



Student Teaching

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During the summers of my junior and senior years at BYU, I was asked to be a student instructor for intensive readings classes offered through the Honors Program. One was called “Readings in the Classics.” In it we read great books of Western literature, history, and philosophy from ancient to modern times. The other was “Readings in Contemporary Thought.” In it we read contemporary books from many disciplines, selected by faculty as among the most important general works in their fields. Full-time faculty would guest-lecture in class about their favorite books, but I was responsible for leading discussions and providing overall continuity and grading.

I used to quip that BYU engaged in academic malpractice by allowing a callow undergrad to teach these classes. In fact, however, BYU might have been engaging in an academic best practice—at least for me. Teaching such ambitious intensive reading courses provided the finest general education experience I received at BYU.

Nothing deepens and accelerates learning quite like having to teach. I learned to write in graduate school not simply by writing papers and a dissertation but by teaching writing. This schooled me in the rules of usage and taught me how sentences, paragraphs, and arguments are constructed. Similarly, my understanding of Shakespeare, Milton, British Literature, and Scripture has been immeasurably deepened by teaching these subjects.

That teaching enhances the teacher’s own learning is a truism long recognized by teachers. It has informed American education since the days of the one-room schoolhouse, where all students of necessity learned together, the more advanced students helping the novices. It has been theorized under many names, including Collaborative Learning, Peer Teaching, Learning by Teaching (a.k.a. *Lernen durch Lehren* or LdL). Pedagogies which help students learn by teaching ought to come naturally to us at BYU for they draw upon our educational roots. Peer teaching was part of Karl G. Maeser’s original educational system at BYU. It is also mandated in Section 88 when the Lord commands the early Saints to “teach one another.” The School of the Prophets enacted this mandate by providing opportunities for students to become teachers and teachers to become students.

I am persuaded that we ought to take such mandates and models more seriously at BYU. In saying this I am well aware that collaborative learning strategies do not offer fail-safe pedagogical methodologies for improving teaching and learning. Frankly, no pedagogy is teacher-proof. I’ve been in plenty of classes where the instructor made inept attempts to incorporate collaborative learning techniques, leaving me yearning for a good lecture. At the same time, most of my best classes have required or encouraged me to engage in active learning.

We often think of faculty as teachers and students as learners. But, as we all know, faculty are also learners. Likewise students are also teachers—whether formally as TAs, lab instructors, and tutors or informally in class discussions, study groups, and other conversations outside class. Students are among the most important teachers on campus. Hence I regularly advise students to seek out roommates and friends who will help them to learn.

This advice is based on personal experience. I was blessed to have student peers at BYU who refused to be passive “bench-bound learners”—to use a phrase from Harvard educator Jacob Brunner I encountered in “Readings in Contemporary Thought.” We took ownership for our education. We invited our favorite faculty for Saturday pancake breakfasts to tell us about their research. We went to plays, concerts, lectures, and firesides and spent time talking about what we learned among ourselves and with dates. We even persuaded the Dean of GE to let us set up our own self-directed reading class. Another instance of academic malpractice perhaps, but one from which I learned as much or more than I did from any other class I took at BYU. I can still remember the book I taught the group: Martin Buber’s *I/Thou*. My roommate led the discussion on Kierkegaard’s *Training in Christianity*. Another friend taught *The Federalist Papers*. And thus each of us, though still undergraduate students, became a teacher. In the process we learned by teaching.

Student teaching is a notion not just for those training to be professional educators. It is an ideal for all students—one we might well build into our practices at BYU.