

BYU-IDAHO: A REDEFINITION

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At the January 2001 faculty meeting, President Bednar described the transformation of Ricks College to BYU-Idaho as an historic, perplexing, inspiring undertaking. Don Bird, Academic Vice President, spoke of a letter whose writer expressed discomfort about a college becoming a university simply through making four-year baccalaureate degrees available. Specifically, this writer wondered how Ricks College could be a university when it didn't offer graduate programs or have association with research institutions. Brother Bird understood the tension felt by the writer, and by the listening faculty. He mentioned that BYU-Hawaii is an accepted university, though offering post-graduate courses only in education. Further, Wisconsin University is centered in Madison, but considers itself incomplete without its satellite community colleges. Brother Bird suggested that we might be more comfortable taking the name of a university while viewing ourselves as a satellite institution of BYU-Provo. We would be committed to common educational purposes while remaining institutionally autonomous.

I want to talk about a deeper reason for our change than that of merely getting used to a new name, namely the power of re-reading and re-thinking, and the possibility that we can lead our students to an exponential increase of educational value without increasing the quantity of instruction. But first I have a few comments about our new name, the deep change, and the tension. I will also review some principles that underlie all our deliberations and practices. And then I will discuss what I think is the essential core of this transition—the potential and the necessity of helping students internalize and integrate their learning through thoughtful re-reading.

To teach effective reading may appear a trivial matter relative to meeting deadlines to achieve university status. But if we become a university in name *and quality*, we need to discern the quality of learning we hope to promote even while preparing for our name change. Finding ways to integrate re-reading into our curriculum can be no more trivial than the degree to which we trivialize the outcomes of study.

We can no doubt learn much by considering BYU-Hawaii and Wisconsin as models during our transition. But the discomfort we all sense with the process should not move us to settle into an early answer, one that doesn't satisfy the deeper longing to understand what a living prophet has in mind for BYU-Idaho, especially if we believe he has been inspired by the Lord. Rather, the discomfort we feel should be viewed as what Thomas Kuhn calls essential tension: a type of tension or discomfort by which discovery of a better way is prompted and made possible.

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The prophet's decision to change Ricks College into BYU-Idaho carries the implicit mandate to redefine the university in the 21st century, not to excel inside a familiar definition, but to formulate a new shape founded upon principles of the restored gospel and the mission of the Church. If we do this, BYU-Idaho will become a premiere religious teaching institution, fitted to meet spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and social needs of a growing church, and to minister to a needy world in the 21st century.

Our primary purpose of instruction will always be to build testimonies of the restored gospel and encourage living its principles. Indeed, the building of testimonies comprehends all intellectual, emotional, and social purposes contained in our mission statement. (All things unto the Lord are spiritual: *Doctrine and Covenants* 29:34.) These secondary purposes become significant because they point in complementary fashion toward the ultimate purpose of eternal life suggested by the first, to come to know God and his Son.

Implied in this spiritual commitment is an intellectual and emotional commitment to excel in study. The Lord counsels us to “seek diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea seek. . .out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 88:118). In order to teach such that our primary purpose of building testimonies of Christ and His gospel may be the means of unifying the other purposes of our mission statement, our instruction ought to reflect our personal devotion to genuine learning. If so, we will do much to invite our students to value the privilege of disciplining their minds and hearts through their commitment to discover and enjoy personal connectedness in all they endeavor to understand.

Though students can achieve an integrated education only if invited into it all across the campus, the place where they will actually do it is within individual classrooms, one hour at a time. Fundamental to our teaching are the premises that students must distinguish between what they do and do not understand, and that they must make vital, personal connections among the subjects they study. A university education at BYU-Idaho must be one in which students are not primarily taught subject matter in a discipline. They must learn to make connections between the subject matter and the character of their thinking.

But just as we don't need new doctrines in order to become a Zion people, we don't need revolutionary courses to offer our students a new level of thinking and commitment. Similarly, just as we need greater commitment to the fundamental doctrines of the Lord, Jesus Christ—and to Christ—we need greater commitment to curriculum design that promotes the fundamentals of a unifying (or integrated) education.

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As simple as it sounds, at the heart of such a curriculum is reading, the kind of reading that connects the reader with ideas and principles that both require and cause character growth. In the words of Alma, by small means are great things brought to pass (Alma 37:6). At the heart of higher education is the assumption that an educated person can think through, assimilate, and contribute. The key activity is reading.

To bring about connectedness with tradition and the passion to contribute to tradition, reading will need to go beyond what passes as such in many universities—and in our own classes. I mean the kind of re-reading that is motivated by one’s desire to genuinely participate in the thinking of an author who is thought-worthy. Our teaching ought to reflect a vigilant commitment to the art of effective re-reading. Precious little could bear greater fruit than teaching students how to work through challenging texts to a point of insight into the text, and of excitement to share insight with others.

A tenet of a BYU-Idaho education ought to be that one grows into a knowledge of what one is learning—not simply memorizes information to be stored in 72-hour memory. This growth is promoted by deliberate re-reading. Too few of our students read like this. We would do well to teach them to develop a commitment to, and even a reverence for, the miracle of personal connectedness that so naturally follows from diligent re-reading.

