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The Faculty Center. Find out more by visiting the BYU Center for Teaching and Learning at byucenterforteaching.com. CTL was formerly the Center for Instructional Design and Development, and Learning is dedicated to improving student learning in the context of the Aims of a BYU Education. The Center was established in 1992 and is now known as the BYU Center for Teaching and Learning. The Center is composed of a team of professionals dedicated to improving teaching practices. The mission of the Center is to provide resources and support to faculty and administrators to enhance teaching and learning. The Center offers a variety of services, including workshops, courses, and consultation. The BYU Center for Teaching and Learning is part of the Brigham Young University and is located in Provo, Utah.

Message from the CTL Director
Russell T. Osguthorpe
Professor of Instructional Psychology and Technology

INSPIRE—a simple two-syllable word, yet one that holds so much meaning for what education is all about. In the book The Education of the Heart, I included the following passage about the meaning of the word inspire:

"The oldest meaning of the word inspire is to 'breathe or blow upon or into' (Oxford English Dictionary). God literally inspired Adam, and at the very moment that God blew life into him, Adam inhaled so that he could receive God's inspiration. The second oldest meaning of the word inspire is 'to draw in breath' (ibid.). Without both actions—God's breath, and Adam's inhalation—Adam could not live (Osguthorpe, 1995, p. 160).

I often ask faculty, "How do you convince students that they cannot live without learning what you are about to teach them?" If the student enrolls in a course only to fulfill a requirement, or if the teacher teaches with any reluctance, neither will likely inspire the other. But when both are invested in the experience, they can breathe life into each other. Last semester a student in my Missionary Preparation course wrote the following note to me:

[Proof] my first day I was highly intimidated. … I had mini anxiety attacks each class period, hoping you wouldn't call on me and that I wouldn't have to make a fool of myself in front of my peers. Then one day you said something that changed my mind and calmed my nerves. You said that we should never be afraid to volunteer in your class because there's nothing to fear, and that everyone in this class is here to support you because they're working on being better, too. That day I made a commitment to myself to volunteer to recite D&C 4 in front of the class during training, he called each participant by name. Elder Nelson knew, I believe, that simply calling people by name would breathe life into them.

While watching Elder Nelson, I recommitted myself to learn the names of my students. The less distance students feel between themselves and the teacher, the more likely both will be inspired. The less distance students feel between themselves and the teacher, the more likely both will be inspired by each other. In addition, as my student taught me, the more one is challenged to attempt what seems to be impossible, the more personal growth will occur. It's all about trying to breathe life into one another. As faculty we need to do all we can to inspire, and we also need to be inspired by the success of our students.

At the Center for Teaching and Learning, we want to help faculty and students breathe life into each other. This can happen in an infinite number of ways. When it does happen, the process is always a two-way experience. When faculty members or students find new ways to improve their learning, their success inspires us to keep reaching a little higher. Our hope is that you will find something in this magazine that will breathe a bit of new life into you and that you will share your successes with us so that together we can fulfill the promise of this unique university.
Reflection & Experience: Writing to Improve Teaching

Susan C. Eliason
Teaching and Learning Consultant, CTL
Part-time Faculty, Marriott School of Management

"I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means."  
—Joan Didion

It's just part of a teacher's job—encouraging, usually requiring, students to write. With increasing frequency, secondary and college-level instructors augment more traditional student composition assignments with reflective writing: "a tool for connecting thought, feeling, and action—a synthesizing tool that works from the inside out and outside in. The act of writing in and of itself leads to a level of understanding that would often not otherwise occur. That is, the writing itself is generative; something happens while you are writing."* Here's a twist on that old theme: I suggest teachers take the same advice and do more writing of their own. Not just more of the academic variety that harnesses the latest research for publication, or the scribbled feedback...
that elicits dread or elation in students. No, I think teachers need to write to capture and examine events that occur in the process of teaching. Simply jotting down the details of what happens in class can be instructive; keeping a log in virtually any undertaking has intrinsic value. But add to that the “so what?” element, and the piece begins to form and spirit. Writing about teaching and how one feels about him- or her experiences behind the lectern—and, more significantly, about perceptions of student growth and learning that result—can help a teacher in at least three critical ways.

First, describing and pondering events in the classroom preserve a momentarily memorable episode that otherwise slips predictably into the hazy blur of things forgotten. Take, for instance, the following account of a riveting episode I experienced some years ago in a corporate classroom in Asia. The experience was worth remembering for its own sake, but the “shoot first, ask questions later” policy applies.

