

# The Theory and Pedagogy of Baha'i Institutes

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When the Universal House of Justice called upon the Baha'i world to begin the process of Entry by Troops, it accompanied the call with a blueprint for the means of developing these new human resources. It gave us the Institutes. Although Baha'i communities have had study classes and deepening activities in the past and one type of Baha'i Institute already exists, the Ruhi Institute in Colombia, South America, at last the Baha'i world as a whole has a systematic, structured vision for addressing the three basic needs of new believers anywhere: the development of spiritual insight, the development of knowledge, and the development of skills.

In its June 1995 description of Institute Training Programs, the International Teaching Center suggested that rather than implying a short deepening course held for a fixed period, the term "Institute" refers to an extensive range of activities for establishing and implementing a long-term program of human resource development. In addition to teaching, these activities include curriculum design, teacher preparation, administration, evaluation and revision of courses, and coordination of the activities of the institute with the teaching plans of Assemblies and committees.

Because of the inclusive and on-going scope of the institute activities, the ITC uses the term "institute process." This term emphasizes the continually evolving nature of the system for educating the believers, a system which will be the foundation of vast future educational institutions offering life-long learning. When the administrative structure, which is already in place in many areas, is augmented by a richer devotional life and the establishment of this basic education system called for by the Four Year Plan, we will have the key components for a truly functioning Baha'i community.

An Institute begins when a core group of people decide to study, pray and act together in order to reach people and invite them to become Baha'i. This group operates under the Local Spiritual Assembly, and gathers the new believers together to go through a series of courses. The group considers the needs of the new believers and factors such as the time, place and the materials. Often the core group uses the lessons developed by the Ruhi Institute, such as the three-book series on basic deepening.

The first book consists of three eight-hour courses which help the believers study the Writings, learn to pray, and reflect on life after death. The goal is for the believers to develop spiritual capacity, particularly the ability to study the Writings independently. We will be looking at some pedagogical features of this course in a few minutes.

The second book helps the believers broaden their knowledge base and find their own path of service. This book reflects the underlying principle of the Baha'i Institutes—that people must increase their capacity to serve. The third book helps the believers become teachers themselves, developing specific instructional skills. In areas where literacy programs are needed, this course offers teacher training essential for creating a body of grass-roots educators.

An additional path of service is provided by a course focusing on community development. This course provides specialized education for those who will be leaders in a variety of social and economic projects.

When Institute facilitator David Mockon was here from the Philippines last summer (1996), he gave us an introduction to the Institute process, and said that each country would eventually develop its own materials. He suggested that the Associations for Baha'i Studies would play an important role in curriculum development. In fact, Japan already has one permanent Baha'i Institute located in Kurume, staffed by Ms. Atsuko Koga, and under the direction of the National Spiritual Assembly. And we can expect more in the future.

Now we will examine some of the theoretical and pedagogical principles used in the Basic Institute Course.

I completed the first course, "Understanding the Baha'i Writings," and as a veteran teacher of 30 years, I found that the theoretical background and pedagogy were extremely sound and innovative. Universal House of Justice member Dr. Farzam Arbab was instrumental in developing the Ruhi Institute and he said that the Ruhi staff wanted to overcome the traditional dichotomy between theoretical and practical knowledge—such as programs which are either academic or else train students in manual and practical skills, but not both. Arbab and his colleagues argued against the fragmentation of knowledge into specific subjects, so the Ruhi curriculum consists of multi-disciplinary modules studying various facets of a problem. For example, a module on water would integrate the physical, chemical and biological properties of water. It would also study the symbolism of water in art and literature. Students would learn how water supplies influence community development and how communities should manage their water resources.

Of course, the idea of integrated learning modules is hardly new in educational theory. But two things are very interesting about the Ruhi Institute approach. First, all participants in the learning act are called "collaborators" whether they are the students or the teachers. Although in every study group, one person is more experienced and is a "tutor", the emphasis is on the collaborative nature of the learning process. Learning is seen as reciprocal and the relationships among the group members is not what is found in traditional teacher-fronted classrooms, where an expert dispenses knowledge to ignorant, passive students.

Many of us are educators and are aware of the rise of collaborative learning in all fields of education. Here we are talking about learners working together to solve problems, each one contributing her own strengths to the learning task. Collaborative learning is now being linked to the work of two brilliant Russian scholars. Their research has had a tremendous impact on cognition and learning theory and we should consider them briefly.

