

# An Experiential Pathway to Conversion

## Learning in the Yoke of Christ

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*Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*  
—Matthew 11:29–30

*This life is not lineal; it is experiential. It is not really chronological, though we use clocks and calendars and wristwatches. It is essentially experiential.*  
—Elder Neal A. Maxwell<sup>1</sup>

Joseph Smith's formal education did not extend beyond the third grade.<sup>2</sup> His life did not extend beyond the final years of his thirties. The person he became and his work in restoring the gospel of Jesus Christ, however, extend into eternity. John Taylor observed that "Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer of the Lord, has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it."<sup>3</sup>

In this article, we write about the power of experiential learning as a tool of conversion. We begin with Joseph Smith because, although

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1. Neal A. Maxwell, "If Thou Endure Well" (devotional address, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, December 4, 1984), <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/neal-a-maxwell/if-thou-endure-well/>.

2. "Joseph Smith and the Restoration," Newsroom, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed November 8, 2021, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/joseph-smith-and-the-restoration>.

3. "John Taylor," Church History, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed November 8, 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/content/testimony/john-taylor>.

he lacked much of what one might call traditional education, he was a marvelous, if not unparalleled, experiential learner. Thankfully, as Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught, education is not a prerequisite for receiving revelation or spiritual experiences: “Spiritual experience, revelatory experience, sacred experience can come to every one of us in all the many and varied stages and circumstances of our lives if we want it, if we hold on and pray on.”<sup>4</sup>

But how might experiences lead to conversion? Do traditional and contemporary models of education provide any insight? We argue that they do, particularly experiential learning theory (ELT). We propose, however, that we must make some meaningful adaptations in order for earnest seekers to yoke themselves to Christ as their experiential guide. We bookend our argument, by way of illustration, with two impressive examples of experiential learning: the lives of Joseph Smith and Russell M. Nelson.

In Joseph Smith’s life, many experiential learning examples are prominent, but few are more poignant than those occurring in winter 1838–39. In a prayer penned in the squalid conditions of Liberty Jail, Joseph Smith exclaimed: “O God, where art thou? . . . How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye, yea thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs of thy people and of thy servants, and thine ear be penetrated with their cries?” (D&C 121:1–2). In response to this pleading, the Lord offered this pedagogically rich counsel: “Know thou, my son, that *all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good*” (D&C 122:7, emphasis added).

Elder Holland clarifies that “those experiences . . . were ‘school teachers’ to Joseph and can be to us, experiences that contribute so much to our education in mortality and our exaltation in eternity.”<sup>5</sup> The key to transforming experiences into conversion, according to Elder Holland, is “bonding” ourselves to God.<sup>6</sup> We argue that this bonding, poignantly captured through the symbol of the yoke, channels the Savior’s constant invitation: “Take my yoke upon you, and *learn of me*” (Matt. 11:29, emphasis added).<sup>7</sup> The proximate appearances of yoking and learning are significant.

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4. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Lessons from Liberty Jail” (devotional address, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, September 7, 2008), <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/jeffrey-r-holland/lessons-liberty-jail/>.

5. Holland, “Lessons from Liberty Jail.”

6. Holland, “Lessons from Liberty Jail.”

7. All biblical quotations come from the Authorized (King James) Version.

In the following sections, we discuss learning models both in and out of the Church. We focus specifically on ELT. We then offer an update to traditional ELT models to better reflect Christ's central role, drawing on the symbol of the yoke to best facilitate learning that ultimately leads to conversion.

### **Learning and Conversion in the Restored Church of Jesus Christ**

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a long and rich history of educating its members. In 1832, the Lord commanded the Saints to establish what Joseph Smith would call the School of the Prophets, and in October 1847, the first school in the Great Basin opened, only months after the Saints arrived in the Salt Lake Valley. In the midst of a race for their very survival, the Saints desired to educate themselves and deemed that constructing a place of education was essential. The next sixty years would see the establishment of the Church Board of Education and nearly forty academies that opened in Utah and the surrounding areas. The foundation and expansion of educating the Saints has been an ongoing priority that continues to this day, not only in churches, schools, and universities but also, more importantly, in the hearts and homes of all the Saints.

In October 2018, the Lord, through his prophet and leaders, asked his Saints to embrace a new model for Church education and learning. This change was dramatic, not in the doctrine but in the process and setting. Focusing on enhanced teaching and learning in the home, this approach has been referred to as home-centered, Church-supported learning. The principal emphasis of this approach is teaching and learning within the home, with parents shouldering primary responsibility for their children's religious development. The Church stands ready to support this massive undertaking with a huge stable of resources, which includes everything from manuals to videos, from podcasts to artistic renderings. But what more must happen to effectively bring about this home-centered, Church-supported approach?

The introductory materials for *Come, Follow Me—for Individuals and Families: Book of Mormon 2020* contain the following statement:

The aim of all gospel learning and teaching is to deepen our conversion and help us become more like Jesus Christ. For this reason, when we study the gospel, we're not just looking for new information; we want to become a "new creature" (2 Corinthians 5:17). This means relying on Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ to help us change our hearts, our views, our actions, and our very natures.

But the kind of gospel learning that strengthens our faith and leads to the miracle of conversion doesn't happen all at once. It extends beyond a classroom into an individual's heart and home. It requires consistent, daily efforts to understand and live the gospel. True conversion requires the influence of the Holy Ghost.<sup>8</sup>

Because the aim of this kind of gospel learning is to lead individuals to conversion, how can individuals and families more effectively participate in this lofty aspiration, particularly in light of this new home-centered, Church-supported approach to gospel learning? In this article, we explore these questions and more, beginning with the Church's brief statement on the conversion process:

Conversion includes a change in behavior, but it goes beyond behavior; it is a change in our very nature. It is such a significant change that the Lord and His prophets refer to it as a rebirth, a change of heart, and a baptism of fire.

The Lord said: "Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again; yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters;

"And thus they become new creatures; and unless they do this, they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God" (Mosiah 27:25–26).

Conversion is a process, not an event. Conversion comes as a result of righteous efforts to follow the Savior. These efforts include exercising faith in Jesus Christ, repenting of sin, being baptized, receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end in faith.<sup>9</sup>

Conversion, then, is change: a change of behavior and change of nature, a rebirth and baptism of fire. Conversion is transforming into a new creature, and transforming is a process—an experiential process, not a onetime event.

