

## Keeping Course Little “Happens” But Much in Fact Does Happen

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The theme of last year’s college meeting was “Charting Course: To Do What Only a Teacher Can Do.” The theme was based on J. Reuben Clark’s 1938 address “The Charted Course of the Church in Education” when he quotes Daniel Webster during a great Senate debate:

Mr. President: When the mariner has been tossed for many days in thick weather, and on an unknown sea, he naturally avails himself of the first pause in the storm, the earliest glance of the sun, to take his latitude, and ascertain how far the elements have driven him from his true course. Let us imitate this prudence, and before we float farther on the waves of this debate, refer to the point from which we departed, that we may at least be able to conjecture where we now are. . . .

Last year’s challenge was to chart our course as the College of Language and Letters by applying five basic principles:

1. We are led by a living prophet.
2. We can receive divine guidance and strength as teachers.
3. Seeing the big picture brings purpose and clarity to details.
4. Working together enhances effectiveness and reduces workload.
5. Self-evaluation brings solutions to problems.

We have completed another year-long voyage on this BYU-Idaho “ship of curious workmanship.” How are we weathering the storms of accreditation, of heavy loads, of new and challenging courses, of pressing students, obligations, responsibilities, and opportunities? Are we still on course?

This year, our college theme is “Keeping Course: Little Happens But Much in Fact Does Happen.” “Keeping Course” asks if we’re where we want to be, if we’re even on the path we’re supposed to be on, if we’re making progress, or if we need to make any adjustments in our direction. So today, we’ll glance at the sun, take our latitude, and assess where we are on our course—we’ll discuss basic aspects of assessment.

Earlier this summer I read a review of Michael Cunningham’s 1999 Pulitzer-winning novel *The Hours* in which the reviewer says “Little ‘happens,’ [but] much in fact does happen.” That statement helped to articulate what has continued to intrigue me as I think about the book, the movie, and assessment. Cunningham relies on a significant assumption and expectation he has for anyone reading his book or even for anyone watching its movie adaptation. He assumes we are very familiar with Virginia Woolf’s novel *Mrs. Dalloway*—Cunningham’s entire book rests on that expectation, yet he rarely makes any direct references to the novel.

Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* is the novel of one day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway as she prepares and gives a garden party. Cunningham’s *The Hours* interlocks one day in the

lives of three different women living at three different times: Virginia Woolf in suburban London in 1923 as she writes *Mrs. Dalloway*, Laura Brown in Los Angeles in 1949 as she reads *Mrs. Dalloway*, and Clarissa Vaughan in New York in the late 1990s as she prepares for her own party and whose life closely parallels that of the fictitious Mrs. Dalloway.

The reviewer is right in that little does seem to happen in the one-day account of these three women, but much does happen when the reader makes connections among these three women and the understood novel—revelations and relationships become more sharp, clear, full, and meaningful. But these insights only happen when readers over time and with the help of Cunningham's women and with Woolf's novel begin to piece together smaller bits of information and events and build a more complete understanding.

I'm beginning to examine assessment differently because of what works for Cunningham and his novel. In the past, I've feared assessment because I assumed that as teachers we would need elaborate, complicated, intricate evaluation instruments that would measure isolated and perhaps even insignificant aspects of what our students and we do. I have envisioned our assessment to be similar to the nightmare Idaho Standards Achievement Test that is a part of No Child Left Behind. I have been afraid that assessment would force us as teachers to artificially teach so some limited concept could be evaluated and measured.

However, I'm beginning to see differently. I'm recognizing that perhaps the best assessment tools are probably simple assignments and activities we already use or can adapt from our own classrooms and teachings, and that within these common, simple activities we can indeed measure multiple levels of understanding and abilities. Hence, "little happens" in terms of changes in our courses and methods of assessment, but "much in fact does happen" as we become more trained and capable of interpreting the results of what our students and we do. Therefore, we need to identify what we already do in the classroom, question what it assesses, and expertly examine multiple levels of meanings based on what we do.

Also, I'm beginning to see assessment differently, mostly through reading Grant Wiggins' *Educative Assessment: Designing Assessments to Inform and Improve Student Performance*. My previous understanding of assessment was auditing student performance, much like recording students' grades and abilities in a grade book using letter grades to measure levels of ability. I realize that is a superficial understanding of assessment, and that most often I only assess what is easy and obvious to test and measure such as the number of comma splices or run-ons, misspelled words, a tightly-controlled thesis statement, and accurate MLA or APA documentation. Wiggins repeatedly reminds us that "the aim of assessment is to *educate and improve* student performance, not merely to *audit* it" (7) and that "once assessment is designed to be educative, it is no longer separate from instruction; it is a major, essential, and integrated part of teaching and learning" (8). Therefore, effective teachers are also effective assessors.