The grammar was fudging fast, however, and turning into genuine terror, startled students began to rip off their headsets and bolt from their carrels. A couple ventured toward the window where I stood, urging me to follow them out the door at the opposite end of the room. But I could only stand there, feet planted like redwoods, fascinated by the horror of watching a real plane being shot at by real guns.

Whenever I retrace my account of that evening in Seoul, I’m almost there again. My heart beats a little faster and I vividly sense anew how immobilizing fear can be.

Upon years of reflection, another important lesson repeatedly comes to the fore—teachers often do well to follow the lead of their students. I would have been wiser on that occasion to exit the classroom post haste with the wide-eyed others than to succumb to the temptation of terrified curiosity. I’ve never encountered that brand of danger in a classroom since, but I’m reminded that not all dangers are physical. One of the greatest threats to learning, for example, is the mentor who refuses to take counsel from the protégé. More could be written on that subject—a journal entry for another day.

Next, the teacher who writes about teaching will likely observe instructive patterns—repeating events or cycles which, when noted, may prompt welcome course corrections. Here’s an illustration: I finally took time a few years ago to jot a note to myself about the high number of poorly constructed “bad-news” letters submitted every semester. The point of the bad-news letter-writing assignment is for students to learn how to write an effective “no” response—“I can’t accept your application, and your money, hire you in spite of your stellar qualifications”—in a clear yet respectful way, offering the recipient whatever alternative accommodations may be possible. Successfully writing such a letter is harder than it may seem; it requires students to develop or refine skills related to empathy, timing, and careful verbal construction void of ambiguity.

After a few seconds of unstructured penciled musings about the perpetual problem with the quality of bad-news letters I was receiving, I had an epiphany, one of those “discoveries” so obvious given a little thought. Turns out my in-class discussion of this assignment mirrored my inadequate written description in the course syllabus: both simply missed the mark in terms of sufficient detail. Which is why, on one occasion, a student actually turned in a stiffly composed family/neighborhood update (he thought I wanted to see a “bad newsletter”).

More often, students submitted either abrupt letters, so crisp and pointed as to be downright rude—“No, you don’t get your money back, have a nice day”—or carefully cushioned epistles, tedious and overly polite and completely enshrouding the unfortunate message that prompted the letter in the first place! (In the latter case, I often thought of the fairytale “The Princess and the Pea.” The bad-news “pea” was buried under so many conciliatory and patronizing verbal “mattresses” as to remain undetected by average, nonroyal folk.)

With the clarity that often rewards even circular thought and composition, I quickly restructured both written and oral specs of the bad-news letter-writing assignment. It was a simple intervention. And my students, for the most part, now submit carefully crafted bad-news letters that elevate the professional sandwich treatment practically to an art form.

Finally, writing observations and feelings about individual students can help a teacher remember, temporarily at least, how it feels to be on the receiving end. Greater understanding and patience often result from this exercise. I confess I don’t write about my students all that often. Occasionally I’ll comment in my journal about an exceptionally fine student effort or possibly a seeming disappointment.

Now and then I’ll write about a particularly challenging individual. One such person—I’ll call him Jake—enrolled in my evening management communication course a while back, complete with a late add form and a chip on his shoulder. For the first ten weeks of the course, Jake sat on the back row and alternately glanced and scowled. Meanwhile, he had turned into something of an enigma; his written assignments were unusually well done, yet his attitude toward classmates and me was less than positive. He was fast becoming a regular in my reflections journal.

One night Jake arrived half an hour late and in his typical foul mood. He slid backward in his seat, crossed his arms, and refused to participate other than to mumble periodic expletives to no one in particular. My frustration finally peaked; for the first time in my teaching career, I seriously considered putting class on hold, marching up to Jake, and motioning him out to the hall with me where I planned to send him on his way with the most severe warning I could muster.

And then it happened: Into my mind came the essence of earlier written contemplations on the Jake Syndrome. In less inflammatory moments, I had pondered on my keyboard why Jake might be acting in such egregious ways. I concluded, finally, that even if I didn’t know the reason, there definitely was a reason; after all, no sane person purposefully sets out to alienate peers and teachers with such breathtaking efficiency.

That recollection was followed by an idea that startled me in its paradoxic and simplicity. What this guy needs, my inner voice whispered, is love and acceptance. Give it, give all you’ve got, and give it now.

