

## **Teaching by the Spirit—Faculty Perceptions**

Karen T. Arnesen and A. Jane Birch

BYU Faculty Center, 2018

In 2016, the Faculty Center conducted research to explore ways BYU faculty understand and experience teaching by the Spirit in their classrooms. This research involved 19 faculty members. Although all 19 are successful, impactful faculty members at BYU, ten of these had received quite high ratings on the official BYU student ratings instrument and nine had received relatively lower ratings. One goal of this research project was to discern whether there is a difference between faculty with higher and lower ratings in terms of how they understand and experience teaching by the Spirit. This is important because students in the higher-rated courses indicate they are having a significantly better quality experience in these courses than in the lower-rated courses, and how these faculty members approach teaching by the Spirit may have some impact on the different quality experience students are having.

All 19 faculty members in this study are faithful members of the Church who are committed to the mission of BYU and value teaching by the Spirit and their positions as faculty at BYU. In preparation for this study, the Faculty Center invited these faculty members to spend one week analyzing their teaching for ways they invited the Spirit into their teaching that week. Then each faculty member was interviewed about their experiences, feelings, and ideas about teaching by the Spirit. For each faculty member, several of their current students were randomly selected to be interviewed. After these interviews were completed, they were transcribed, analyzed, and coded by members of the Faculty Center research team.

The results of this analysis revealed a significant and interesting difference between the way higher-rated faculty and lower-rated faculty define and experience teaching by the Spirit. Although this distinction varied to some degree among the faculty members who were studied, overall there was a strikingly distinction between the two groups. In brief, lower-rated faculty tended to think of teaching by the Spirit as making interesting connections between the gospel and their subject matter. In contrast, higher-rated faculty saw teaching by the Spirit occurring as they extended themselves to connect with the interests and lives of their students. This difference will be explored in a bit more detail below.

Many lower-rated faculty felt that teaching by the Spirit meant making gospel connections to their subject or making comments in class related to the gospel or the Church. They spent time thinking about and developing gospel connections and felt enlightened by them. However, sharing these connections with their classes had mixed reception. Rarely did students report finding these connections profound or life-changing; more commonly they were seen as merely interesting or somewhat useful. Some of these lower-rated faculty felt that their subject was not conducive to teaching by the Spirit because they could not find these gospel connections. Their perspective on what counts as teaching by the Spirit may have limited their ability find ways to teach by the Spirit.

Higher-rated faculty, on the other hand, tended to have quite a different view of teaching by the Spirit. For them teaching by the Spirit meant loving their students, responding to promptings in preparing and presenting their lessons, trusting students to learn, providing opportunities and assignments that invite students to apply gospel principles and make their own gospel connections, being sensitive to the needs (both hidden and apparent) of the students, and creating an environment of openness and charity where the Spirit could be present. These faculty

spoke frequently of receiving guidance during a lesson (to share a story, make a point of talking to a particular student, not using a preplanned picture, etc.) and of counseling with students about both academic and spiritual concerns. This research showed that these efforts were having a significant, positive impact on students, who deeply felt and appreciated these efforts by the faculty.

However, in spite of these marked differences, both higher and lower-rated faculty often used similar practices. Higher rated faculty did not necessarily shy away from making gospel connections to the subject matter, and many lower-rated faculty showed care for students and felt prompted by the Spirit in their interactions with them. For example, one highly-rated faculty member peppers his lectures with gospel connections and scripture references. He ponders relationships between his research and the gospel. Another highly rated faculty does the same, and gospel connections seem to come easily to him in the middle of a lesson. It is clear that he does not separate his religious and secular life and allows the Spirit to inform both. On the other hand, one lower-rated faculty recognizes that the Spirit can teach him effective ways to teach so he tries to plan lessons with the Spirit's influence. He sometimes knows exactly what he should say. Similarly, although the students of another lower-rated faculty do not necessarily feel the Spirit in class, one mentioned that the class "helped me read the scriptures at home; that's something that allows me to feel the Spirit better."

Both higher-rated and lower-rated faculty members manifest a love and concern for their students. One lower-rated faculty speaks about inviting students to his home and enjoying the one-on-one time he has with students. Although these experiences don't happen very often, one student he formed a relationship shared with how he feels this professor genuinely cares for him.

They published a paper together and the professor was instrumental in getting him into a Ph.D. program. This student continues to visit him.

Although all the faculty we interviewed were having good experiences with students, lower-rated faculty do not seem to have these experiences as often as highly rated faculty, and students' comments indicate that they sometimes feel some of the lower-rated professors are intimidating or aloof. However, even if professors do not have a consistent pattern of profoundly influencing students' lives, we found evidence that each faculty member was finding key ways to positively influence the lives of students. This evidence illustrates an important aspect of teaching by the Spirit. The Spirit can use people, even in their apparent weakness, to influence the lives of individual students. Teachers who do not receive the highest ratings may come into the kingdom (a classroom or a life) for "such a time of this" (Esther 4:14), when they are placed to make a difference in even one student's life. For example, one student felt her class was "more stress than spirit," but when she was worrying about a decision she had to make, she felt she should talk to her professor. He was able to answer her questions. Although he was not necessarily a great teacher (at least for this student), he was able to answer a need she had. It may be that in the Lord's eyes, an important purpose for the professor's teaching this class was to influence this one student. Other professors may have the gift—and the mandate—to be a broader and different kind of influence. Could not all of these people be teaching by the Spirit?

All the professors who participated in this study wanted to teach by the Spirit. They were willing to spend time pondering how the Spirit influences their teaching and their relationships with students. For some this came more easily; for others it was more difficult. The key difference, based on the Faculty Center analysis, was that those faculty having the greatest impact on their students focused first and foremost on their students: their lives, their interests,

their needs, their learning. For them, teaching by the Spirit meant prioritizing their relationship with the students and serving their needs as directed by the Spirit. This research revealed that for many students, this student-centered focus was life changing as students felt the love and care of the faculty member and responded to the trust shown them in their potential and ability to succeed.

There is no one right way to teach by the Spirit, but this research suggests that the greatest gift faculty can give to students is the gift of themselves: their love and concern, their time and attention, their belief in the student potential, and their willingness to gear the lesson toward the needs and interests of the students, under the impressions and even direct guidance they receive from the Spirit of God. BYU is a remarkable place to be, where this type of teaching is encouraged and celebrated.