Understand and Live Truth,” Church Educational System broadcast, February 4, 2005, 3.

4. Church Educational System, *Teaching Emphasis* (Salt Lake City: The

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003).

5. *Teaching the Gospel: A Handbook for CES Teachers and Leaders* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1994), 35.

6. *Teaching the Gospel: A Handbook for CES Teachers and Leaders*, 35.

7. Scott, "To Understand and Live Truth," 3.

8. Richard G. Scott, Church Educational System satellite training broadcast, August 2003.

9. Church Educational System, *Teaching Emphasis*.

10. Robert D. Hales, "Teaching by Faith," Church Educational System broadcast, February 1, 2002, 4.

11. Henry B. Eyring, "Raising Expectations," Church Educational System training broadcast, August 4, 2004, 2.

12. Eyring, "Raising Expectations," 2.

13. Eleanor Duckworth, *The Having of Wonderful Ideas: And Other Essays on Learning and Teaching* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1987), 14.

14. Church Educational System, *Teaching Emphasis*.

15. Bednar, "Seek Learning by Faith," 3; emphasis added.

16. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Teaching and Learning in the Church," *Ensign*, June 2007, 90.

17. Scott, "To Understand and Live Truth," 3.

18. Bednar, "Seek Learning by Faith," 5; emphasis added.

19. Scott, "To Understand and Live Truth," 2–3.