

Charting Course: To Do What *Only* a Teacher Can Do

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I was fortunate to have my best friend as a college roommate. We knew each other well. We also knew how to hurt each other. I once accused him of going into business for money; he quickly recounted with, “Rod, you’re going into teaching for power.” Nearly a quarter century later, I haven’t forgotten that.

Yes, we teachers do have significant power in the classroom. We orchestrate our classes and our students. We try to make what is wrong right, and we try doing things that haven’t been done before. We try to change and enhance lives, opportunities, and outcomes.

However with all of our power in the classroom, we paradoxically often feel powerless outside the classroom. Society, parents, students, and administrators ask a lot from teachers, and teachers ask a lot from themselves. Yet we may feel we can’t do any more than what we’re already doing. We can’t see how we can make things better. We can’t see how things can change. We lack power.

True, there are some things for which we do lack control or power. Let’s take, for instance, our fifteen-credit teaching load. I know teaching load is a major concern, if not the most overriding concern, at this university. College deans and department chairs continually discuss teaching load, and every faculty in the College of Language and Letters who responded to a recent listed teaching load as their main concern.

In some ways, we do not have control over our workload. The Board of Trustees has determined that faculty at BYU-Idaho will have a fifteen-credit teaching load. Yet as individual teachers, we do have considerable power over how we manage our workload. We each have strengths and powers that, if developed, can help us individually and collectively have more control.

To assist in developing these strengths, I’d like to discuss five general principles that can have a significant impact on what we do. I want to follow the counsel of President Hinckley: “We are here to discuss principles with minor references to the details” (“Rise to a Larger Vision of the Work” 95) and the counsel of Elder Eyring to “be simple in our teaching” (“The Power of Teaching Doctrine” 74). Therefore, I will outline the principles simply, and then pray that each of us will continue to receive divine direction in how to apply the details to our own lives and classrooms.

Principle 1. We are lead by a living prophet. I know that we all know that President Hinckley is our living prophet. And we know that he receives revelation for us at this time from our Heavenly Father. President Spencer W. Kimball reminds us of the close relationship between heaven and our earthly prophet:

From the prophet of the Restoration to the prophet of our own year, the communication

line is unbroken, the authority is continuous, a light, brilliant and penetrating, continues to shine. The sound of the voice of the Lord is a continuous melody and a thunderous appeal. For nearly a century and a half, there has been no interruption. (78)

We also recognize that President Hinckley has received direct revelation about the creation of Brigham Young University-Idaho. True, there is much that we don't understand, and we still have concerns and questions, but we don't doubt President Hinckley's role and leadership. And under his leadership and through the Board of Trustees, we have a fifteen-credit teaching load.

President Hinckley has given some good advice about starting something new. Although he was speaking specifically about the then new program of funding the church solely through tithing and not through assessment, notice the direct relationship his comments have for us as we create BYU-Idaho.

This is a new and wonderful program. AS with any new program there will be a few items that will need to be corrected as we go along. There are still unanswered questions. . . . Time and experience will provide the answers. Meanwhile, be grateful and prayerfully go to work to make it function. I promise that you will be happy if you do so. ("Rise to a Larger Vision of the Work" 97)

Let us apply his counsel to "prayerfully go to work to make it function," even the teaching load, and then "time and experience will provide the answers."

Principle 2. We can receive divine guidance and strength as teachers. This divine guidance and strength also applies to how we collectively and individually manage our teaching loads. Without help from Heavenly Father with our load, we become like the people N. Eldon Tanner described as "stumbling and groping for answers to their own and world problems, and finding *their* attempts at solution to be totally inadequate" (2).

In contrast, Marion G. Romney reminds us that we are "unlike the rest of the world, we are not 'still searching for . . . the answers.' We know. . . the Almighty himself has revealed them" or will help reveal to us (104).

Similarly, Richard G. Scott encourages us to persevere with the following:

Our Heavenly Father did not put us on earth to fail but to succeed gloriously. . . . Some face life with only their own experience and capacity to help them. Others seek, through prayer, divine inspiration to *know* what to do. When required, they qualify for power beyond their capacity to do it. ("Learning to Recognize Answers to Prayer" 30)

We can and will receive direction and inspiration in regards to our challenges as teachers. As Richard G. Scott reminds us again that "our Heavenly Father and His Beloved Son, are willing, even anxious for us to learn from them," yet the answers come "a small piece at a time through

faith, with great exertion, and at times wrenching struggles” (“Acquiring Spiritual Knowledge” 8).

Elder Eyring also promises us that “God can multiply the effectiveness of our time (20). Eyring explains:

There is another way to look at your problem of crowded time. You can see it as an opportunity to test your faith. The Lord loves you and watches over you. He is all-powerful, and He promised you this: “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” (Matt. 6:33).

