

TEACHING WITH COMPASSION:
UNLEARNING IRRESPONSIBILITY BY EMPHASIZING
CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

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I'm thinking about putting the plaque "Concierge" on my office door. Whenever I leave my door open, I end up fielding questions such as "Where's the Education Department?" "Where's Brother Ward's Office?" "Where's room 346?" Some of these questions are understandable. My office is the first students see, and I doubt anyone really understands the Smith building's room-numbering system. But many of these questions make me clench my teeth (both in irritation and to keep my jaw from dropping to the floor): "Could you throw this away for me?" "Can I borrow your stapler?" "Do you have any blank paper I could have?" "Can I just print something out for my class? It's due right now."

I'm even more frustrated by similar types of comments that come from my own students: "I didn't do the assignment because I couldn't get ahold of you" (this usually comes from the student who leaves a message on voice mail at 2 a.m., needing help with an assignment that is due at 8 a.m. the next day). "Well, you didn't tell me that the assignment was due" (which leads to the old "it's on the syllabus" discussion). And the statement that is most disturbing: "Well, I didn't know where to go [for help], so I didn't do it [the assignment]."

For much of last year—my first year teaching at Ricks College—you could have heard me muttering under my breath, "I can't believe these students. When are they going to take responsibility for themselves? For their education? Do they expect me to do everything?"

WHERE DOES A TEACHER'S RESPONSIBILITY END?

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Drawing the line between teacher and student responsibility is difficult. Particularly, when we strive to be "Spirit of Ricks" teachers, "upholding a tradition of...*compassion*" ("The 'Spirit of Ricks,'" emphasis added). Many faculty members come to BYU-Idaho to teach with compassion: to "be there" for their students. This is a strength across our campus. One faculty member often comes in late at night to meet with students on their assignments. Another teacher devotes personal time to working with a former student who is struggling with an eating disorder. Many faculty give out home phone numbers so students can contact them whenever necessary. I admire and respect the faculty's, and staff's, commitment to nurturing our students.

However, in our attempt to foster the "Spirit of Ricks," are we taking too much of the student's responsibility on ourselves? While sitting in

one of the new-faculty meetings, I worried at another teacher's comment, "Well, I've called this student repeatedly about her absences so we can talk about what we should do." My concern is that this kind of attention takes away the student's responsibility for coming to class, or making up assignments, and places it on the teacher. Consider the possibility of a slippery slope, with this attitude easily evolving into a student claiming, "It's not my fault I didn't do well. My teacher never told me what I needed to do after I missed class."

The problem is that many students, particularly freshmen, do need some guidance as they transition from high school to college. Take for example, my student Candy, in my freshman writing course, who was absent one Monday and did not get the handout we were reading for the following Wednesday. When I corrected Wednesday's reading quiz, this student's answer read, "I wasn't here on Monday, so I wasn't able to get the reading or the information to know where to get it. I'm not quite sure how or what to do." My first response was my typical muttering: "Why didn't you just call me? Why didn't you ask a friend? This kind of lackadaisical behavior won't get you through college."

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One Sunday I took this problem to my Laurel class, as our lesson that week was on choice and accountability. These girls at church are only one year younger than my freshmen, and I'd intended to show this student's quiz as an example of the consequences of not coming to class. However, the Laurels' responses were surprising. "Well of course she should have waited until the next class to find out what the assignment was. That's what you are supposed to do."

Surprised, I started talking to high school administrators, and I learned this is exactly what some high school students are taught. Candy and many of her freshman colleagues have been trained to wait for the teacher to tell them what to do. Therefore, while as teachers we may be justified in our frustration at students like Candy, we must recognize that sometimes students are reflecting, not their laziness or irresponsibility, but their previous educational training. We must also recognize that our students may feel equally frustrated because it seems like they are being punished (or at least "yelled at") for doing what they've been trained to do.

Faculty should show compassion to these new college students. But not by taking the bulk of our students' responsibility on ourselves. This misguided consideration simply prolongs the problem. Instead, teachers truly show compassion by helping students unlearn ineffective habits of irresponsibility. We can teach students how to fulfill their educational responsibilities by emphasizing two areas: 1) critical thinking skills and 2) educational ownership.