This past year, I've had to look much more carefully at assessment as I've prepared to teach for my first time English 430 Teaching English in Secondary Schools, the English methods class where a significant focus is training new teachers in methods and purposes of evaluation and assessment. I've had to read theory, question why I do what I do in the classroom, and develop more clear assignments and activities that model student assessment. A governing principle of effective assessment is "authentic" assessment measuring "authentic" performance tasks. *Authentic* in educational theory is nothing more than work which "replicates or simulates the contexts [skills and abilities] in which adults are 'tested' in the workplace, in civic life, and in personal life" (Wiggins 24)—assignments that are realistic, require judgment and innovation, ask students to "do" the subject, encourage application of skills and knowledge, and allow appropriate opportunities to rehearse, practice, consult sources, and get feedback on and refine performances (Wiggins 23-24). Authentic assignments incorporate real-life applications and activities in an academic setting.

I've tried to apply the principle of authentic assignments to the classes I teach. For example in advanced writing for business, students create a correspondence portfolio of memos, emails, faxes, letters responding to a case study involving multinational participants, and students write actual business plans to potential investors describing their proposed business and its marketing, operations, management, and financial needs and expectations. In the English methods class, students over the semester create a grading portfolio that practices and demonstrates different grading strategies using their peers' papers from our own class, freshman college students, and 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade class sets of papers. The assignments model and practice what adults do in real life.

Authentic assignments naturally lead to multiple levels of authentic assessment. But as teachers we often look for the obvious and don't exercise our professional skills in looking for deeper levels of students' abilities and performance. Earlier this summer, I had an experience with focusing on the obvious and missing the significant. My sons and I were four-wheeling in the Arco desert when Nathan and I had an accident. We hit a rock and flew off the four-wheeler. Fortunately, we were wearing helmets, and when our heads hit the ground, we were uninjured. My son was bruised and scraped, and as I took my gloves off to help him up, I saw the obvious—I had dislocated my finger—it was pointing in an unnatural position. I wasn't feeling any pain in my finger, but the back of my hand was a little tender, just a bruise.

Rather than have my brother pull the dislocated finger back into its socket, we drove the hour and half to Rexburg for a doctor's assessment and treatment. On the drive home I'm focusing on the obvious misdirected finger and my son's excessive driving speed and am not paying attention to my bruised hand. After I drop the boys home, share the story and the finger, I go to the hospital. The hospital doctor is not concerned about the dislocated finger but about the bruised hand and pulls in Dr. Mills, an orthopedic surgeon, who just happens to be walking through the emergency room. These doctors looked past the obvious, sent me for X-rays, and made arrangements for surgery to repair two broken bones with wires, plates, and eight screws. They looked deeper and found more.

Unquestionably, one of my most sobering experiences as a teacher happened when I did not look deeper into a particular student's work in my class. I've shared this experience before with some of you, but it remains a constant reminder to me that I need to look deeper with professional eyes. Cindy had classes from me two different semesters. I remember her on the first day we met because she wouldn't look at me, even as she introduced herself and as I walked around the room trying to learn names. She wouldn't look at me for several weeks. Cindy had weak writing skills, bad skin, and poor personal hygiene. She didn't participate in class, and whenever we did group work, she'd simply listen and not offer comments. She did her work; I noticed general writing problems but not anything alarming. She wouldn't come in for conferencing, or when I'd approach her after class to comment on her work, she'd excuse herself and say she was in a hurry for another class. I was surprised to see Cindy in my composition class the next semester. She was the same old Cindy. But then she began to change—she had her first boyfriend. For the first time in her life, she felt significant, and her appearance and self-esteem began to improve. She tentatively started to work in small groups during class, and she'd write longer papers describing her dates and her boyfriend. She still had some major writing problems, but they were manageable.

What I didn't see was that Cindy did not submit working drafts of her papers—I only saw final products. I didn't see that Cindy had missed every in-class writing assignment for both semesters; instead she submitted late, computer-generated writings. She had missed the announced diagnostic writing activities each semester, yet she made arrangements to do them at home and bring them to me, computer-generated. Even when I required students to write informal letters regularly to me about class performance and concerns, Cindy's were also done on the computer and in final draft form. Not until the final exam of the second class when I repeatedly denied her permission to miss this last in-class writing or to do it on the computer did I see Cindy's true writing ability. Here is her final exam in which she was to write an essay telling me what she had learned in class. She took the entire ninety minutes to write this essay. I had no clue until then how severe Cindy's writing problems were. She had received Cs in both of my classes, yet as her teacher I had failed. Cindy graduated with a 2.1 GPA, and she also received Cs in two other English classes, and I'm certain her teachers were also unaware of her abilities—we did not see the individual student.

A principle I would like to incorporate into my own classes is with professional eyes look past the obvious to see deeper meanings and significance as I assess students' performance and understanding. But what am I looking for as I do this? How can I look for different levels when I'm so used to seeing the obvious?

Wiggins provides direction as I learn to look deeper at what my students and I do. He describes five facets of understanding that can apply to levels of assessment.

1. **Meaningful Content.** This facet of understanding focuses on subject content and how well students understand the basic principles, how the principles work, what the principles mean, and why the principles are important.