That is a true promise. When we put God's purposes first, He will give us miracles. If we pray to know what He would have us do next, He will multiply the effects of what we do in such a way that time seems to be expanded. He may do it in different ways for each individual, but I know from long experience that He is faithful to His word. . . .

I cannot promise academic success or perfect families. Nor can I tell you the way He will honor His promise of adding blessings upon you. But I can promise you that if you will go to Him in prayer and ask what He would have you do next, promising that you will put His kingdom first, He will answer your prayer and He will keep His promise to add upon your head blessings, enough and to spare. Those apparent prison walls of 'not enough time' will begin to recede, even as you are called to do more. (20-22)

We need absolute faith that we can receive direction and strength to prevail and succeed.

Principle 3. Seeing the big picture brings purpose and clarity to the details. At times we're so focused on our own struggles that we don't see how what we do does connect to a bigger picture. We need to see the bigger picture. Each year Elaine P. Maimon, Provost and Chief Academic Officer at Arizona State University West, sends a memo with the subject line “The Big Picture” to faculty pleading for them to gain a broader view of their roles at the university (65-67).

I identify with the author Sandra Cisneros, who feels that her role as a writer is “what I was put on this planet to do—to do that work that's bigger than just me” (Jerome 57). We too have been put on this planet, at this institution, at this time to do a “work that's bigger” than each of us. We need to catch a glimpse of that bigger work.

At the Summer 2002 Commencement, Elder Haight couldn't read his prepared remarks because of his failing eyesight. Yet, he did declare that he could see the big picture. How many of us can see the big picture?

And President Hinckley has challenged us to “Rise to a larger vision of the work” (“Rise to a Larger Vision of the Work” 95). Part of that challenge, then is to gain a perspective of how our

fifteen-credit load helps to define us as teachers at this time at BYU-Idaho and how this load defines us in relation to other CES institutions, to other peer institutions, and to the work of the Church and higher education.

Principle 4. Working together enhances effectiveness and reduces workload. Perhaps one of the most effective ways of gaining a broader view of our purpose is by working with others. Liberman and Miller's research shows that "teaching is indeed a lonely enterprise. . . . So much is carried on in self-imposed and professionally sanctioned isolation" (Brookfield 248). Stephen D. Brookfield describes this loneliness and isolation many teachers feel:

For many of us there is a sense that teaching is a secluded activity conducted in private fiefdoms over which we hold sway. . . . Silence surrounds us as teachers. Given the noise of a typical campus, this may seem like a strange statement to make. Yet in the demoralizing, though often unacknowledged way, many of us spend the greater part of our lives as teachers bound in the chains of silence." (247)

Geoffrey Chase, however, claims, "Teaching is fundamentally about community, about relationships between individuals and the larger groups of which they are a part. . . . Being a teacher means working with other teachers to create more effective learning communities" (15).

We can't manage the burdens of a fifteen-credit load on our own—we need to work with each other in our departments, college, and at the university. Without a doubt, one of the most empowering, motivating, and sustaining experiences of my life has occurred over the last two years as we have become BYU-Idaho. Do we realize what a blessing, what an opportunity President Hinckley, the Board of Trustees, and our Heavenly Father have given us to create on a faculty level, a four-year program? As a faculty, we develop the programs, the majors, and the courses. There's something very sacred about that trust placed in us, and the miracle comes from watching how *all* faculty members, both full-time and adjunct, come out of their offices, share ideas, work on committees, shape direction and implement work.

Looking back over the work each of us has done together over the last two years testifies of M. Russell Ballard's assertion that "God never intended that his children should stand alone" (77) Ballard continues his observation: "When we act in a united effort, we create spiritual synergism which is increased effectiveness or achievement as a result of combined action or cooperation, the result of which is great than the sum of individual parts." Ballard also promises that teams, including problem-solving teams, can lift loads as they share ideas and work (77).

For the last twenty years as a teacher, I have witnessed the power of collaboration as my students work together on class projects. I know that collaboration isn't without its troubles, but the benefits overwhelmingly make up for any inconvenience. As we struggle to work with fifteen-credits, we can accomplish significantly more with less effort if we work together.

Principle 5. Self-evaluation brings solutions to problems. We need to evaluate what we do.

One of the most fundamental principles of the gospel is accountability. President Hinckley has said, “Man would have his agency, and with that agency would go accountability” (90). Someone has suggested that to complement and balance the Statue of Liberty on the East coast of the United States, we also need a Statue of Responsibility on the West coast. Self-evaluation not only demonstrates responsibility and accountability and satisfies accreditation but also strengthens teaching and generates solutions to problems. Of course the university, the college, and the departments will all be involved in assessment, but I’m also speaking of the self-evaluation each of us can do individually with our own teaching, with our own classes, and with our own students. We need to examine what Jim Collins calls “the born facts” of what we do. By examining these facts, we often develop our own solutions (89).

