

THINKING ALOUD

John C. Thomas—Editor

This summer I learned about “think-aloud protocols.” Cognitive psychologists apparently developed this method “to study how people solve problems,” and history teachers have used think-alouds to better understand how people learn as they read. These scholars ask readers—both experts and novices—“to give voice to any and all thoughts as they [attempt] to make sense of...historical documents.” One historian marveled at the chance to “observe the process of thinking in a raw, unvarnished state,” calling it “the single-most eye opening experience” of his teaching career. Another developed a website with film clips showing seasoned historians puzzling aloud over unfamiliar documents, so as to “make their reading processes explicit or visible” to students who otherwise perceived their teachers’ ways of thinking as mysterious and forbidding.¹

Without wishing to imply that this issue of *Perspective* comes to you in a “raw, unvarnished” state, I suggest that it contains a good deal of “think-aloud” content that reveals what our colleagues think about thinking and how they frame the problems of learning and teaching. As Randy Bass reminds us, “Having a ‘problem’ is at the heart of the investigative process.” Yet when it comes to teaching, “asking about a problem...[can] seem like an accusation” rather than an invitation to join in purposeful, ongoing inquiry.² In a spirit of invitation, this issue engages some of the problems that give meaning to our work in higher education. It includes several interviews about epistemology, where teachers discuss how they know what they know in their disciplines. A few articles about Foundations illustrate a related set of problems—how to determine what students most need to know and do and become, and how to design classes that help them develop the requisite knowledge and competence and character.

It’s good for me to hear these think-alouds. As a learner, I am intrigued to hear colleagues describe and demonstrate what it means to think like a naturalist, historian, or culturist, or how one comes to know truth in music, math, or fiction. As a teacher, it encourages me to hear colleagues “talk shop” about problems of design and delivery in learning and teaching. These voices articulate disciplined ways of working with subjects and students that make our profession understandable and inviting rather than mysterious or forbidding.

Meanwhile, just weeks into my own Foundations class, it surprised me how little I wanted to know what my students were thinking. Though I asked them plenty of questions, I simply wasn’t that curious to know what the class meant to them, and I avoided questions that might

disclose too clearly what wasn't going well. I wondered what would happen if someone filmed my students puzzling aloud over the syllabus, assignments, or discussions. What kind of problems would be revealed, and would I really feel like investigating them? As painful as it can be to watch ourselves teach on film, what jarring surprises would emerge if a camera captured what and how (and how much) my students thought and learned?

In learning how to cope with the challenge of a new class, my curiosity about how others meet that challenge falters. It reminds me of an observation by Patricia Cross, whom Steven Hunsaker quoted a few years ago when urging us to assess student learning more diligently:

Are we curious about why students don't learn, why they come up with distorted ideas about what we thought was perfectly clear?... Well, maybe, fleetingly. But by and large, we don't set out to investigate these common departures from what we know should happen in class. We are soon on to other things, and the opportunity to learn from the experience is lost.³

Why do we move so soon to other things? For me, at least, fear squelches curiosity. I fear to see my limits and failings and pretense of competence revealed. Already insecure that someone else is better qualified to lead the students where they need to go, I shrink from clarity about where my students and I have gone astray.

Perhaps there is more than one remedy for this pattern of avoidance, but the gift I need above all things is charity. We hear about charity often enough that invoking it here may seem trite. But charity underwrites curiosity. When I am clothed in charity, I wear a mantle—"the bond of perfectness and peace" (Doctrine and Covenants 88:125). Wrapped in that garment, my curiosity surpasses my insecurity, and I can pay clear-eyed attention to what works and what really doesn't. Nothing excels charity when we need strength for hard-headed and broken-hearted inspection of our teaching and our students' learning.

I don't quite understand what the "bond of perfectness" means, but I do know that charity brings peace, which sustains the effort to investigate problems in our work. In all likelihood, we shall only "know in part" the problems that emerge about teaching and learning in our classes. After all, both teachers and students "see through a glass, darkly." But seeking charity—and thinking aloud together in the light of charity—the prospect of knowing "even as we are known" becomes a promise instead of a threat (1 Corinthians 13:12). ☺

NOTES

- 1 Lendol Calder, “Uncoverage: Toward A Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey.” *Journal of American History*, 92.4 (March 2006), 1367-68; Daisy Martin and Sam Wineburg, “Seeing Thinking on the Web,” *The History Teacher*, 41.3 (May 2008), 306.
- 2 Randy Bass, “The Scholarship of Teaching: What’s the Problem?” *Inventio* 1.1 (February 1999), 1, quoted by David A. Bednar, BYU–Idaho Faculty Meeting, 21 August 2001, 7.
- 3 K. Patricia Cross, “Teaching to Improve Learning.” *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching* 1 (1990), 10, quoted by Steven V. Hunsaker, ““Prove All Things, Hold Fast That Which is Good,”” *Perspective* 3.1 (Winter 2003), 37.