MODELING AND DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

We see the need for critical thinking in many situations. The most obvious is in our students' inability to think of alternative ideas and solutions when the obvious solution (the teacher) is unavailable. Sometimes students' inability to think critically seems ridiculous. This summer a student with the business travel program appeared to classes unshaven, violating the grooming standards. When questioned, his response was, "I had no other choice. My adapter for my razor didn't work, and so I had no other choice." Mature critical thinkers cringe at the phrase "no other choice," but for some students, there is only *one* answer to problems, and it isn't their fault when this answer doesn't jibe with school or faculty expectations.

Often used synonymously with problem solving, critical thinking can be defined as teaching students to "actively think their way to conclusions" (Paul). Richard Paul, from the Foundation for Critical Thinking, elaborates on this definition:

[Students need to] entertain a variety of points of view, analyze concepts, theories, or explanations from their own points of view, actively question the meaning and implications of what they learn, compare what they learn with what their experiences suggest, tackle non-routine problems, examine assumptions, or gather evidence. They [must do these things to] achieve higher-order learning, [and become critical thinkers].... [If not] they are at best trained, not critical thinkers or persons.... Lacking experience with complex thinking, unused to critical thinking, [many] retreat in the face of complexity to simplistic pictures of the world. The growing mass media feed this demand for simple-minded answers; politicians cater to it.... Schools and colleges must cultivate a shift from rote memorization to critical thinking.

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While few would argue against the need to think critically, some faculty struggle with how to teach this skill. Some believe they teach critical thinking skills simply because they themselves are critical thinkers. "Many teachers [believe] that students can internalize critical thinking by a process very similar to osmosis; that is, by being in the presence of critical thinking professors" (Haas and Keeley). Students, however, rarely see or comprehend the process that led the professor to a particular conclusion. Instead, they methodically take notes, memorizing what the teacher says, without "thinking their way to [the] conclusions" (Paul).

Instead, faculty members need to make "invisible" problem-solving skills "visible" to students and then allow them to practice in structured, safe, environments. In collaboration theory, this modeling/practice method is referred to as scaffolding. The students are given a supportive frame to guide them in their group work. Scaffolding is equally necessary in critical thinking. Teachers provide support by "explicitly discuss[ing] with students:

1) What the [problem-solving] strategy is and does, 2) When and why to use the strategy, and 3) How to use the strategy.... After modeling and explaining a strategy, [faculty] need to coach students as they try out using the strategy in a similar contextual situation. As [students] practice (often with [the support] of partners at first), [teachers] and [student] peers can offer suggestions or pointers. Finally, students independently recognize when and where to incorporate the strategy”(Allan and Miller 19-20).

Another problem with teaching critical thinking skills is that “many teachers are much too busy providing information and helping students understand models within their own disciplines to worry about whether they can think critically” (Haas and Keeley). While pushing to cover the material, perhaps teachers unconsciously resort to lecture, which is the quickest way of “covering material,” but a less effective way of *learning* concepts.

Many faculty members avoid the lecture method by engaging in question/answer discussions, and sometimes assume that these discussions will lead to critical thought. However, most discussion questions require only the “lowest cognitive level (information),” rather than ask students to understand and evaluate concepts (Haas and Keeley). Also, during class discussions, some teachers are tempted to jump in and “save” the students when there are long pauses or confused looks on students’ faces, which teaches the students that if they wait long enough, the teacher will supply the answer.

To promote problem-solving skills, teachers can begin class discussions with a few lower cognitive level questions, and then move on to higher level, evaluative, questions. For example, the following types of questions require students to apply concepts, rather than just repeat them:

- using specifics from our reading, explain which model of education would be best for this situation
- using the concepts covered in class, explain why the author of this book might be wrong; offer a correct conclusion
- explain to your partner how you will apply this concept on the job.

