

A newsletter for those  
who teach at  
Brigham Young University  
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From the Faculty Center



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BYU Faculty Center  
167 Heber J. Grant Building  
Provo, UT 84602  
(801) 378-7419  
Fax (801) 378-5976  
FACCENS@UCS.BYU.EDU

## Active Learning and the First Day of Class

The first day of class has been described as a work of art “in fast-drying plaster that needs to be shaped carefully and quickly before the whole course sets,” rather than “an oil painting that we can come back to at leisure for touching up.”<sup>1</sup> Has your class ever dried up before it was in the shape you wanted?

As a new semester begins, now may be a good time to ask, “What do I want to establish the first day of class?” Perhaps in the past you’ve envisioned lively classroom discussions, students engaged in challenging projects, and esprit de corps that transcends disciplines. But instead maybe you’ve been met by student nonengagement and lackluster stares in response to your most thought-provoking questions or carefully planned projects and team-building exercises. If so, the problem may have been the first day of class.

Research shows that students learn more when they actively discuss subjects in and out of the classroom and work together in small groups. And in order for a classroom climate to be established—one which not only allows but *promotes* participation and discussion—current research and practice also indicate it *must* begin the first day of class.

One professor said he used to wonder why his students were passive and hesitant to ask questions even though he often requested them. He later realized that although he announced his desire for class participation, he always conducted his first class session without any opportunity for students to speak. His students, therefore, assumed his discussion of participation was empty rhetoric and ended up listening, not participating, the rest of the semester. However, after he tried several techniques to generate active student participation from the start, he found it much easier to elicit discussion during the rest of the course.

Student participation, active responses, and questions increase when teachers provide opportunity for involvement *in the very first part of their very first class meetings*. In fact, in some educational research circles, the argument is not whether involvement ought to occur in the first class period, but whether it ought to occur in the first fifteen or twenty minutes of the first class.

Many BYU faculty members are in the habit of encouraging active learning the first day. BYU assistant professor of English Phil Snyder gets his students talking early on by having each one interview and introduce one of their classmates the first day. Each student also writes down answers to questions such as “If a movie were made about your life, what would the title be, and who would star in it?” Then Snyder goes around the room to learn a little about each student and stops periodically to make sure he and the other students remember names.

The informal questions and introductions create an environment in which students feel comfortable interacting with the teacher and their classmates. Snyder then uses class and small group discussions as tools for teaching throughout the course. "I see the classroom as a learning community, and each student is an important and valuable part of that community," said Snyder. "I have to get to know the students, and they have to get to know each other, or we can't have productive class discussions later on."

Snyder also spends part of the first class period discussing his personal teaching/learning philosophy. "I believe in giving students the freedom to construct, in part, their own educational experience. They decide what the tests will be like and what their writing projects will be," said Snyder. "I want students to feel responsible for their own learning, and then I want to provide an environment for them to articulate what they have learned." Once students know that Snyder believes in and *practices* student involvement, and that much of what they learn in the course will depend on their participation, they are more willing to take an active role in the classroom.

For more ideas and suggestions on how to encourage active learning beginning the first day of class, contact



*Phil Snyder (l.) conducts a small group discussion with students.*

the Faculty Center at 378-7419 to obtain a *First Day Active Learning* packet. This packet contains reprints of articles from journals and newsletters, including concrete suggestions for first-day activities. ■

#### NOTE

1. Adams, Steve. "Quick, Before It Dries: Setting the Pattern for Active Participation from Day One," Leann Rutherford, ed. *Instructional Development*, Spring 1990.

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## To Improve the University . . . with TQM

BY HEIDI SKEEN BAY

What does the now fashionable Total Quality (better known as TQ) have to do with academic practice? On some campuses, a great deal. A recent *Business Week* survey reported that 61 percent of college presidents now claim involvement in TQ, compared with a dozen or so campuses as recently as two years ago. And now BYU is becoming involved in TQ, a corporate idea that promotes assessing needs and constantly improving processes to satisfy those needs.

Joseph Free, professor of mechanical engineering, recently received a one-year award and appointment from the dean of the College of Engineering and Technology. Free will use his Total Quality Professorship to research TQ and to help the College and the Department of Mechanical Engineering assess and improve

their current quality status.

After graduating from Cal-Tech and MIT and teaching for 32 years, Free has realized that technical knowledge is necessary but not sufficient. "Equally important," said Free, "is the ability to work in groups and to develop and use the potential of technically educated people working together." This realization piqued his interest in Total Quality—a movement that incorporates ideas from industrial and humanistic psychology, management theory, human-resource and organizational development, statistical process control, and systems theory. TQ (also known as Total Quality Management and Continuous Quality Improvement) is based on concepts such as focusing on the customer, motivating employees to do their best work, and systematically

searching for best practices. "Total Quality is an attitude of continuous improvement, a process, not a program or recipe," said Free. "The idea is to decide who your customers are and then please them."

Free also wants to research TQ to learn how to amplify the learning process in the classroom and how to help projects move along more efficiently by achieving the synergistic potential of project teams. He feels that helping student groups work together to produce their best work is what will ultimately help industry the most.

Free is working on five specific questions as part of the award.