Ignoring my natural inclination to exorc Jake on the spot, I listened to that holier impulse and then said something like, “I’m going to divide the class in half for a few minutes, and I need someone to help me teach subjective mood to the group on the left, Jake, you’re it. Come down and work with these folks here.”
Clearly surprised, Jake murmured something inaudible but then strode briskly to the front of the room, where he proceeded to engage his half of the classroom in one of the finest grammatical processing sessions I’d ever seen, albeit from the corner of my eye. He spoke boldly and definitively, involving virtually every student in his half of the room (and some from my side, as well). Afterward he returned to his seat at the back and grinned for the remaining few moments of class. When I dismissed the students for another week, Jake caught my eye and winked!

But that isn’t the end of the story. When I got home later that evening, I found this e-mail message from none other than my once nemesis, Jake himself:

I would like to apologize for my behavior in class tonight. …I just found out that I am getting an automatic “F” in my science class because I didn’t sign the roll for the first two weeks of class and my teacher won’t budge on the issue. I also have several people angry at me for things I did not do, and I was not feeling like doing anything. As a matter of fact, I missed my first two classes today but for some reason attended yours. I did not want to participate in teamwork, I did not want to be cordial, and I did not want to take the quiz. Although what I wrote instead of the quiz might express some of my sentiments, I am not at all opposed to learning the right way to do things…. In any case, I do have a passion for grammar, and in the end, the class brought me out of my slump. Imagine that—learning grammar put me in a good mood. I am glad you did not get frustrated with me…. I am grateful for my involvement in your class.

Have a wonderful night,

Jake

I confess that experience was one of a kind, at least so far. Rarely does student rehab occur in such textbook fashion—but the dream lived on throughout that semester and beyond. Jake has since sent me a wedding announcement and a request for a letter of recommendation for law school, along with the occasional e-mail update on life.

Can it really be that simple? A few thoughtful notations in my journal that prompted a counter-intuitive response at a pivotal moment, changing a relationship and possibly even a life forever? Yes, I think so; the practice of writing—even pedestrian, unremarkable writing—often unleashes a power unimaginined in common hours (to broadly paraphrase a related sentiment by Thoreau).

Documenting events and their lessons; exploring and correcting what isn’t working so well; and trading virtual places with students via empathic journaling—these are only three routes to writing one’s way to better teaching. And why not invent a few more while we’re at it? After all, declares noted educator William Zinsser, “Writing and thinking and learning [are] the same process.”


Notes
**tools you can use »**

**Introduction by Jessica Draper**  
Instructional Designer, CTL

**Really Simple: The Beauty of Podcasting**  
Nina Lewis  
Manager, CTL Walk-in Center

**PODCASTING,** one of those recently minted hybrids, combines “iPod” and “broadcasting” to describe a technology that transmits information via the Internet. Although people once relied strictly on radio and television for news and entertainment broadcasts, we now can also turn to a variety of MP3 (portable media) players—e.g., the ubiquitous iPod—or even to a desktop computer, for the latest information.

Although people once relied strictly on radio and television, we can now also turn to a variety of sources for the latest information.

A podcast can exist either as an audio file or as written content on the Internet. Some files can be syndicated to a wide audience, allowing broad access to educational as well as entertaining material. An even newer technology, RSS (Really Simple Syndication), permits that access without requiring users to manually navigate to Web sites in search of new posts. Using RSS requires an RSS feed reader—free software that can be set up to check favorite sites and monitor them regularly for new information. When new data is posted, the RSS reader automatically delivers it to us.

How can podcasting and RSS feeds help with teaching and research? For answers to these and related questions, visit the Center for Teaching and Learning Web site (http://ctl.byu.edu) for details and additional ideas.

**Introducing the New CTL Web Site**  
Nate Walton  
Graphics Designer, CTL  
Adjunct Faculty, College of Fine Arts & Communications

**NEWS FLASH:** You have a lot to do! And with class preparation, office hours, grading, and research, teacher development often gets short shrift.

Investing just a little time now and then—perhaps skimming an article on teaching strategies, or trying out a new tool to streamline class preparation—can pay big dividends.