Because these types of questions require longer time to process, teachers can facilitate student responses by asking them to come to class with these questions already answered, or give them a few minutes in class to write out their responses before sharing them.

Similarly, group discussion and collaboration, which can be effective in developing critical thinking, are often incorrectly used. Just because students discuss ideas in a group does not mean they are thinking critically about a topic. Students learn quickly the “surface language” of education, where they either mimic the teacher’s ideas or spout off definitive, and

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unsubstantiated, opinions about an issue (Elder and Paul). However, rarely do these group discussions require students to offer carefully developed and supported ideas that evaluate and explore alternatives. To help groups practice critical thinking, teachers can provide guidelines that require the group to analyze criteria, evaluate implications, and develop alternatives. Another important element in successful collaborative critical thinking is to require that the group support its ideas with concepts discussed in class and also account for its group work (e.g., asking the group to present conclusions to the class).

Finally, teachers must also carefully scrutinize assignments and exams, which are often designed to measure students' memorization of abstract facts, rather than their evaluative skills. Otherwise, these materials reinforce earlier (high school) training that encourages students to wait to be told what to do/know in order to pass the class, rather than to try to solve problems for themselves.

Therefore, class assignments and exams should be evaluative rather than informative. Ideally, exams should be short essays, rather than multiple choice. Assignments should be case studies that ask students to apply particular concepts to broader settings instead of specialized exercises. Students recognize that these higher cognitive level activities are challenging, and while admitting that it is more difficult, they often appreciate the value of the assignment. An advanced writing teacher shared a student's response to a case study that "required creative [problem-solving] along with knowledge of [document] format": "This is more than just an exercise. Exercises are easier. This will make us really write." A junior in the elementary education program, commenting on these kinds of evaluative/analytical assignments, said that for the first time in her college career she had two classes that required her to think, not just repeat what she heard in class, and that these assignments were distinctly harder for her.

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These comments are revealing. As freshmen and sophomore students move into upper division coursework, there arises an important question about their preparation for these courses: have the students been *taught* to think critically, or have they simply been told to think?

If the answer is the latter, then faculty and students will be frustrated. The faculty are frustrated because they find themselves repeating the same things: "look in your syllabus," "read the assignment sheet," "no, you can't do that." More significantly, they are frustrated with shallow papers, inaccurate and often incomplete conclusions, and unproductive class time. The students are frustrated because they feel they truly don't "know what to do." And instead of learning to think and find solutions to these problems, they merely try to "figure out" one particular teacher,

who is often perceived as “mean” because he or she doesn’t fit the students’ understanding of what a teacher does—solve their problems.

Teaching critical thinking needs to be an interdisciplinary concern. It can’t be taught in one “critical thinking” course. It needs to be reinforced across the campus, so that students can repeatedly practice these skills. Some teachers may resist incorporating critical thinking into their classes, concerned about the time required to reshape courses. However, many faculty members already have activities and assignments that can be adjusted, fairly easily, to teach these skills.

OWNERSHIP—REMOVING THE SCAFFOLDING

An important outcome of critical thinking is educational ownership, with students taking greater responsibility for their education. A goal for us as teachers is to help our students learn enough concepts, coping strategies, and critical thinking skills that they won’t need us to tell them what to do. We can help students reach this point by gradually cutting back the overt support that incoming students require. Although scaffolding is an important part of the learning process, just as with construction, eventually the scaffolding in learning needs to be minimized and ultimately taken away. Additionally, while we are modeling and teaching effective critical thinking, we must not take away the students’ responsibility for their own learning. As mentioned earlier, my primary concern with misinterpreting the “Spirit of Ricks” is that in our compassion for our students, we take away their ownership for their own education.

I struggle with this. As a writing instructor, I believe in one-on-one conferencing with my students on their papers. Every semester, as the students first come in, I notice a disturbing pattern. When I ask my students what questions they have about their papers, they look baffled. After stuttering for a few minutes, the majority of them blurt out, “I want *you* to tell me what I should change.” Laughing, I tell them that I’m not going to follow them around the rest of their academic career, fixing their papers. Then we work together on helping the *student* identify what he or she should revise. With each paper, my comments and suggestions decrease, while the students’ explanations of how they intend to revise their papers increase.