In the Church, members regularly discuss the concept of conversion and read about examples of the conversion process in scriptural accounts. However, true conversion requires more than talking and studying about the topic. Therefore, if conversion is an experiential process of transformation, then further understanding the experiential learning process may be useful to both individuals and families—particularly because the

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8. *Come, Follow Me—for Individuals and Families: Book of Mormon 2020* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2019).

9. Gospel Topics, "Conversion," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/conversion>.

relatively new home-centered, Church-supported curriculum requires members to play a more active role in teaching and learning the gospel. While numerous scholars have studied and written about experiential learning, few have applied ELT to religious education, and none that we are aware of have clearly articulated its application in a home-centered, Church-supported environment. To this end, we begin with a brief overview of experiential learning and then discuss applications to religious education and learning focused on a home-centered, Church-supported approach.

## Experiential Learning Theory

Learning scholars suggest that two broad categories describe the learning process, in general: reproductive and transformative. The former is a “reproductive conception which sees learning as reproducing facts and information acquired through memorisation,” which is primarily delivered through didactic instruction.<sup>10</sup> The latter category views learning as a “process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience.”<sup>11</sup>

In our experience, Western<sup>12</sup> teaching and learning have historically been focused on the reproductive model—this type of pedagogy is often referred to as “sage on the stage.” Until the 2018 change noted earlier regarding home-centered learning, religious education within the restored Church of Jesus Christ was generally structured using a reproductive, teacher-centered model. Hence, the burden for learning was placed squarely on the instructor, and the learner was relegated to the tasks of absorbing and retaining.

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10. David Boud and David Walker, *Experience and Learning: Reflection at Work, EAE600 Adults Learning in the Workplace: Part A* (Victoria, Australia: Deakin University, 1991), 101.

11. David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1984), 41.

12. In using the term *Western*, we refer to concepts primarily developed and cultivated within the modern, Western cultural framework. “Western culture, sometimes equated with Western civilization, Western lifestyle or European civilization, is a term used very broadly to refer to a heritage of social norms, ethical values, traditional customs, belief systems, political systems, and specific artifacts and technologies that have some origin or association with Europe. The term has come to apply to countries whose history is strongly marked by European immigration, such as the countries of the Americas and Australasia, and is not restricted to the continent of Europe.” Freebase, “Western Culture,” Definitions, accessed November 8, 2021, <https://www.definitions.net/definition/western+culture>.

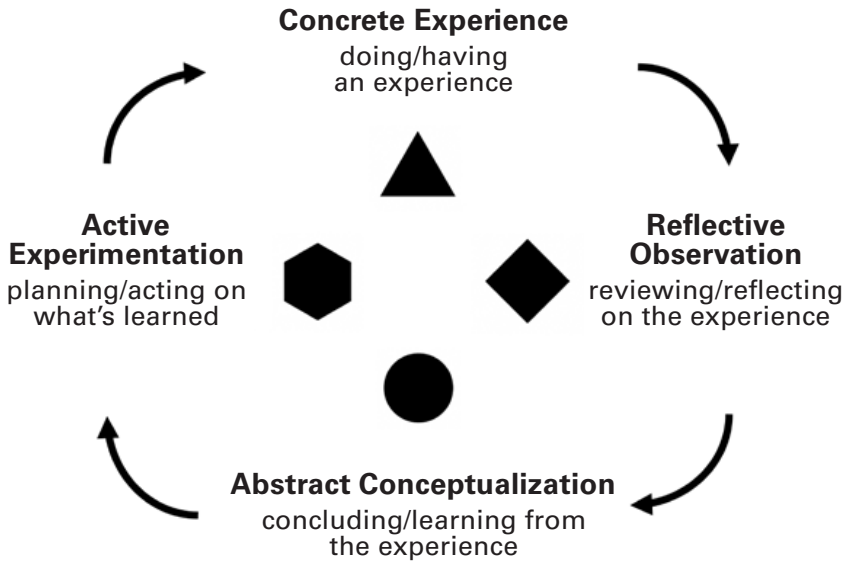


FIGURE 1. Graphical representation of the standard cycles of Experiential Learning Theory (ELT).

In stark contrast to this reproductive model, ELT structures knowledge as a taxonomy of themes and mental models that are acquired through a cyclical process (see figure 1). First, learners engage in new experiences. Second, learners then intentionally reflect on those experiences. Third, learners identify gaps between what was previously understood and what the new experience suggests. Finally, learners develop new ideas, themes, mental models, and understandings as they come to new conclusions, thus leading to application and the testing of new knowledge.<sup>13</sup> In a very real sense, ELT is learner focused as opposed to instructor focused.

13. By way of preface, we recognize that both experiential and transformative learning constitute separate streams of research. Each has received important scholarly attention in its own right. However, for simplicity's sake, and due to considerable overlap between ELT and TLT (transformative learning theory) as well as precedent to consider these together, we include transformative learning concepts and citations under the general umbrella of ELT. See Rachel Percy, "The Contribution of Transformative Learning Theory to the Practice of Participatory Research and Extension: Theoretical Reflections," *Agriculture and Human Values* 22, no. 2 (2005): 127–36, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-004-8273-1>.

At its core, ELT has constructivist beginnings, based on the work of many theorists and authors.<sup>14</sup> Constructivism posits that meaning and individual learning are actively constructed based on previous experience and that these experiences are tied to an individual's social and cultural context.<sup>15</sup> Thus, experiential learning is an extension and application of constructivist philosophy.<sup>16</sup>

An example of the experiential learning process at work has been described by Jack Mezirow.<sup>17</sup> He discussed a scenario in which an individual faces a disorienting dilemma, an experience that forces the individual to reconsider his or her current view of the world and the way he or she lives in it. As a result of this experience, the individual reevaluates his or her assumptions and beliefs and often comes to a sense of dissatisfaction regarding his or her current standing or perspective. The individual needs opportunities for reflection and discourse regarding previous assumptions and beliefs so he or she can develop a plan and begin testing out new approaches and gaining new skills based on a new way of seeing the world.<sup>18</sup>

With ELT, the instructor's role is to act as an experiential guide or a facilitator to help the learner work his or her way through the ELT cycle and to ensure that the necessary steps of reflection and future action take place properly (see table 1). As a learner navigates through the ELT process, the learner is the primary person in charge of constructing meaning from the experience, not the mentor or instructor. The learner's tasks

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14. Most notably, Dewey (1929), Bruner (1961), and Piaget (1980). J. Dewey, "Experience and Philosophic Method," in *Experience and Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1929), 1a–39, <https://doi.org/10.1037/13377-001>; J. S. Bruner, "The Act of Discovery," *Harvard Educational Review* 31 (1961): 21–32; Jean Piaget, "The Psychogenesis of Knowledge and Its Epistemological Significance," in *Language and Learning: The Debate between Jean Piaget and Noam Chomsky*, ed. Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 1–23.