We see this reverence and commitment exercised by Jewish readers of the Torah. Jacob Neussner tells us that reading, for a Jew, is a sacred activity. He tells us that the closest we can get to participating in godliness is to use our minds. In the mind one performs acts of creation in purity. And since the Torah is deemed to be the ultimate blueprint for God’s creative acts among men, the ultimate act of worship is experienced while contemplating God’s thoughts intently when reading the Torah.

It may seem a long stretch to associate reading the Torah with reading at Ricks College, but it’s not such a stretch. Those who have experienced the exhilaration of working through a difficult text—not to be tested on it, mind you, but solely to understand it—know the feeling of gratitude that accompanies the awakening of one’s mind and heart. This experience borders upon the sacred, since it is nothing less than revelatory. It is not simply a process of making sense of information, but a process of becoming open, alive, with possibility taking the place of confusion. Insight has the power to rearrange more than the content of the study. The reader feels renewed, in touch with greater things. As a character in the movie *Shadowlands* put it: “We read to know we’re not alone.” And Sven Birkerts said: “The time of reading. . . is not the world’s time, but the soul’s.”

In the midst of much good that has been accomplished, Ricks College has tended to give its students a multiversity experience rather

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than a university education. We do this by taking students through a variety of general education and major courses, assuming that they study multiple texts on their own and engage meaningfully with the concepts taught. In some cases students do this, but for the most part the curriculum is dummed down because they don't read the assignments, let alone re-read them.

Too many students haven't learned the discipline to engage texts meaningfully.

This isn't true only for Ricks College; it's true for colleges and universities nationwide. Too many students haven't learned the discipline to engage texts meaningfully. They read at texts, skimming for the main ideas, or at least ideas they think will be tested or discussed in class. Still others don't care enough to exert even this much effort. For them, the trick is getting through courses with as little reading as possible. The sad truth is, they perform this trick quite well.

There's one other way multiversity schooling stifles meaningful re-reading: by the sheer volume of required reading. You and I hear this all too often. Students complain of assignments comprising 30 pages in biology, 25 pages in psychology, 20 pages in history, 100 problems in math, 25 pages in literature—all to be done before the next class meeting. I've heard the response given to these complaints: "You're in college now. What did you expect?" Drowning in a flood of text, our students may be sending a deeper S-O-S call than what we might discern in their whining. Where adequate time to read isn't built into the curriculum, our reading assignments do more to stifle educational opportunities than to promote them.

Students learn that reading isn't necessary.

Too often the class discussion goes on notwithstanding our students' lack of preparation. Herein lies our challenge. The more reading teachers assign while not promoting accountability in their students, the more students are taught that they don't have to read, let alone re-read, in order to understand the content in each course. What's more, as reading assignments are summarized in lecture, students learn that reading isn't necessary. When this occurs, not only do we school our students into memorizing a smattering of data unrelated to each other; we condition them to become intellectually blind. Such multiversity schooling does little to integrate understanding within any course, or to unify understanding from a variety of courses.

Our students must learn that, in the determination to connect themselves with ideas, confusing first readings become tolerable second readings. These, in turn, become understandable third readings, intriguing fourth readings, and, finally, insightful fifth readings. Obviously "five" is not the magic number at which students always connect with the text. The point is, they need to be taught a meaningful gradation of re-readings, to gain personal insight from them, and to learn to govern their lives

from them. There is a correlation between how students read college texts and how they read inspired texts.

How grateful I am for the few teachers who taught me to read this way. The blessing doesn't lie half as much in acquiring information as in participating in the world-view of the writer. In such a partnership, readers are drawn out of their own confinement into a greater world, a world with possibilities beyond their own imagining. The more world-views one has participated in, the more rich the thought-possibilities to bring back to one's own world. The result can be to perceive possibility in drudgery, optimism in routine, hope in despair, understanding in confusion.

I weep as I consider the shattered hopes of some of my young ward members who wonder why their marriages aren't as happy as they've been promised. Yet they don't re-read to discern the possibilities. They read, if they read at all, as they read for their classes: as consumers of information that perchance may interest them. When an idea doesn't catch their attention, they shrug it off as boring, meaning that it is neither worthy of their attention nor worth their thinking about. They would rather read what will comfort them by confirming their limited perspective. They overlook insights that lie dormant all around them because of their self-blinding habit of reading that consists mostly of scanning magazines that easily draw them in. As to books containing ideas that could open their awareness, they choose to live ignorantly.

This choice is made in deeper ignorance than the choice of what to read. At its core lies an ignorance of the re-reading that changes the reader's character, a type of reading through which one submits to the righteous ideas of others. But until students experience this re-reading for themselves, they can hardly make it their chosen mode of reading.

The irony is that most of these students are now attending their second year at Ricks College, yet their learning isn't being converted into principles exercised in their personal lives. The reading required of them doesn't invite them to perceive life-options that make a positive difference.

So much has been said by President Bednar about a curriculum of integration. You will recall that in the October faculty meeting he spent a good share of his comments helping us understand the importance of integrated baccalaureate degrees. But genuine integration can only be achieved if individual integration of understanding becomes the primary concern of students and teachers. If Ricks College is to rise to President Hinckley's mandate of becoming a premiere teaching institution—if this institution is to redefine Ricks College into Brigham Young University-Idaho—we need to become more attuned to re-reading. ☺

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