**1. How can TQ help students in their personal lives?** To acquaint BYU students with TQ, Free and

"Total Quality is an attitude of continuous improvement, a process, not a program or recipe."

faculty members from the Marriott School of Management and the Colleges of Education, Physical and Mathematical Sciences, and Engineering and Technology have developed a GE course entitled "Quality Quest." This course teaches TQ principles and correlates them with gospel principles. "The students learn what TQ is and are asked to work on their *personal* quality," said Free. "TQ is based on principles such as honesty, integrity, frugality, and teamwork, all of which are integral parts of the gospel and

can also improve organizations."

Free said that working with the six faculty volunteers was a "delightful experience" because of their dedication to the development of quality ideas.

**2. How can groups work together more effectively using TQ?** Free will spend this year researching how teams of students can learn and accomplish the most by working together to complete tasks. As part of his research, he will be observing and testing two engineering groups that are working on design projects to determine what works well in groups.

**3. Can a department use TQ to improve its curriculum?** Free plans to assist the Mechanical Engineering Department with a principle-centered curriculum redesign. From a Total Quality perspective, BYU's "customers" could be the students, their families, the Church, and/or the organizations that employ BYU graduates. Free is using TQ principles to assess how well the present curriculum satisfies these customers' needs.

**4. How can TQ principles be used to improve a college?** Free is assisting Dean Douglas Smoot in an initiative to apply TQ principles for continuous improvement of the College of Engineering and Technology.

**5. What can BYU do to promote an interchange with the community that will contribute to productivity and quality for both?** To encourage an interchange with the business community, Free helped organize the *Alliance with Industry* conference in April '93. The workshop sessions focused on specific concepts and tools that develop quality and improve engineering productivity. The conference was jointly sponsored by the College of Engineering and Technology and the Marriott School of Management.

As Free and others work to improve the university by teaching, researching, and using quality management principles, BYU may see even more quality assessment and customer-oriented change in the future. ■

Joseph Free, Total Quality Professor.

## To Be a Bridge

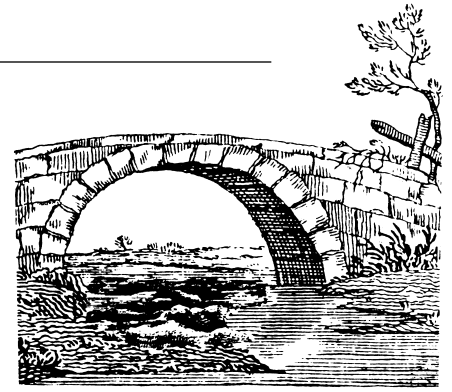
BY MARION SHUMWAY  
*Teaching Assistant, Organizational Behavior*

While reading Franz Kafka's "The Bridge," I gained insight into my role as a teacher. Kafka describes a man who was a bridge. With his hands on one side of a steep chasm and his feet on the other, he lay waiting to carry travelers safely across a river and the sharp rocks below. As a traveler stepped onto the bridge, it caused such pain that the bridge turned around to see what the traveler was doing to hurt him. Kafka's imagery is striking—"a bridge to turn around?" A bridge, of course, cannot turn around, and both bridge and traveler fell onto the sharp rocks below.

In my experience as a teaching assistant in organizational behavior, I have often felt much like a bridge. I feel a responsibility to support unsteady travelers and to provide passage into previously unexplored realms. Although I do not minimize the responsibility of the student in the learning process, I do feel, as a bridge, the weight of the responsibility to not "turn around."

Not turning around, for me, consists of honoring two primary commitments. One of these commitments is to the student and the other is to truth. Honoring my commitment to the student means creating a supportive learning environment where students can respect themselves and each other.

To "turn around" on this commitment would be to fail to help students learn appreciation, understanding, and compassion for the human family.



Honoring my commitment to truth is creating a respect for learning and for discovering truth. It is accepting the premise that learning is seldom easy and, in fact, is often painful. This means pushing deeply into the difficult and seemingly unsolvable problems of the world, recognizing that there are no simple solutions, and refusing to deny the existence of known facts and painful realities. To "turn around" on this commitment would be to fail to prepare students to see their world as it really is and to build up false hopes for the future.

Whenever I teach I remember Kafka's bridge. Regardless of difficulty, I cannot "turn around." I feel that by holding fast to these commitments, I can better help my students cross over to increased understanding. ■

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We invite your written responses to Marion Shumway's ideas or short pieces on any other topic of interest that will "improve the university." Submissions (up to 500 words) for *To Improve the University* should be sent no later than Friday, October 1, 1993, to:

Lynn Sorenson-Pierce, *Editor*

**FOCUS ON FACULTY**

Faculty Center, 167 HGB

**BYU Faculty Center**

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Annette H. Jensen, *Secretary*

167 Heber J. Grant Building  
Provo, UT 84602  
(801) 378-7419  
Fax (801) 378-5976  
FACCENS@UCS.BYU.EDU

**FOCUS ON FACULTY** is an occasional newsletter published by the Faculty Center for the teachers of Brigham Young University (full- and part-time faculty, student instructors, and teaching assistants). Its purpose is to serve as a medium for exchanging ideas about teaching and scholarship and for sharing information about faculty development activities. The editor welcomes your ideas, contributions, and comments.