15. Ratna Narayan and others, "Constructivism—Constructivist Learning Theory," in *The Handbook of Educational Theories*, ed. Beverly J. Irby and others (Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age Publishing, 2013), 169–83.

16. Many will argue that a constructivist view of truth—relative and constructed by the individual—is antithetical to the *sine qua non* of religious dogma that truth is fixed and absolute. Our intent is to demonstrate that experiential learning is highly useful in facilitating the conversion process at an individual level without violating the doctrine that truth is inviolate and unchanging.

17. Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), 168.

18. Kevin J. Pugh, "Transformative Experience: An Integrative Construct in the Spirit of Deweyan Pragmatism," *Educational Psychologist* 46, no. 2 (2011): 107–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2011.558817>.

**Table 1. Experiential learning cycle explained**

Phase in the ELT* cycle	Learner's actions
Experience	New experience/concrete experience; disorienting dilemma, an experience forcing one to reconsider
Reflect	Reflect on previous assumptions; think/come to new realizations
Analyze	Learn by analyzing gap between old and new (self-evaluation)
Act	Apply and test; plan, act, acquire, and reintegrate

\*Experiential learning theory.

are to develop new skills, chart a course for new behaviors, and further develop his or her identity. Thus, experiential learning is a process of change and potential transformation.

Figure 2 demonstrates a traditional ELT conceptualization.<sup>19</sup> The learner is the one in charge of constructing meaning from his or her experiential environment. The learner is the focal point and, over time, constructs new meaning and understanding. The challenge with this more traditional view is that truth becomes constructivist and relative to the learner. In the figure, the passing of time is represented on the X axis as the learner constructs new understandings of his or her environment (in gray/dotted) based on previous experiences.

While ELT has been shown to be a powerful model and has been applied in numerous fields and settings, authors have identified its shortcomings from a religious and spiritual perspective. As Ellen Marmon argued, the experiential learning process has not previously drawn on, nor sufficiently recognized, spiritual domains or the possibility of an objective truth beyond the socially and culturally constructed environment upon which the experiential learning process could be built.<sup>20</sup>

**ELT and General Religious Education**

Scholars, largely outside of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, have turned increasing attention to the role of experiential

19. Adapted from Peter Jarvis, *Paradoxes of Learning: On Becoming an Individual in Society* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992), 25.

20. Ellen Marmon, “Transformative Learning Theory: Connections with Christian Adult Education,” *Christian Education Journal* 10, no. 2 (2013): 424–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F073989131301000212>.



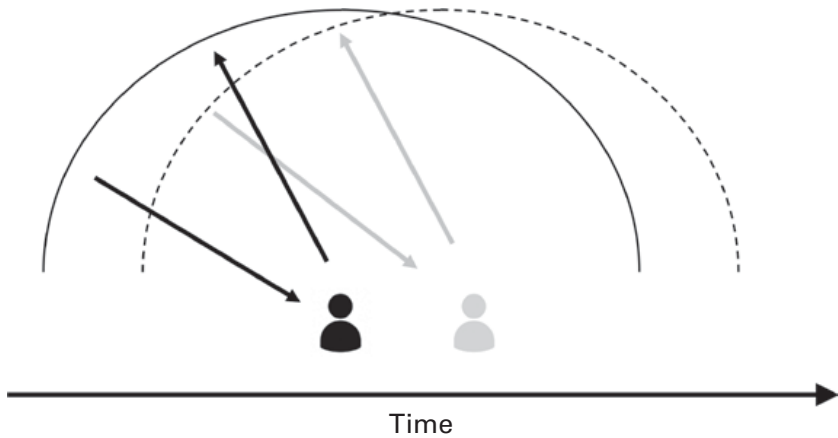


FIGURE 2. Graphical representation of the model of experiential learning that is centered on the learner, a traditional ELT model.

learning theories in and their application to religious study and spiritual growth. In *Teaching for Spiritual Growth: An Introduction to Christian Education*, for example, Perry Downs emphasized the importance of informal, experiential processes in one's spiritual development.<sup>21</sup> Downs observed that "Christian living must be an experienced reality, or it is no reality at all. *Words apart from experience, are dead.*"<sup>22</sup> Rather than concede experience as the process of socially or individually constructing knowledge and truth,<sup>23</sup> however, Downs argued that experiential learning relative to spiritual growth must be rooted in, or guided by, truth. He argued that it would be dangerous to found one's development on "experience that is not based on truth. . . . Christian experience must be filtered through the grid of biblical and theological understandings. . . . Experience must be judged by the standard of the Word of God."<sup>24</sup>

21. Perry G. Downs, *Teaching for Spiritual Growth: An Introduction to Christian Education* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Academic, 1994).

22. Downs, *Teaching for Spiritual Growth*, 164, emphasis added.

23. Downs's approach implicitly contrasts with Steinaker and Bell's, who stipulate that all experience is ontologically real or true. Norman Steinaker and M. Robert Bell, "A Proposed Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Experiential Domain," *Educational Technology* 15, no. 1 (1975): 14–16, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44418219>.