2. **Effective Application.** This facet of understanding focuses on how well students demonstrate their abilities to use the principles, adapt the principles or customize the principles for different purposes, audiences, and expectations.
3. **Multiple Perspectives.** This facet of understanding focuses on how well students understand the principles through multiple vantage points and positions (such as various critical theories or sides of an argument), through “new avenues of discovery,” questioned assumptions, or reexamined past experiences.
4. **Empathetic Experience.** This facet of understanding focuses on how well students understand principles based on another’s feelings and worldview, to experience the world as another person experiences it.
5. **Reflective Awareness.** This facet of understanding focuses on how well students understand principles in terms of their own self-knowledge, their own intellectual prejudices, and how those prejudices influence what and how they act and feel. (84-85)

These facets of understanding and assessment intrigue me, and although I haven’t yet determined specifically how I will utilize them in my classes, I do see how using authentic tasks and assignments naturally will lead students and me to multiple, more meaningful levels of assessment—much deeper than the obvious. These facets will give me significantly more assessment mileage from a single assignment—where “little happens but much in fact does happen..”

I’m now trying to determine where and how to start this more meaningful assessment, and I’m drawn to three related gospel principles that seem to apply: the principles of stewardship, accountability, and discernment.

Part of our stewardship as teachers is to also be assessors. In 1978 President N. Eldon Tanner has declared: “So much has been done and is to be done, and it will be done best when we follow the principles of stewardship” (94). A singular principle of stewardship is receiving divine guidance as we study and apply assessment in our teaching. Tanner reminds us of the need to rely on the Lord for direction within our stewardships: “What a great spirit we would have if we would realize that all we have to administer, all that we call our own, is the Lord’s [and I’ll add all that we must do as teachers], and we have the responsibility to do it the way He would have it done” (94). Have we prayerfully asked for guidance as we develop ~~ment~~ assignments and assessments for our students?

A second principle of stewardship is that we can always improve upon our talents, abilities, and magnify our callings, even the calling of an assessing teacher. I’d like to apply to our professional situation what President Spencer W. Kimball declared in 1977, but what President Hinckley continues to remark today: “Brothers and sisters, . . . may I urge you to go forward in this great work. So much depends upon our willingness to make up our minds collectively and individually, that present levels and performances are not acceptable, either to ourselves or to the Lord” (*Ensign*, November 1977, 79). And President Hinkley: “This is the time for us to stand a little taller, to lift our eyes and stretch our minds to a greater comprehension and understanding . . .” (“This is the Work” 71)—perhaps even a greater comprehension and understanding of assessment.

Of course, we generally think of accountability as being directly connected to agency, and it is, but in terms of assessment, accountability can also refer to both student and teacher taking responsibility for academic performances. While reading an article by Elder Dennis B. Neuenschwander entitled "The Path of Growth," I could see similarities between the accountability associated with confession with the accountability of assessment. For instance, accountability and assessment involve conquering pride, learning from others including supervisors, helping us take individual responsibility, and helping us to become improve what we already do (*Ensign*, December 1999, 13+).

Elder Dean L. Larsen has given an excellent perspective on accountability in his talk entitled "Self-Accountability and Human Progress." Larsen reminds us that the Lord has told us in Doctrine and Covenants 101:78 that every person will be accountable and that we are to "act in doctrine and principle pertaining to futurity." Larsen then promises that the major strides we make in being personally responsible and accountable will have a significant impact upon the Church and in the kingdom, and I suggest that that kingdom can also relate to our roles as teachers at BYU-Idaho and will help us "to rise above the [assessment] plateaus we have been on" (*Ensign*, May 1980, 76).

Fortunately, the spirit of discernment can greatly help us as we fulfill our stewardships and become accountable. Usually we refer to the need for gift of discernment to help us recognize good and evil, but discernment also helps us to see things as they really are. And isn't one of the greatest challenges of assessment is to see students and their understandings as they really are? President David O. McKay reminds us of teachers' need for discernment:

The successful teacher is one who, with a spirit of discernment, can detect to a degree at least, the mentality and capability of the members of his class. He should be able to read the facial expressions and be responsive to the mental and spiritual attitudes of those whom he is teaching. The great Teacher had this power of discernment in perfection as is well illustrated in his conversation with the woman of Samaria whose interests he not only interpreted, but whose soul he also read by virtue of her past deeds. Too few teachers have this gift, even to a limited degree, but every teacher has the responsibility of determining how best to approach the members of the class in order to make appeals that will be lasting" (*RSM*, 21:722, 1934).

That same spirit of discernment not only applies to seeing our students and their performances as they really are but also seeing our course content and principles as they really are. I encourage us all to reread Elder Dallin H. Oaks April 2001 conference talk "Focus and Priorities." Read the talk in relation to the courses we teach; what principles of our subjects should receive our highest priorities and upon which principles should we focus our curriculum? The spirit of discernment will help us with a wise and inspired use of the information we cover in our classes.

May we use this gift of discernment as we develop our courses and assess our students and ourselves. May we be wise and accountable stewards and teachers. May we look beyond the obvious into multiple levels as we assess our students and their performances.

May we examine the little that happens to reveal <sup>that</sup> ~~the~~ much in fact that does happen. And  
may we continue to keep the course, is my prayer.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.