

MAKING BOOK OF MORMON STUDY IRRESISTIBLE

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It needs to be said at the outset that obviously there is no magic formula by which a teacher can be guaranteed that every student he may have will do his educational bidding. Any genuine success we have as teachers must be achieved only with the continuing exercise of each student's agency. If we attempt to proceed without that agency, we are in peril of failing. Some teachers feel they are failures with many of their students. Most teachers wish to be better teachers. I deeply believe they can be, but to do so often requires a major transformation in their thinking of what teaching and learning are really about.

I believe that to some degree we are prisoners of non- Mormon educational traditions. As we function in the Church it's very natural to try to bring that world-view into the Church. Consequently, we experience much less success in our efforts than we should.

Our beginning point should not be the traditions of the fathers, but the truths, insight, examples, and models of the restored church. It is from just such a perspective that I would like to outline some of my thinking and experiences as they relate to teaching The Book of Mormon, because the study of the Book of Mormon will become irresistible to a person to the extent that he can satisfy the soul's longings for spiritual food.

It becomes very clear, then, that to be a truly effective teacher, one must bring the student and the book together in such a way that the soul can find sustenance. For the teacher to be able to do that, however, he must know both the deep needs of the student as well as the nature of the book. Of course, he must also know how and when to bring the two together.

What are the needs of the student? How does one come to know them? It is rarely true that any two students have the same learning needs. This being so, a teacher must begin responding to students individually to be truly effective. An effective teacher is involved more and more with students on an individual basis. Even though most students may be studying the Book of Mormon, each may be in different parts of the book because their needs are different; therefore, there will be less and less that students do in common.

A teacher may have to use other learning materials or scripture to prepare some students to study the Book of Mormon. "Milk" must come before "meat." To do otherwise is to disserve both the student and the sacred things of God. Readiness is important and must be skillfully tested for.

A teacher can come to know a student's needs in two principal ways: self-disclosure, and inspiration or revelation. The latter way is known, although it might not be regularly used in the teaching-learning situation. Furthermore, a student will not be in a hurry to disclose his significant needs unless the teacher has become a trusted associate. If the teacher is not trusted, he must work to become so. In the meantime, needs can begin to be ascertained inferentially. Careful observation of the student in and out of class, in reaction to peers and to the teacher and to daily routines, will do much to reveal what his needs are and whether those needs are being met. Approachment or avoidance behavior toward a given task or happening tells a teacher a great deal about need fulfillment.

The teacher must also be viewed by the student as qualified to help him learn. The teacher may be liked and trusted but not seen as having anything deeply important to offer the student.

In spite of our Church programs, I've come to believe more and more that many of our youth (and all of our members) don't get challenged enough or deeply involved enough in truly studying the gospel. I do believe, however, that they will become involved if they have a better chance, but they must be responded to as individuals and in terms of the deep needs of their own souls. Joseph Smith said, "*The things of God are of deep import and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out.*" (History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, ed, B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1932-51], 3:295; hereafter cited as HC.) This seldom happens in teaching-learning situations that are a type of "lock-step" system, for any given topic that may be relevant to one student is often irrelevant to the rest. Therefore there is little that is irresistible about it, little to touch the lives of the group as a whole. This is not to say that teaching groups cannot be done. It certainly can, and the ministry of Jesus is the classic example that it can.

In a gospel doctrine class, I focused on the raising of questions. The importance of questions, the right kind of questions, is often overlooked. Teachers usually attempt to communicate answers to questions that either nobody is asking or nobody is interested in. Students often ask questions that teachers either consider irrelevant or are not prepared to deal with. The result is that the "right" questions rarely get matched up with the "right" answers, and teachers are struggling with lukewarm classes that rarely get turned on.

In this particular class my major goal was to convince each class member that the lesson topic was worth studying. Consequently, my aim was not to have them come to class prepared to deal with lesson 21, but to have them study that lesson at home after they had attended the class. Let me give further clarification. I'm saying we should think more of a class being a springboard to learning than a place where learning occurs. A very important concept is often overlooked: learning must be done by the individual or it will not occur. One is reminded of scriptural injunctions to "seek, knock, ask." One is also brought to reflect upon the many times that Jesus, during his ministry, talked with individuals or groups, after which they would come to him publicly or in private, asking him questions such as "Is this what you meant when you said, . . ." When one thinks of his many parables and stories, of the Sermon on the Mount, or of the many interactions Jesus had with people, one thinks less and less in terms of his being a teacher in the modern sense and more and more in terms of his being a master in his ability to stimulate thinking and learning. He actually seemed to be a very discreet teacher. People had to dig things out of him to the point of frustration and exasperation. Think of his disciples pleading, "*Now speakest thou plainly, and speakest no proverb.*" (John 16:29.) Or of their asking, "*Why speakest thou unto them in parables?*" and his answer, "*Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom.*" (Matthew. 13:10, 11) Then Jesus explained that learning is a personal responsibility: "For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whomsoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath." (Matthew 13:12) He went on to say to the Apostles, "*Blessed are your eyes, for they see and your ears, for they hear.*" (Matthew 13:16) Of course, the point of all this (carefully study, Matthew 13, Mark 4 and 3 Nephi 26) is that each individual must be working out his "own salvation with fear and trembling." (Philippians 2:12) The burden and the responsibility rest there. Therefore, the teachers' primary role is to respond to that searching *if he can*, Joseph Smith said, "*Thy mind, O man, if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity—thou must commune with God.*" (HC 3:295)