24. Downs, *Teaching for Spiritual Growth*, 164.

Beyond Downs's early writings in this area, a few other scholars suggest (1) a more central role for Christ-centered objectivity in the experiential, spiritual process and (2) experiential learning focused more on conversion than pedagogical approaches. Alison Le Cornu, for example, extended the role of experiential learning toward change.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, her approach largely focuses on the position of the learner relative to their environment—similar to a standard psychological development/ELT approach. Le Cornu observed that “change is part of the process of learning and is a fundamental way in which people construct significant parts of themselves. Internalization takes the form of people ‘acquiring their [objectified] culture through socialization’ [suggesting that] the principal means by which this happens is through reflection.”<sup>26</sup>

Le Cornu went on to describe reflection as the “transformation of knowledge into knowing and hence representing a second stage of the learning process, the first of which Jarvis defines as ‘the transformation of experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, values, emotions and the senses.’ The outcomes of these are ‘integrated into [people’s] own biographies.’”<sup>27</sup>

We read these varieties of conversations as evidence of a wider recognition of the utility of experiential learning in religious studies. However, along with ELT’s application comes ELT’s more constructivist heritage. Surprisingly, few scholars specifically talk about ELT in the religious education context with the nonconstructivist approach of experiencing and knowing truth through Christ versus through one’s environment and personal preferences. In fact, many push against this type of approach as dogmatic and seemingly narrow-minded. In a 2001 study, Le Cornu expounded that “truth is by its very nature relational. Nevertheless, when either presented or perceived as objective and propositional, as has generally been the case in Christianity, it assumes or is attributed an inherent authority which directly (and potentially adversely) influences the growth and development of the learner.”<sup>28</sup> Certainly some efforts have been made to nuance

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25. Alison Le Cornu, “People’s Ways of Believing: Learning Processes and Faith Outcomes,” *Religious Education* 100, no. 4 (2005): 425–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344080500308637>.

26. Le Cornu, “People’s Ways of Believing,” 428, quoting Jarvis, *Paradoxes of Learning*, 19.

27. Le Cornu, “People’s Ways of Believing,” 428, quoting Peter Jarvis, *Adult Education and Lifelong Learning: Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed. (London: RoutledgeFarmer, 2004), 111.

28. Alison Le Cornu, “Is Adult Theological Education through Distance Learning Self-Defeating?: An Exploration of the Relationships between Truth, Authority and

truth and experience, but the result, to us, seems the same. For example, Jarvis argued that “at the heart of religion is experience. . . . We cannot teach the primary experience but only learn from it[,] but we can teach religious belief systems. . . . Experiences are fundamental to our humanity whereas the explanations reflect only the cultures within which they were had—the explanations are not the experiences!”<sup>29</sup>

An outstanding question, perhaps *the* outstanding question, in extending this stream of literature is quite simply this: What happens when an individual puts Christ at the center of his or her experiential learning? How does ELT better inform religious study and conversion if Christ is the objective truth serving as the reference for internalizing the experience that one has? If one were to adapt the ideas from Le Cornu<sup>30</sup> and Jarvis,<sup>31</sup> how might the following conceptualization gain utility if modified?

Figure 3 presents a modified ELT model that underscores two main differences. First, the learner is no longer the sole center of the learning process. Instead the learner “yokes” with Jesus Christ to gain greater understanding into his or her experiences (Matt. 11:29–30). So doing, he or she appeals to Christ for insight, comfort, and divine assistance, learning more of Christ’s nature and power along the way. This, in turn, raises the second difference: in addition to learning how to construct one’s experiences, the learner can also become more converted to Christ through the yoking process of learning. We capture this process in figure 3 with the arrow drawing the left half (learner) of the yoke toward the right (the Savior).

Several scholars seem to offer support for our suggested ELT modifications. For example, Jane Thayer’s study<sup>32</sup> explicitly used Kolb’s learning modes (ELT) to measure spiritual growth and learning, facilitating the “concept of spiritual development modes that are defined as learning modes by which one engages with God and others through the spiritual disciplines [for example, Bible reading, fellowship, repentance, and

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Self-Development,” *British Journal of Theological Education* 11, no. 2 (2001): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jate.v11i2.9>.

29. Peter Jarvis, “Religious Experience and Experiential Learning,” *Religious Education* 103, no. 5 (2008): 566, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344080802427200>.

30. Le Cornu, “People’s Ways of Believing.”

31. Jarvis, *Paradoxes of Learning*.

32. O. Jane Thayer, “Constructing a Spirituality Measure Based on Learning Theory: The Christian Spiritual Participation Profile,” *Journal of Psychology & Christianity* 23, no. 3 (2004): 195–207.

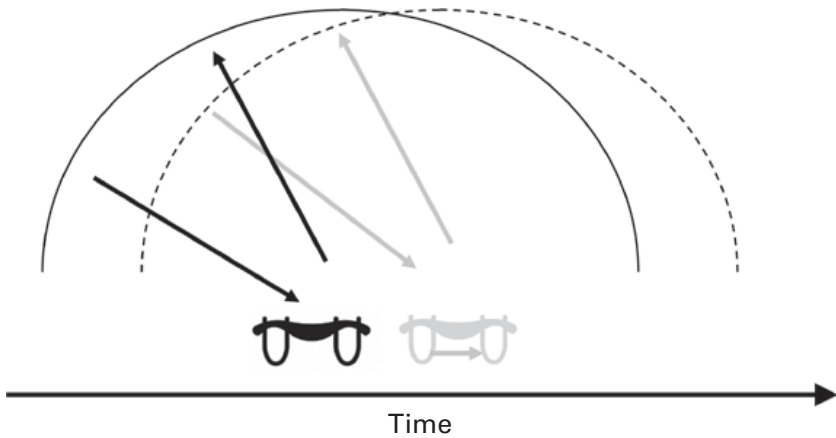


FIGURE 3. Graphical representation of the model of experiential conversion that is centered on the learner who is yoked to Christ, a modified ELT model.

service]. These modes are hypothesized to be means through which the Holy Spirit transforms Christians into the likeness of Christ. The most important point of the theory is that holistic spiritual growth requires different kinds of learning obtained by active participation in a relationship with God and God's word, active participation in relationships with other people, and critical reflection on both relationships."<sup>33</sup> In short, Thayer seems to advocate an experiential path informed by God's objective truths. Jarvis echoed this concept to some extent: "We cannot teach anybody religious experience—they have to experience that for themselves and learn from it; perhaps, however, traditional religious systems of meaning can actually help us interpret our experience from within the framework of our own religious narrative."<sup>34</sup>

As we shall argue in greater detail below, Christ is the narrative through which one's experiences can lead to conversion. Returning to Downs's early work in this area, we contend that "experience must be judged by the standard of the Word of God,"<sup>35</sup> and as noted by the Apostle John, the "Word is God" (John 1:1).