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was an educational psychologist working with infants and very young children. His research suggested that children construct meaning collaboratively with their interlocutors, and, therefore, social interaction is critical in establishing their organization of reality. Meaning remains mutable throughout life; it is actively and continually reconstructed through discourse. Vygotskian analysis can be applied to many types of interaction—for example, we can use it to approach Baha'i consultation. Much of our understanding of the Writings and many of our decisions are based on the collective creation of meaning—the spark of truth emerging from the clash of differing ideas.

The work of the second Russian, philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), has been used in literary theory for quite a while as a rebuttal of deconstructionism. His basic idea is that the child internalizes the voices of those around her during her early years, and then re-externalizes those voices for the rest of her life. In other words, when we speak, we speak with the voices of our mother, our father, our friends, our teachers. True thought, Bakhtin suggests, is not found in the isolated minds of the individuals, but emerges through the discourse of multiple voices.

So, from the Bakhtinian perspective, collaborative learning not only encourages the construction of meaning through interaction, but through the study and memorization of the Writings, also supplies the new believer with the Voice of God.

The second interesting point about the Institute process is that the material is very highly structured, especially at the basic level. In fact, we could say that it is virtually “teacher proof.”

As an example, let’s consider the lesson plan for the first course in the basic deepening series, “Understanding the Baha’i Writings.” This aims to develop the person’s capacity to read the Baha’i Writings and to meditate on their meaning in order to fulfill the obligation to read the Writings every day. The course consists of 20 short quotations which are studied in groups and memorized. Then the participants answer questions about the Writings. Three levels of comprehension are targeted. The first is comprehension of the meaning of the words and sentences in the Writings; the second is applying the concepts in the Writings to daily life, and the third is applying the concepts to more general situations.

Now, we’ll go through a lesson to see how it is organized and to identify supporting pedagogy. First the students read the target passage from the Writings three times. This activates the learners’ background knowledge and the repetition helps them process the content and link it to previously developed knowledge. The second step is clarification of the meaning of the words and phrases used in the passage. If there are new terms, the learners give examples showing the concept behind the word, rather than a decontextualized dictionary-type definition. This type of presentation facilitates integration of the new material with previously learned material, and creates new schemata, or mental organizations in the mind. Many new believers will be studying ideas which they have never thought of before, and the development of mental structures for handling the new material is very important.

In the third next step the students manipulate the passage by forming four questions. However, these questions are restricted to only that information which is in the passage. For example, learners first read the quotation below three times.

“The betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds.”

Then, one learner would ask, “How can the betterment of the world be accomplished?” The other learners would answer, “through pure and goodly deeds.” A second learner might ask, “What can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds?” The rest would answer, “The betterment of the world.” This might seem to be too simplistic, but such repetition and review are very important cognitive learning strategies. Furthermore, by changing the grammar through the construction of different questions, the learners are able to access the deep structure of the passage—its underlying meaning according to principles of Universal Grammar.

After asking and answering these questions, the learners move to the fourth step and discuss the quotation, analyzing its application to different situations in their lives. At this point, according to Vygotsky,

the collaborative nature of the discussion leads to the creation and enhancement of meaning for all participants. Through discussion, the new believers learn to think deeply about the passage, and to develop spiritual understanding. This is a very different process from quickly reading new material and then, very superficially, being able to paraphrase its general meaning. The collaborative nature of the study process enables a more detailed exploration of the many meanings contained within the Holy Word.

The final step is the memorization of the passage—in the Bakhtinian sense, empowering the learner with the Voice of God. The specific pedagogical techniques for this are the use of a cloze test format, where one learner deletes important content words, which are supplied by the others, who do not look at the passage. This is a strong technique for enhancing holistic comprehension of the new material, linking it with previous knowledge through the use of key words. A second technique is back-chaining. Here one learner says the entire passage except for the last word, which is supplied by the others. Then the learner says the passage again, this time leaving off the last two words, which are said by the others, and so forth. This memorization technique uses the strategies of repetition and automatization until the pattern has been processed and stored in the mind.

After the twenty passages have been studied, the learners answer review questions aimed at testing the three levels of understanding. Some questions ask learners to give the meaning and content of the Writings they have studied. Other questions present daily life situations where they could apply the spiritual principles they have studied, and the final level of questions deals with spiritual behavior in more general situations.

When they answer these questions, through the process of spiral review the learners reinforce their knowledge of the Writings and the spiritual principles they embody. Through collaborative discussion with their group members, the learners come to understand how the Writings have a direct application to their own lives and the operation of their community. In this way, they move down the path of spiritual development.

This, then, is the Institute Process. It will build our communities and become a center of education. Japanese culture has always valued the idea of life-long study and we therefore have a special ability to take the idea of the Baha'i Institute and make it our own.