The Center for Teaching and Learning Web site (http://ctl.byu.edu) hosts a wealth of helpful time-saving, easy-to-use resources for faculty. It describes CTL services such as course design consultations, educational media production, and the handy Walk-in Center for speedy, immediate assistance. The Web site also contains information on planning effective lectures, writing exams, and grading. Syllabus Builder and anti-plagiarism software are among its abundant collection of tools designed to expedite and refine your best efforts. And now, you can have articles, podcasts, newsletters, and discussions delivered straight to your desktop to keep you updated and inspired year-round.

**Bottom line:** The Center for Teaching and Learning Web site is simply packed with tools, techniques, and information to make your life easier and to support excellence in teaching at BYU.

**Using Student Feedback to Improve Teaching**  
Trav Johnson  
Teaching and Learning Consultant, CTL

**OF MORE THAN 300 BYU faculty members who improved their overall BYU student ratings by 1.5 points or more (see “Small Steps to Teaching Improvement,” p. 10), 74 percent said they made these improvements by utilizing student ratings. As one professor explains, “I take the online student ratings very seriously. It is an incredible opportunity that every sixteen weeks I have some very truthful feedback on my performance.”**

Further resources to inform the improvement of teaching include—

» Mid-Course Evaluations—questionnaires or interviews that give students an opportunity to reflect on their individual progress in achieving course goals, inform the instructor about what is or isn’t working, and understand that the instructor cares about their learning experience.

» Students Consulting on Teaching (SCT)—a confidential program dedicated to improving the quality of education at BYU and to providing faculty members with feedback that helps them gain a better sense of what is going on in their courses and classrooms.

» The Instructional Diagnosis Evaluation and Assessment (IDEA) System—a special in-depth course evaluation instrument and approach designed to provide instructors with feedback tailored to the particular objectives of each class.
Recipe for a Better Syllabus
Richard Swan
Teaching and Learning Consultant, CTL

LAST YEAR, the Center for Teaching and Learning launched Syllabus Builder, a Web-based template designed to help faculty construct learner-centered syllabi. “It’s amazing!” one professor exclaims, noting the ease with which she is now able to create an engaging and sufficiently detailed syllabus with a relatively minor investment of time. Other faculty members echo this teacher’s enthusiasm. Syllabus Builder and other syllabus-related resources are available online at ctl.byu.edu.

In addition, Syllabus Builder often prompts requests for additional features and functionality. One college, for instance, has asked for the ability to link course syllabi to its program learning outcomes, thereby facilitating its academic unit review and accreditation processes. And the BYU Student Association has requested the development of an option that will allow students to view course syllabi online.

In response to these and other indications that Syllabus Builder is meeting a significant need, the Center for Teaching and Learning and the Harold B. Lee Library are collaborating to develop an online, database-driven syllabus repository. The goals of the project are to make creating, updating, and publishing syllabi simple and immediately accessible and to facilitate data gathering for departments and colleges as they review their programs. The expected release of this product is in the first quarter of 2009.

Small Steps to Teaching Improvement
Trav Johnson and Richard Swan
Teaching and Learning Consultants, CTL

OVER A THREE-YEAR PERIOD, 300-plus BYU faculty members improved their overall-course student ratings by one-and-one-half points or more, and they sustained these improved ratings for at least three semesters. How did they do it? That is the question graduate student Whitney Ransom and the Center for Teaching and Learning addressed in a recent study soon to be published.

One professor in Ransom’s study writes,

“I had to decide to be humble about my teaching and my ratings. When I got that review back, I [thought], “I have to either decide that there is not a problem here and try to hide it, or admit there is a problem and try to fix it.”

To his credit, this professor decided to “try to fix it.” Later he noted, “The most humbling part of the experience [was] actually going to my peers and saying, ‘I’m struggling with this!’ I asked them to read my student ratings and also set up a meeting time to discuss patterns and possible plans of action.”

Ransom surveyed all participating instructors to learn what they had done to achieve these remarkable results. One of her most significant findings is that the majority of these faculty indicated that improvements had not required a great deal of extra effort. One professor observed, “Most of the changes I have made are simple but they make a big difference to the students.”

Specifically, the study reveals that four factors accounted for 60 percent of the changes to which instructors attributed their improved student ratings: (1) using more active and practical learning strategies in the classroom; (2) improving the quality of the student-teacher interaction; (3) establishing clear expectations, often through explicit learning outcomes; and (4) improving teacher preparation and knowledge.