33. Thayer, "Constructing a Spirituality Measure Based on Learning Theory," 204.

34. Peter Jarvis, *Learning to Be a Person in Society* (London: Routledge, 2009), 128.

35. Downs, *Teaching for Spiritual Growth*, 164.

In summary, Marmon observed that “early on, [ELT] was criticized for being too cognitive at the expense of affective and spiritual domains. Its constructivist roots call into question whether or not objective truth exists outside of each person’s perceptions.”<sup>36</sup> Yet Marmon further noted, “The key dynamics of [ELT] are elements of education that Christians value: honest relationships, life experience, thoughtful consideration of what God is teaching through the experience, and possible realignment of attitudes, dispositions, and actions to reflect God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.”<sup>37</sup>

### **The Yoke as a Symbol of Experiential Learning Rightly Understood: Coupling Conversion with Christ**

For learners, experiential learning is about renegotiating what they can do and even who they are based on their experiences. In the process of renegotiating who they are and who they want to become, their experiences teach them that they can actually do more than they thought they could do and become more than they thought they could become. While most secular expansions of experiential learning put the learner in the center of the experiential journey, our primary point is that the learner should center his or her experiential learning *on* Christ and, particularly, *with* Christ. We advocate Christ-centered experiential learning that yokes the learner and the Savior together so that he can serve as the guide. In this way, experiential learning can build true conversion—the highest form of learning.

On the surface, elevating experiential learning in this way may seem time-consuming and perhaps even a little unclear and overwhelming. Modern followers of Christ rarely need one more thing “to do.” With those concerns in mind, we make four observations to help unpack the concept of yoking oneself to Christ.

First, *yoking* makes the undertaking of experiential learning more manageable and less overwhelming because it invites divine tutoring and companionship. Christ will surely help the individual learn and, ultimately, convert. He even promises that the process can bring added peace (D&C 19:23). His revelations and commandments promise the transformation that follows yoked learning. Matthew 11:28–30 beautifully clarifies the invitation and promise related to learning, experiencing, and yoking oneself to Christ: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy

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36. Marmon, “Transformative Learning Theory,” 429.

37. Marmon, “Transformative Learning Theory,” 429.

laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

In examining this passage, several concepts seem noteworthy. First, there is an equivalence between learning and the yoke: the Savior tells the individual to take upon him or her the yoke in order to learn his ways and his gospel. Hence, step 1 in Christ-centered learning is experiential because “yoking” oneself to Christ is an action, an experience. By yoking oneself to him, one naturally orients his or her learning as an experience with Christ, his ways, and his teachings.

How then do we specifically yoke ourselves to Christ? Yoking is the process of binding two forces, typically animals, together in order to pull a load that could not be managed alone. Yoking oneself to Christ suggests that we bind ourselves to Christ in order to manage life’s burdens that we would not be able to bear alone. Yoking ourselves to Christ does not, however, suggest we are on equal footing with Christ. For training purposes, a master might yoke a younger, weaker animal to a more experienced animal to teach it how to effectively and successfully manage especially heavy loads through a yoked relationship. Symbolically, this is clearly the case as we strive to yoke ourselves to Christ. We have an opportunity to be taught and trained by the Savior’s perfect example of love, service, and truth and therefore to manage life’s most difficult challenges.

The process of yoking oneself to Christ might be achieved in numerous ways. President Nelson recently invited members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to yoke themselves to Christ by increasing their faith. In the April 2021 general conference, he pleaded, “*Start today to increase your faith.*”<sup>38</sup> He went on to recommend five ways our faith can be more experiential, thereby binding, or yoking, us to Christ: “First, study. Become an engaged learner. . . . Second, choose to believe in Jesus Christ. . . . Third, act in faith. . . . Fourth, partake of sacred ordinances worthily. . . . And fifth, ask your Heavenly Father, in the name of Jesus Christ, for help.” In these five recommendations, President Nelson illustrates the experiential nature of faith and how faith yokes us to Christ.

Our second observation is that the experiential learning process is clearly evident as we yoke ourselves to Christ. By yoking ourselves to Christ, we deepen our relationship with him and permit his tutoring

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38. Russell M. Nelson, “Christ Is Risen; Faith in Him Will Move Mountains,” *Liahona* 45, no. 5 (May 2021): 102, emphasis in original.

and guidance. We propose that yoking oneself with Christ includes the full experiential process—particularly using Christ and his teachings as a guide to reflect on life's experiences, analyzing experiences through the lens of Christ's teachings, and then making plans and taking action inspired by Christlike love and his commandments, especially the first two great commandments.<sup>39</sup>

Regarding the experiential process of yoking ourselves to Christ, our reasoning is fairly straightforward: individuals can better relate to Christ through lived experience and real-world application than they can through a theoretical lens of abstract knowledge. Experiences provide the medium in which individuals relate to and receive help from others and from Christ. Consider how people connect to their fellow sisters and brothers here on earth. As social beings, humans generally find that the power of shared experiences and connecting with others is significant.<sup>40</sup> In addition to the power of sharing experiences, when individuals experience or engage in a common struggle, bonding increases, and they are more inclined to provide future support when needs arise.<sup>41</sup> When individuals share experiences together, relationships develop. Strangers often become friends and family, more dear when they share experiences together. Individuals not only learn to like and support their experiential companions but also even learn to become like them.

The same logic applies as we yoke ourselves to Christ and invite him into our lives through shared experiences and engaging with him in our common struggle. Individuals learn to love Christ and, more poignantly, to become like him. For Christ, this connection is possible because he can perfectly relate to every and any experience an individual chooses to share or yoke with him (Alma 7:11–12). For the individual, he or she draws closer to Christ as he or she chooses, through faith, to accept him as a trusted companion, a divine being with whom one shares experiences and who is engaged in a common struggle through this mortal experience. Having an all-perfect, all-powerful, and all-loving brother to share experiences with makes all the difference in an individual's learning and, ultimately, his or her conversion. This process works because the individual becomes more powerfully connected to Christ through

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39. See Matthew 22:36–40.

40. See Vivien Williams, "Mayo Clinic Minute: The Benefits of Being Socially Connected," News Network, Mayo Clinic, April 19, 2019, <https://newsnetwork.mayoclinic.org/discussion/mayo-clinic-minute-the-benefits-of-being-socially-connected/>.

41. Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *The Power of Moments* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 214.

their shared experiences when he or she sees Christ as someone to connect with during the struggles of mortality.