What a nerve-racking responsibility and charge teachers in the Church have! Who is ready to accept such a calling? In this regard let me also suggest a study of Robert Matthew's work on the

Inspired Version of the Bible and of Joseph's Smith's purpose and method in doing that translation. According to Brother Matthews, Joseph Smith's purpose was not only to produce a more correct version of the Bible, but to serve as a process for Joseph Smith himself to grow in knowledge and understanding. (see *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible* [Provo, Utah, Brigham Young University Press, 1975], pp. 53, 164.)

My experience has been that many in the Church have done little significant study or learning. At the same time, most learning that they do has been catechistic; right questions right answers repeated again and again over the years. This is not to say there are not many people with better questions to ask; it just doesn't pay to ask them.

One of the major results of convincing a person or a class that they don't really understand something they thought they understood is that they seriously begin asking for an answer. They begin to express serious interest in resolving the question. At this point I'm careful to give them little satisfaction on the basis of my teacherhood, at least at the moment. If other class members try to clear it up I question them carefully until they begin to say, "My word, I'm not sure about that myself, I thought I understood that up until now." My strategy is to bring the class period to a final climax wherein there is a high level of motivation to resolve the dilemma. When that point is reached, I raise the next question: "How many of you would really like the answer to that question?" Nearly every hand goes up. "All right, this afternoon after you've had that nice dinner, let me suggest that you open the D&C to section 134. Read it carefully, the answer is there."

The next Sunday, after a few preliminaries, I ask, "How many of you read section 134 of the D&C last Sunday?" Nearly every hand goes up. "What is the answer to the question?"

"Well, it doesn't really answer it entirely," someone says, "so I've been studying some other Church writings."

Generally, this describes my approach to teaching in various situations in the Church. It is important to note that there are two basic approaches one can take here. One can begin with student questioning or one can begin with teacher questioning, but both cases one must get beyond the superficial and unimportant to the significant. One needs to go to the heart of things. The same strategy can be used on an individual basis for stimulating learning. Rather than functioning before the class, one just proceeds in a similar manner with individuals. In the case of a gospel doctrine class, especially where it is quite large, it would probably be best for the teacher to respond to people as individuals before and after class. With younger people and small classes, however there ought to be a lot of individualizing. In either case it must really be worked at from the beginning, because people are not used to getting down to topics and questions that really matter to them unless they are very young. They have become used to the idea that their relationships with other people, even in Church, are often very shallow and very non-revealing. You don't really say what you think and you don't really say what might be disagreed with.

Not only can the Book of Mormon become irresistible as a source of learning, but other scriptures and other teachings and writings of the prophets can too. If this is to happen, the deep yearnings of each individual for understanding and knowledge must be responded to through our teaching efforts. If this were done with the very young, as they grew older they would drive their teachers mad with the search for truth. Then the task would not be, "How can we encourage more study of the Book of Mormon?" It would be, "How can I keep up with this insatiable hunger for knowledge and understanding in my students?"

Consider the scene of Jesus in the temple at age twelve discussing questions with the doctors of the Law or of Joseph Smith at age fourteen going to the grove to pray. This could be the experience

of every person if we would realize that learning is an individual thing and that each individual must be responded to according to his learning needs and his learning schedule. We each learn, "line upon line," and we learn "here a little and there a little," While one may learn here and there, another may learn there and then here. Each of us has a different learning pattern. None learn in exactly the same sequence. I'm sure much of this is explained by our pre-mortal development, and therefore each of us comes with different gifts and different needs. Because of this our classes must be individualized places established where learning is begun or fostered, not necessarily where it occurs, even though there will be a lot of that also as people become highly motivated.

Learning occurs only when the learner desires to and when he or she is ready for that particular learning. Probably no two learners will desire the same learning, or if they do, not to the same degree. Nor will any two learners usually be ready for the same learning even if they both desire it. For teaching to be effective the separate desires and points of readiness of the learners must be understood and appropriately responded to.

Therefore the master teacher –

- a. Discovers desires directly or indirectly.
- b. Discovers points of readiness directly or indirectly.
- c. Teaches by direct and indirect means
- d. Knows how to awaken a desire to learn in those who are honest in heart.
- e. Is lead to individualize learning
(This is not the same as *individualized instruction* which has been greatly written about in education journals.)

The learning theory that has been presented in this paper has emerged from my experience, which seems to have been subject to promptings, impressions and inspiration, as well as from a lot of study and pondering of the scriptures and other writings. I realize that this method of learning is very different from what is generally practiced, but I believe that what is generally practiced is not of the Church but is of people origin. I invite all to consider my observations.

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NOTE: Presented at the 1997 Book of Mormon Symposium. This is when Reed Benson and Larry Arnoldsen began their acquaintance and friendship. BYU Religion Teacher and, former Stake President, Vern Summerfeldt, was inspired by this article for his doctorate dissertation.