Ransom concludes that irrespective of differences in personality, subject matter or discipline, or course size, faculty can significantly improve their teaching performance, as over one-sixth of the full-time faculty members at BYU have demonstrated. And most achieved this distinction with minimal extra effort by focusing on simple, fundamental elements of effective teaching.

My favorite and most influential professors have stated that they are “tickled pink” to help their students develop ideas, research, or revise assignments. They were clearly not interested in grades, but rather in how much I learned and grew in their class. I could tell they wanted to help and that they were looking for my best effort, rather than flawless work.

–HANNAH, A BYU STUDENT
ON THE FRONT COVER of this issue’s Inspire is a likeness of Karl Gottfried Maeser, “founding father” of Brigham Young University. As members of the BYU community, we recall the direction Brigham Young gave Maeser to not even “teach the alphabet or the multiplication tables without the Spirit of God.” But what does this mean? How would one teach thermodynamics “with the Spirit” or Portuguese verb tenses “with the Spirit,” or any subject with the Spirit?

Examining some of Maeser’s philosophies can be instructive as we, too, seek to apply President Young’s mandate—Maeser’s tenets can inspire us and provide ready take-aways for teaching with the Spirit.

Let us consider just two of Maeser’s many ideas for effective teaching and learning: (a) love your students, and (b) foster individual student growth.

**Love Your Students**

Professor Emeritus Don Jarvis said Maeser believed that good teaching begins with simple affection for the students: “As nothing can grow without sunlight, so nothing can prosper in school . . . without love.” Speaking of Brother Maeser, one student wrote, “He saw the shortcomings as well as the excellences of his pupils, and while he never hesitated to point them out sometimes in a genial, humorous way it was always with such an undertow of kindly interest that no criticism ever left a sting.”

Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has also advocated loving our students:

> Those who teach out of love will be magnified as instruments of the hands of Him who they serve. … [A teacher’s] total concentration [should] be on the needs of … the students, not on himself or herself.”

University of California Santa Cruz president Page Smith, a twentieth-century educational philosopher, echoed Maeser’s and Oaks’s views:

> If we do not love and care for the [students], if we do not place them in the center of our thinking and doing, if we persist in thinking that they are merely incidental to or distracting from our serious scholarly concerns, then there is quite literally, no hope for higher education."

**Foster Student Growth**

Maeser was well versed in the theories of the Swiss educational reformer Pestalozzi, who advocated thoughtful development of each student, regardless of social or economic class. “Maeser was deeply interested in developing individuality, which he named as the first aim of education.” He held that “Every human being is a world in miniature. It has its own centre of observation, its own way of forming concepts and of arriving at conclusions, its own degree of sensibility, its own life’s work to do, and its own destiny to reach.”

Maeser continued, “[Students] ought to have a chance to develop . . . moral, mental, and spiritual faculties to their utmost capacity. . . . In this affection should forever hold sway.” He instructed his teachers to carefully formulate their questions and assignments to encourage higher-order reasoning in students: “Careful teachers always endeavor to reduce mere memorative questions to the lowest possible minimum, inasmuch as reflective questions will call the higher mental qualities of the pupils into requisition.”

The foregoing counsel and observations are reflected in the research conducted by Whitney Ransom, a graduate student in Instructional Psychology and Technology. Ransom’s findings show that cultivating high-quality student-teacher interactions and establishing clear expectations are predictors of successful courses at BYU.

Maeser foreshadowed what contemporary educational specialists are advocating in order to promote student growth: reduce the role of lecturing and increase active learning with methods and resources such as writing assignments, journals, peer review of student papers, student presentations, problem solving, group projects, cooperative education, class discussion, and interactive media.

**Conclusion**

Jarvis suggests we should interpret thoughtfully and broadly Brigham Young’s injunction to teach with the Spirit of God. Karl G. Maeser’s views of teaching with the Spirit, which include loving our students and developing them as individuals through effective teaching and learning strategies, parallel the most thoughtful research, theory, and practice of contemporary scholar-teachers worldwide.

Inspire and the Center for Teaching and Learning exist to support BYU faculty in these critical and rewarding pursuits.

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**Notes**

7. See Wilkinson, Brigham Young University, 55.
10. Ibid., 245.
12. Karl Maeser, School and Fireside, 276.
15. Ibid., 7.
Maeser’s Vision, by Suzy Gerhart

“I have had a dream—I have seen Temple Hill filled with buildings—great temples of learning, and I have decided to remain and do my part. Yes, my child, I have seen it all.”

Karl G. Maeser