Ultimately, the bond that can grow through sharing or yoking experiences with Christ is the essence of the Atonement, literally an “at-onement.” Anyone can become one with Christ because he understands everyone perfectly and has sacrificed himself so that all can transcend their fallen state and transform themselves to be more like him. This transformation can only happen when we submit to Christ and become yoked to him in shared experiences as he journeys with us through our mortal lives.

Like all learning, experientially yoking oneself to Christ is a learning process that requires practice and is not perfected easily. “Becoming perfect like Christ will not happen overnight. Becoming like Him is a slow and steady process that will take you an entire lifetime, and even beyond. It is a process that you can start today, one step at a time.”<sup>42</sup> Experiential yoking accommodates the “wisdom and order” that King Benjamin referenced when he observed that “it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength” (Mosiah 4:27).

Finally, the symbol of the yoke in experiential learning is not meant to convey constraint but assistance and companionship in magnifying the divinity and power that is within each of us. Experiential yoking accommodates the exercise of agency that the Lord points to in Doctrine and Covenants 58:27–28: “Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness. For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves.”

As individuals exercise their agency, the Lord—their partner and trainer in the yoke—will not yank them away from their individual journeys. Rather, he will accompany them on their individual journeys, attending to their interests, failures, and successes. As long as individuals continue to strive to follow Christ and his teachings, they “shall in nowise lose [their] reward” (Matt. 10:42). This type of companionship is beautifully illustrated in Christ’s attending to the recently deceased Lazarus. Lazarus’s sisters were yoked to Christ and invoked his help and intervention in their lives and journeys. Rather than tugging Mary

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42. “Following His Footsteps,” Latter-day Saints Channel, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, April 8, 2015, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/inspiration/following-in-his-footsteps>.



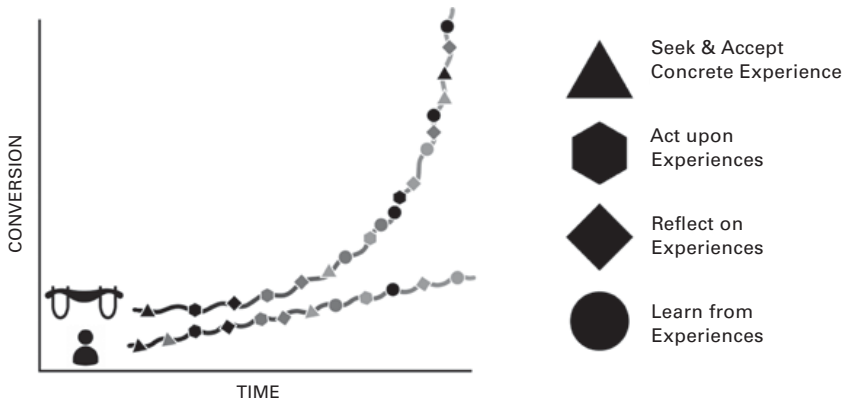


FIGURE 4. Graphical representation of the model of yoked experiential learning and conversion, a modified ELT model.

and Martha away from Lazarus's tomb, Christ went with them, participating fully in their grief, and performed a miraculous transformation for all who shared in that sacred experience with him.

With these observations in mind, we distinguish our approach from that of most other experiential learning scholars. We illustrate these distinctions in figure 4, which incorporates figures 1–3. Figure 4 captures the various aspects of the traditional ELT cycle but proposes that when the learner is yoked with Christ, the learner can exponentially increase his or her highest form of learning: conversion. The yoked, exponential learning is initiated when the ultimate facilitator, Christ, comes into play. In this Christ-centered model, aspects of the ELT cycle can come with increasing frequency and productivity.

Early ELT scholars largely left learners to process their experiences by themselves. In their view, self was the primary, if not only, reference point in the learning process. Downs, however, declared that “Christian living must be an experienced reality, or it is no reality at all.”<sup>43</sup> Downs’s observation underscores our argument: learning from mortal experiences must be done in a Christ-centered, not a self-centered, approach. The process of yoking oneself to Christ is an experiential process and an expression of our faith—through reflection, analysis, and action. It

43. Downs, *Teaching for Spiritual Growth*, 164.

ensures that one's experiences are based on and understood in the light of truth. No one can expect the unyoked, natural man to teach himself anything that can help him transcend his fallen state or transform himself into a more converted being.

To this end, our argument parallels Elder David A. Bednar's inspired insights on learning. He observed that "learning by faith and from experience are two of the central features of the Father's plan of happiness."<sup>44</sup> Rather than separate "faith learning" from our "experiential learning," one can follow Elder Bednar's prescription to bring all learning "in one, in Christ."<sup>45</sup> As one yokes his or her experiences in faith with Christ, one stands to gain conversion and intelligence, "the application of the knowledge we obtain for righteous purposes."<sup>46</sup>

### **The Importance of Everyday Experiences in Yoking Ourselves to Christ**

In addressing the role of experiential learning in a gospel context, we believe that everyday, seemingly ordinary experiences matter. First, consider the puzzling reality that oftentimes miraculous or otherworldly experiences do not lead to conversion. Why is this the case? Indeed, the scriptures contain numerous stories of people who beheld heavenly manifestations but failed to become converted. A simple example is Laman and Lemuel from the Book of Mormon: they personally witnessed numerous miracles and yet became "past feeling" (1 Ne. 17:45). So, why do some extraordinary experiences fail to produce the change in behavior that we might expect? Differentiating ordinary everyday spiritual experiences from the extraordinary will help us better understand the process of conversion.

Recent work by Mat Duerden and his coauthors<sup>47</sup> helps clarify the difference between ordinary and extraordinary experiences that can be applied to the conversion process. *Ordinary experiences* are routine occurrences that hold an individual's attention long enough for him or

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44. David A. Bednar, "Seek Learning by Faith," *Ensign* 37, no. 9 (September 2007): 63.

45. David A. Bednar, "Special Witnesses of the Name of Christ," *Religious Educator* 12, no. 2 (2001): 10.

46. David A. Bednar, "Learning to Love Learning" (commencement address, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, April 24, 2008), <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/david-a-bednar/learning-love-learning/>.

