



The Greatest Teaching

by J. Scott Miller, Dean

What makes university classes different from other learning experiences?

The question rarely surfaces amid the critical tide surrounding American higher education, but it is central to the debate, and its answers are many. If you have taken even a few university-level classes, you have likely sampled the broad range of pedagogical possibilities higher education offers students. Odds are, you also discovered that you were not in Kansas High School anymore.

My own first experience at BYU is a case in point. Because of an early birthday and a pending mission call, I could only take block classes offered the first half of fall semester, which limited my course options. After ruling out a senior nursing practicum and an advanced engineering seminar, I settled into four classes that would simultaneously prepare me for a mission and get me started down the path to a university education: for core science, field botany; for spiritual fiber, two religion classes; and for some physical education, canoeing.

The variety of my pedagogical experiences could not have been greater. The canoeing class quickly found me, after some land instruction, in a van with 15 other students riding to Utah Lake to paddle against foul-smelling waves. In my large religion classes I became one of many in a crowded hall, alternately entertained and soberly exhorted by remarkable lecturers. In field botany, a dozen of us enjoyed informal classroom discussion with walks around campus and the occasional excursion to local canyons to observe, feel, smell, and even taste the flora. (I still crush a smoke bush leaf near the Maeser Building from time to time just to enjoy its refreshing, lemony smell.)

The exams, likewise, covered a broad, and sometimes surprising, spectrum. My canoeing test involved both naming the equipment and successfully negotiating a floating obstacle

course. My religion exams presented the most challenging multiple-choice questions I have ever confronted. My field botany exam was a stroll around campus, the teacher silently pointing to plants whose names (both Latin and common) we wrote on the test sheet.

The variety and differences of these courses is emblematic of the university classroom experience: one size never fits all, and each is optimally designed to suit one of a spectrum of objectives. Large classes serve information mastery with economy and efficiency; small classes suit skill building and intensive, personalized learning. Field trips allow direct experience; carefully prepared lectures cover broad swaths of information and establish conceptual foundations. All may be employed by a single teacher during their career, based upon what they intend to teach.

Accordingly, perhaps one thing that makes university classes different from other learning experiences is their greater diversity of teaching methods. Some universities have staked their

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identities on emphasizing one or another of these. At Cambridge and Oxford, the tutorial method is legendary: students meeting with professors solo or in small groups to be questioned deeply about selected readings. At some small colleges in the US, courses are taught one at a time, with students devoting themselves to only one class daily for several weeks, before beginning the next class. Some for-profit institutions have modernized correspondence schools of the past using exclusively remote, asynchronous online learning.

At BYU, we offer a broad variety of instructional modes, with a special focus on teaching undergraduates. But foundationally we are committed, in every class, to a singular mode rare among other universities: the combined focus on intellectual growth and spiritual strength. All new teachers coming to BYU,

regardless of background or field, have to confront the same question: What does it mean to spiritually strengthen my students, and how can I do that best? Although that question implies an attempt to measure the unmeasurable, its continued presence on student class surveys means our teachers take it seriously, and our students cannot ignore it.

I have access, as dean, to all the student survey results for courses taught in the College of Humanities. That translates, over the past nine years of my tenure, into hundreds of thousands of numeric scores and tens of thousands of narrative comments. For the past year or so, I have been trying to digest and understand those data and have come up with several preliminary conclusions:

- Despite what some uninformed critics may assert, scores and comments for faculty in the College of Humanities regarding a “spiritually strengthening” class are overwhelmingly positive (94%).
- Our teachers employ a wide variety of methods to address spiritual growth: some open with prayer, a hymn, perhaps a devotional thought; others routinely bear testimony where the topic allows; some of the most effusive comments describe teachers who model Christ in relating to their students.
- Student interpretations of the phrase “spiritually strengthening” vary widely and quite dramatically: for some it means being stirred emotionally; for others it is increased gospel knowledge; for yet others it is how often they feel inspired in class.

Overall, what I learn when I take a deep dive into the data is that students find great satisfaction when their classroom interactions happen on both intellectual and spiritual planes. That combination can make classes in the College of Humanities not only different, but different in a spiritually transformative way. There is something unique, even miraculous, about the relationships that sometimes develop when two or more people, gathered in the name of intellectual inquiry and spiritual growth, share the joy of discovering truths and together experience validation from one ineffable and unifying Truth. ■