For some students this method of conferencing is frustrating. They can’t understand why I won’t just tell them what to fix. That’s what they think teachers are for. For other students, this shift in ownership/responsibility gives them a sense of empowerment. The next time they come to conference, they’ve already outlined their questions. Rather than just waiting for me to “bleed” all over their papers, they simply want feedback on their ideas.

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There are many ways to gradually remove teacher dependence and encourage student ownership. For example, one education teacher uses scaffolding (providing structured support as students learn new concepts) to teach her students how to effectively read their textbooks. Early in the semester, the students read the chapter prior to class, and then, as a class, they discuss the chapter concepts, with the teacher modeling how to identify what those key concepts are. For the next reading assignment, students come to class, discuss key concepts they've identified for themselves, and then take a short essay quiz, which measures their understanding of these concepts. Gradually, the teacher support is minimized, and eventually the students read the chapter and take an online quiz *before* coming to class. In class, they still discuss concepts, but the primary focus is not the teacher explaining the material, but the class applying the reading to actual teaching situations.

One of the simplest, and often most effective, ways of helping students take responsibility for their learning is by asking them to solve their own problems. One faculty member does this very effectively. When students come to her with a problem (e.g., "I missed the assignment. What should I do?" "Where can I get this information?" "What should I do about this?"), the teacher lovingly asks, "Well, what do you think would be the best answer?" The students must then use their own problem-solving skills and must accept responsibility for the solution's outcome, rather than blaming the teacher if the result isn't what they wanted.

TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING AND OWNERSHIP—AN EXAMPLE

As shown in this essay, many faculty members at BYU-Idaho are already effectively teaching critical thinking and educational ownership, and I could have drawn from many more examples throughout campus. I'd like to finish with an example that shows how teachers can foster critical thinking and promote student responsibility.

Sister Professor met with her advisee, Julie, to discuss future educational plans. Julie wanted to transfer to her hometown university and didn't know what to do. Her solution, which was a viable one, was to speak to her advisor. After speaking with Julie, Sister Professor tried to help her find the answer to her problem. Together, they decided that Julie needed to find a copy of her hometown university's B.A. requirements. This recommendation led to the following discussion (as it was related to me):

Julie: Well, can't you get that for me?

Sister Professor (smiling): No. But you'd be able to get that information from the college's website, or by contacting the department for your specific major.

Julie: Well, can't you look that up for me?

Sister Professor (smiling): No. It would be best for you to look that up because you know exactly which department you are interested in.

Julie: Well, can I use your computer in your office?

Sister Professor (smiling): No. But there are many computers in the library where you can look things up on the Internet. This way you'll have plenty of time to research your questions.

The professor is teaching Julie a very important lesson about responsibility and ownership. But, rather than simply telling Julie to do it, the professor is modeling effective problem solving, helping Julie see where she can find the information she needs. But then she stops there and allows Julie to take responsibility for her needs.

THE SAVIOR'S MODEL FOR CRITICAL THINKING

As the primary focus of this essay promotes modeling as a means to learning, I would be negligent if I failed to look to our greatest model in education: the Savior. In *Doctrine and Covenants* 9: 7-8, the Savior outlines the critical thinking and ownership principles discussed in this essay. "Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right."

In this scripture, the Savior is teaching us how to find the answers to our problems. Similarly, by encouraging students to participate in their own education through critical thinking, we are helping them find answers to their problems—both academic and larger concerns.

I also believe that as faculty members, we should apply this scripture to ourselves. As we commit ourselves to the scholarship of learning and teaching, I suggest that we continue the discussion of how to foster critical thinking in our classrooms. Many of the issues raised regarding BYU-Idaho's four-year degrees—interdisciplinary curriculum, capstone projects for majors, university portfolios—are based on critical thinking theory. But more importantly, as we model and teach critical thought, helping students to take ownership of their education, we will be compassionate teachers, fulfilling the "Spirit of Ricks." ∞

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