47. Mat D. Duerden and others, "From Ordinary to Extraordinary: A Framework of Experience Types," *Journal of Leisure Research* 49, nos. 3–5 (2018): 196–216, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2018.1528779>.

her to complete a task, but the experience lacks an emotional resonance or significant meaning. *Extraordinary experiences*, on the other hand, can be subdivided into three types: (a) memorable, or an experience that has an emotional connection and therefore creates a lasting impression; (b) meaningful, or an experience that includes emotion and personal relevance, discovery, or learning; and (c) transformative, or an experience that evokes emotion and meaning and creates a change within the individual.

Based on this clarification regarding ordinary, memorable, meaningful, and transformative experiences, we see that it is not the activity in and of itself, or the regularity of an activity, that makes it ordinary or extraordinary. Instead, it is the emotion or meaning that is associated with the experience. Therefore, everyday activities, if filled with faith and action, will yoke us to Christ and be transformative. Faith-filled activities applied through the experiential learning process of intentionally reflecting, analyzing, making plans, and taking action will create an extraordinary effect leading to transformation and conversion. As Elder Bednar instructed, when we bring all learning in one, in Christ, our experiences become an essential thread in the tapestry of conversion.

President Spencer W. Kimball taught that conversion-forging experiences most often come to individuals drop by drop. He used the Lord's parable of the ten virgins as a backdrop to explain this concept: "Attendance at sacrament meetings adds oil to our lamps, drop by drop over the years. Fasting, family prayer, home teaching, control of bodily appetites, preaching the gospel, studying the scriptures—each act of dedication and obedience is a drop added to our store. Deeds of kindness, payments of offerings and tithes, chaste thoughts and actions, marriage in the covenant for eternity—these, too, contribute importantly to the oil with which we can at midnight refuel our exhausted lamps."<sup>48</sup>

Thus, prophetic counsel teaches that making time for the Lord every day<sup>49</sup> is a vital source, the most important source, of conversion-strengthening fuel. The application of experiential learning in the gospel context is the key to utilizing experiences in the quest to become more like the Savior Jesus Christ. It is vital that in the desire for extraordinary spiritual experiences, individuals appreciate the daily habits and

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48. Spencer W. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1972), 256.

49. Russell M. Nelson, "Make Time for the Lord," *Liahona* 45, no. 11 (November 2021): 120–21.

occurrences that are so meaningful. These seemingly ordinary experiences help individuals discover the incremental changes they need to make, thereby transforming them step by step through the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ.

### Experiential Learning in the Restored Gospel

While the concept of experience plays a prominent role in many discussions and teachings within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (for example, D&C 122:7), ELT<sup>50</sup> has yet to be effectively utilized within the current home-centered, Church-supported approach to gospel learning. We note a few exceptions and parallels that lead us to our main argument: experiential learning, properly understood, can help individuals learn and teach in ways that will lead to more complete conversion. For example, Anthony Sweat, writing for the *Religious Educator*, drew considerable attention to the role of experiences in spiritual learning: “If students do not have the opportunity to *act* physically, mentally, or spiritually during the learning process (the *means*), they usually will not have a spiritual experience (the *end*). It is proverbially said that experience is the best teacher, and from a gospel perspective, we know that we are here on earth to gain experience. Metaphorically speaking, we can see life as a large participatory classroom where we can learn through experience to choose good from evil (see 2 Ne. 2:27) and gain attributes that will enable us to become like God.”<sup>51</sup>

In terms of experiential learning in the restored gospel, Cheryl Preston provides another Latter-day Saint perspective: “Horizontally, the Church is formed by the use of lay leaders, councils, and the communitarian and experiential learning processes.”<sup>52</sup> She also observed that “the form and function of the organization pushes [members and lay leaders] toward hands-on, experiential learning.”<sup>53</sup>

Kevin Worthen, president of Brigham Young University, promoted a realignment of BYU and its mission toward an objective he called

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50. See note 13, which details our rationale to largely consider experiential and transformative learning under the umbrella of ELT.

51. Anthony Sweat, “Active Learning and the Savior’s Nephite Ministry,” *Religious Educator* 10, no. 3 (2009): 75–86, <https://rsc.byu.edu/vol-10-no-3-2009/active-learning-saviors-nephite-ministry>, emphasis in original.

52. Cheryl B. Preston, “The Spiritual Concept of Form and Function as One: Structure, Doctrine, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (2014): 39.

53. Preston, “Spiritual Concept of Form and Function,” 66.

“inspired learning.” Inspired learning focuses on learning by experience, and President Worthen used the term *experience* over sixty times in his speech. He expounded inspired learning in this way:

Experiential learning has become somewhat of a buzzword in academia in recent years. However, for us there is a deeper, even doctrinal reason for pursuing learning by experience in a systematic way. We are all quite familiar with the scriptural injunction that we “seek learning, even by study and also by faith.” That describes two key ways by which we learn important truths: by study and by faith. But those are not the only ways by which we learn essential knowledge and skills. Gospel teaching instructs us that we learn by study, we learn by faith, and we learn by experience. Learning by experience is a central purpose of our mortal journey. As Elder David A. Bednar once observed, “Learning by faith and from experience are two of the central features of the Father’s plan of happiness.” We could not have simply memorized celestial laws in our premortal life and declared ourselves fit for the celestial kingdom. We needed to come to this mortal existence to experience certain things we could not experience in our premortal life and to learn from those experiences. Experience is a key part of our mortal learning process.<sup>54</sup>

These few examples clearly identify an emphasis toward experiential learning, and we propose that even more can be done at home and at church to fully realize the power of ELT as we yoke ourselves to Christ. Two prominent resources currently exist for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that exemplify the power of ELT and the opportunities for application in a home-centered approach. First, the Church’s new *Come, Follow Me*<sup>55</sup> curriculum encourages families to use object lessons, draw pictures, sing songs, and role-play, all experiential learning approaches. Using the ELT process—including reflecting on experiences, analyzing or identifying opportunities for improvement, making plans to act, and then trying out new behaviors—can add additional structure and enhance the experiential activities identified in the *Come, Follow Me* curriculum.

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54. Kevin J. Worthen, “Inspiring Learning,” (Brigham Young University Conference address, Provo, Utah, August 22, 2016), <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/kevin-j-worthen/inspiring-learning/>, quoting Bednar, “Seek Learning by Faith.”

55. “Ideas to Improve Your Family Scripture Study,” *Come, Follow Me*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/come-follow-me-for-individuals-and-families-old-testament-2022/family>.

