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Dear Colleagues and Friends:

Recently the journalist David Epstein beamed into campus to give a forum address. His message may have caught many of us by surprise. As disciplinary specialists, we think of learning as the process by which students, through sweat and tears, gain what New Zealand professor James Flynn called “narrow critical competence” in their majors. And, of course, that’s precisely what we want, especially in pre-professional programs that require students to be impressively leveled-up so they can get jobs and make a difference.

But Epstein presented us with an alternative view of learning, one based on research findings in multiple dimensions of human performance. In this view, narrowly-specialized knowledge is most useful for solving problems in what psychologist Robin Hogarth dubbed “kind” learning environments—ones with repeated patterns, accurate feedback, and straightforward protocols. Epstein pointed out that in professional and public spheres of action, we’ll just as likely encounter “wicked” learning environments (again, Hogarth) as kind ones—environments with new variables, incomplete understandings, and vague feedback.

To work effectively in unpredictable, dynamic learning environments, our students need more than narrow critical competence: They need *range*. They need to be able to solve messy problems, abstract from cases to overarching principles, communicate effectively with and across human difference, transfer and transform what was learned in previous settings to new ones, vary their approaches, integrate ways of knowing for new contexts. They need to prepare themselves to ride out, with resilience, the inevitable churn of work-life. They need to *learn how to learn*.

This is what GE sets out to do: teach students to learn how to learn across ways of knowing and doing and “across traditional departmental lines,” as Spencer W. Kimball put it in his Second Century Address. There is no way to give students the kind of range they need without GE. And the proposed Explorations courses in the new GE will give students not only the breadth promised in the BYU Aims and commanded in scripture; it will immerse every student in the intellectual project of knowing, doing, and being in our disciplines writ large. They’ll learn what it’s like to be curious amateurs, open to experience and expectation failure, in messy but exciting learning environments—over and over again.

We do need specialists. Many of the world’s most breathtaking advances have come about because men and women of intellect have the patience to build a knowledge base, line upon line, until they become experts in a narrow critical competence. But if we’re thinking on God’s timeline, the next world will be what it will be because men and women of faithful intellect continue to pursue divine becoming in a radical range of knowing, doing, and appreciating, forever. A new GE program can breathe new life into that shared mission, and we all have a role to play.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brian Jackson', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Brian Jackson

English Department and University Writing