The teaching portfolio for me is one of the most effective means of examining what I do as I search for solutions to my teaching problems. A few years ago I created a teaching portfolio as an example for new teachers who must also generate a teaching portfolio as part of CFS. This year, I want to create another portfolio, not revamp the old one, but to create one focusing on my teaching for this year.

Camille Newton explains that “teaching portfolios offer teachers the responsibility and opportunity to explore and display their teaching practices for the purpose of development.” She continues, “Teaching portfolios are lauded for their ability to contribute to teachers’ development and to present more contextual information about teachers and their teaching” (496).

Patricia Hutchings claims that the very “process of constructing a teaching portfolio contributes to a teacher’s development and learning” (3). Chris Anson adds that teaching portfolios inspire teachers “to think in more principled ways about how their teaching materials are written and this process leads to revision, new thought, and new action where perhaps otherwise there would be little change” (188-189).

I trust Stephen Brookfield when he claims “a useful starting point for dealing with teachers’ problems is teachers’ own experiences...[When teachers] come to realize the value of their own experiences, they take a critical perspective on them, and they learn how to use this reflection to help them deal with whatever problems they face” (160-161).

We also know that “the Holy Ghost will tell [us] what to do when [our] own abilities and efforts are not enough” (Eyring, “Watch Over and Strengthen,” 66).

Therefore, I want to explore, examine, revise, and assess my experiences and what I do. I encourage each of us to do the same.

The title of this article, “Charting Course” is based on J. Reuben Clark’s 1938 address “The Charted Course of the Church in Education.” Excerpts of this address have been reprinted in the September 2002 issue of the *Ensign*. In the final paragraph of this excerpt, President Clark gives an apostolic blessing for teachers that still applies to us today.

May God . . . quicken your understanding, increase your wisdom, enlighten you by experience, bestow upon you patience, charity, and, as among your most precious gifts, endow you with the discernment of spirits that you may certainly know the spirit of righteousness and its opposite as they come to you; may He give you entrance to the hearts of those you teach; . . . may He enrich your knowledge with the skill and power to teach righteousness; may your faith and your testimonies increase, and your ability to encourage and foster them in others grow greater every day—all that the youth of Zion may be taught, built up, encouraged, heartened, that they may not fall by the wayside but go on to eternal life, that these blessings coming to them, you through them may be blessed also. (61)

Note that President Clark blesses us with “the discernment of spirits.” I believe that discernment applies to Clark’s example of Daniel Webster’s reference to a mariner ascertaining where he’s been and where he’s headed. We’re at a similar point today. There is much the university can do to assist us, but I believe there are things to do that only a teacher can do—let me emphasize again that *only a teacher can do*.

As we chart course perhaps we need to discern as teachers that:

- Rather than having a long “to-do” list, we should perhaps have a “stop-doing” list—listing what we need to stop doing.
- Rather than jumping in and running, perhaps we need to first to crawl, then walk, and maybe eventually run.
- Rather than focusing on the hatching egg, perhaps we first need to concentrate on actively incubating the egg.
- Rather than impetuously and frequently changing direction, perhaps we need persistent pushing in a consistent, right direction over a long period of time to gain the needed momentum to carry on.
- Rather than fighting our challenges and adversities, perhaps we need to examine ourselves and with divine help search for solutions and strengths to improve our own circumstances.

In *Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield says “You can’t stop a teacher when they want to do something. They just do it” (11).

There’s much we don’t comprehend now, and our questions probably exceed our answers. Neal A. Maxwell lets us know that it’s fine not to have all the answers: “Just as the capacity to defer gratification is a sign of real maturity, likewise the willingness to wait for deferred explanation is a sign of real faith and trust spread over time” (71). Nephi also provides us with an example I hadn’t noticed before. At times we are like Nephi, “I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do” (sound familiar? We don’t always know what to do or how to do it). But notice Nephi’s action, “Nevertheless I went forth” (1 Nephi 4: 6-7). We also

must go forth without fully understanding why or how.

Just as Alma promised, when we act in faith, our souls will be enlarged, our understanding enlightened, and our minds expanded (Alma 32:28, 43).

As we go forth, we will become stronger, we will be led, we will be able to manage our load, and we will be able to “succeed gloriously.” Lorenzo Snow has said:

We have every reason to rejoice and to be full of joy and satisfaction, notwithstanding the difficulties that surround us. And how far have we advanced, how much knowledge have we obtained and how much more are we able to bear now that one, two or five years ago. . . . The Lord has strengthened us and increased us in our growth. . . . We feel stronger today than we did a year ago. (91).

As we chart course, as we do what only teachers can do, let’s remember the encouraging words of our beloved President Hinckley:

The time has come for us to stand a little taller, to lift our eyes and stretch our minds to a greater comprehension and understanding. . . . This is the season to be strong. It is a time to move forward without hesitation, knowing well the meaning, the breadth, and the importance of our mission (“This is the Work of the Master 71).

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