The Church's current approach to youth programming is a second example of experiential learning that has the potential to lead to conversion, especially when implemented using the full ELT process. In the Church's youth guidebook for personal development,<sup>56</sup> the experiential process takes on the form of discovering interests and potential areas for development, and then planning, acting, and reflecting as a process for personal growth. Young people are encouraged to plan by setting goals, act on them, and then reflect on the experience, leading to additional planning, acting, and reflecting as an ongoing process. Recognizing this process as an experiential learning approach intended to lead to conversion is critical for the youth who participate and for parents and adult leaders who support the process. Merely discovering interests and setting goals is not enough. Experiences are essential, but so too are the opportunities to analyze and evaluate the experience and to intentionally draw out the meaning and learning that comes from an experience.

While these examples identify the ways in which the Church of Jesus Christ is encouraging experiential learning, the potential for conversion can be enhanced by using the full ELT process, particularly when centered in Jesus Christ. Making Christ the centerpiece of the ELT process is how we conceptualize yoking oneself to Christ. Yoking ourselves to Christ facilitates conversion as one's identity becomes aligned with Christ through an interactive process of Christ-centered experiential learning.

To further facilitate this process, we provide four principle-based suggestions to help those who desire to implement a Christ-centered experiential learning approach. First, learn to look at experiences as opportunities for growth. Soon, you may find learning opportunities that were previously obscured, and you will start to see a whole new canvas of opportunities to learn and reflect. Second, engage in the experiential learning process with Christ as the unwavering standard. In other words, learn to filter your experiential lessons through the Savior's teachings. This process includes intentionally reflecting on experiences, analyzing your actions and consequences, making plans for new and different approaches, and taking action, thus leading to new experiences and the continuation of the process, all inspired by Christ and his perfect love for us. Third, seek the quiet. Christ-centered experiential insights are rarely found in the noise. Fourth, understand the different aspects of

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56. "Personal Development: Youth Guidebook," <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/personal-development-youth-guidebook>.

the ELT cycle and how the Savior can facilitate yoked learning. Figure 4 visually conceptualizes such processes, but of course, we encourage you as an experiential learner to adopt your own yoked approach.

Accompanying these suggestions, table 2 offers some reflective questions to help individuals engage in the ELT process while yoked to Christ:

**Table 2. Suggestions for using the experiential learning process**

Step in the process	Objectives	Actions
Seek and accept experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build confidence and faith in experiences as part of the <i>divine</i> plan.</li> <li>• Start to see experiential patterns and learn to identify experiences that will lead to learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and describe learning experiences.</li> <li>• Counsel with others on how to engage in Christ-centered experiential learning.</li> <li>• Brainstorm with others on how and when to add meaningful experiences for those you teach or mentor.</li> </ul>
Reflect after experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find opportunities to include reflection personally and when leading or teaching.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Add reflection after personal experiences or when leading activities or teaching lessons.</li> <li>• Record reflections.</li> <li>• Use ordinances (sacrament and temple) as a divinely appointed opportunity for reflection.</li> </ul>
Analyze and evaluate experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify what was learned from reflecting.</li> <li>• Analyze the gap between the old self and what has been recently discovered (desired new self).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask the Lord, and significant others, What can I learn from this experience? Is there more for me to learn? How can this increase my faith? What promptings am I receiving? Are the attributes of Christ represented in what I am learning?</li> </ul>
Act in faith using lessons learned from Christ-centered experiential learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apply lessons from reflection and analysis.</li> <li>• Be willing to stretch, to get outside of your comfort zone.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specifically identify and plan for new behaviors you will implement.</li> <li>• Help those you teach or mentor set specific goals about behaviors they will implement.</li> <li>• Follow up.</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

Over the past few decades, ELT has shown promise as an effective method for teaching and learning in the secular arena and is beginning to be encouraged within the Church of Jesus Christ. We propose that yoking ourselves to Christ is an essential component of using ELT as a home-centered approach leading to conversion. In this article, we have articulated a model where ELT is a highly effective way for individuals to draw near unto Christ, but only so far as Jesus Christ is the central focus of the ELT process. This model stands contrary to most models of ELT, where the learner stands alone in the center of the experiential learning process.

We introduced Christ-centered experiential learning with an illustration from the life of Joseph Smith: the yoked learning that took place in Liberty Jail. There, Joseph sought for and received insight from Christ about the purpose for his experiential journey. As examiners of ELT, we cannot help but surmise that Joseph's accomplishments were, in large part, a result of his incredible willingness to learn from his experiences and his unswerving focus on Jesus Christ as his experiential guide. Indeed, Joseph Smith endeavored to yoke himself to the Savior, from the earliest stirrings in his inquiring heart to his final testimony.

We conclude with a similarly inspiring illustration from the life of President Russell M. Nelson. In a message to members of the Church, he recalled: "My wife Dantzel and I were sitting on the sofa holding hands while we watched television. Suddenly, she collapsed. Despite being well trained to treat the very thing that ended her life, I could not save my own wife. Dantzel and I were blessed with nine daughters and one son. Tragically, I have lost two of those daughters to cancer. No parent is prepared to lose a child. And yet, despite *these and other difficult experiences*, I am incredibly grateful, eternally, for so very many things."<sup>57</sup> How does President Nelson feel such gratitude despite his heartbreaking experiences? Returning to the symbol of the yoke in our experiential learning, President Nelson offers this answer: "You come unto Christ to be yoked with him and with his power, so that you're not pulling life's load alone. You're pulling life's load yoked with the Savior and Redeemer of

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57. Sarah Jane Weaver, "President Nelson Invites Us to #GiveThanks. Read His Full Message on the 'Healing Power of Gratitude,'" Church News, November 20, 2020, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2020-11-20/president-nelson-special-message-gratitude-spiritual-remedy-healing-hope-covid-19-198180>, emphasis added.



the world, and suddenly your problems, no matter how serious they are, become lighter.”<sup>58</sup>

Thus, we offer this final observation. Our experiences, properly understood, can change who we are—orienting us and converting us to Christ as we learn to make him the center of this mortal experience. The act of keeping Christ at the center of our experiential learning is one way we implement Christ’s enduring commandment to yoke ourselves to him and his gospel.

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58. Russell M. Nelson, “The Mission and Ministry of the Savior,” *Ensign* 35, no. 6 (June 2005): 18.