

Learning in Action: Insights from Collaborative Initiatives

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR
BAHÁ'Í STUDIES¹

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INTRODUCTION

As discussed in both the Fiftieth Anniversary Retrospective and the companion essay on the Association's Approach to Learning in this volume, the Association has identified six objects of learning that currently organize its work: multiplying and developing the settings and processes of collaborative inquiry; enabling growing numbers of diverse participants to assist each other in contributing to the discourses that shape spiritual and material progress; developing an outward-looking culture; helping young adults view participation in academic and professional discourses as a core dimension of their service; assisting a growing number of authors to publish work contributing to the intellectual life of the community; and employing the arts as a means of disseminating knowledge and consolidating understanding.

This essay draws on the experience of collaborative initiatives spanning fields as varied as Africana studies, agriculture, the arts, climate and environment, economics, evolution and consciousness, health and wellbeing, Indigenous studies, organization studies, public health, social science, and technology and society, as well as groups focused, for example, on overcoming racism and sexism, or on rethinking social justice. Together, they illustrate how these objects of learning are framing the Association's work and how they are being advanced in practice. While some of these groups function as special interest groups and

others have a more limited focus, the generic term “group” is used throughout to refer to each of them. This essay highlights what these collaborators are discovering, the experiences they are generating, some of the challenges they are encountering, and how this process of inquiry is extending the frontiers of what collective endeavors can achieve.

FOSTERING SPACES FOR GROWTH

The first object of learning is how to multiply and develop the settings and processes in which participants can collaborate, generate collective insights, and share learning about how “to explicate the principles” the Bahá'í community advocates, and “demonstrate their applicability to the issues facing humanity.”² The main types of specialized settings the Association has developed to this end are reading groups, seminars, writing groups, and other small group endeavors, each serving a distinct purpose within an increasingly coherent constellation of collaborative activity.

OVERVIEW

READING GROUPS are small groups that form to read a book or a set of texts from a given field or theme and to thoughtfully explore the content in a collaborative environment. They are an accessible way for participants to deepen their understanding of a

specific discourse and how it correlates with the teachings of the Faith. Once formed, these groups often meet for six to twelve weekly sessions, though some develop into longer-term efforts, and all aim to analyze the text or texts they are studying in the light of the writings of the Faith, the community's experience, and the framework for action. SEMINARS vary in format and size. Some, organized by special interest groups, convene dozens of people at a time for relatively broad and inclusive conversations and presentations about important trends across a range of discourses in related fields, while others gather smaller groups of collaborators for more specific conversations and presentations informed by substantial preparatory reading. Many seminars now take place over two days as part of the annual conference, while others are held throughout the year, either in person or online. WRITING GROUPS are collaborative endeavors aimed at producing content for *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* and other fora. Of particular concern is how to create consultative environments that enhance individual and collective research, writing, and review. The core aim is to foster a humble posture of learning in the writing and review process, one in which each member of the group feels supported by the other members and the *Journal's* editors to strengthen his or her contribution.

The groups documented in this essay range in their degree of development. Some are learning to function as SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS consisting of a

2 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 30 December 2021.

widening network of participants connected by a shared academic or professional field, coordinated by a nucleus of collaborators, and organizing a range of spaces, including reading groups, seminars, writing groups, and other specialized gatherings. OTHERS ARE ORGANIZED AROUND A MORE SPECIFIC FOCUS or a single set of activities, such as drafting seminar materials or advancing a particular line of inquiry. What they share is a commitment to sustained collective inquiry and to creating spaces in which participants can enter into conversation with one another, identify common interests, consult on questions of shared relevance, receive encouragement and support, set goals, and initiate or develop new lines of inquiry and collaborative endeavors.

WORKSHOPS have also served as natural entry points into these groups' activities and the Association's activities more generally. Typically half-day sessions, workshops help familiarize participants with the aims of the Association and its approaches to contributing to professional and academic discourses, exploring such themes as the dispositions conducive to participating constructively in discourses, how to read these discourses for their underlying assumptions, concepts, and methods of inquiry, and how attending to the elements of the conceptual framework helps to ensure coherence between the efforts of the Association and the community-building work and social action of the wider Bahá'í community.

Each of these spaces can function relatively autonomously and also

become part of a mutually reinforcing network of activity, giving rise to and strengthening the others, while being strengthened by them in turn. A few reading groups, for example, may evolve into writing groups whose participants eventually present and receive feedback on their work at seminars or during breakout sessions at the annual conference. Other reading groups may simply give rise to new reading groups, or they may also lead to seminars and lay the basis for the emergence of a special interest group. The annual conference serves as a space of convergence where participants in various collective initiatives share the fruits of their learning with one another and with a wider community; it can also serve as a portal for the multiplication of new, smaller group initiatives. Workshops provide insights into the aims of the Association and stimulate further engagement. Together, these spaces form an organic web of mutually reinforcing yet autonomous efforts, each contributing to the progressive clarification of how the Revelation's principles can inform and transform contemporary discourses. What emerges is an ecosystem of learning³ characterized by shared commitments, collaborative inquiry, and a dedication to reciprocal growth.

In this context, the growth of these spaces over the past thirteen years has been substantial, particularly in reading groups and seminars. What began as a modest set of gatherings has recently

3 See the essay "Approach to Learning" in this issue.

grown significantly, reaching a point where, in the period from May 2024 to April 2025 alone, seventy-one reading groups engaged approximately 500 participants and seventy-seven facilitators, while twenty-four thematic and discipline-specific seminars engaged nearly 350 participants and forty-four facilitators. As of April 2026, this momentum had continued: sixty-seven reading groups have engaged 476 participants and seventy-four facilitators since May 2025, and thirty-four seminars have engaged 783 participants and ninety-four facilitators over the same period. The 49th annual conference in Calgary in 2025, which brought together some 2,000 participants, featured nineteen two-day thematic seminars for 307 participants preceding the general sessions.

Taken together, these figures reflect not merely numerical expansion but a culture of collaborative inquiry that is growing in both reach and depth. In some cases, these spaces are coalescing into special interest groups that are themselves learning to become more systematic in their functioning, to cultivate a mode of learning among a widening circle of participants, and to gain insight into how to nurture fledgling efforts. Some groups have developed significant momentum over the past few years, while others are gaining momentum; some longstanding groups continue to refine their modes of functioning, and still others are beginning to recognize themselves as special interest groups for the first time.

RECENT EXPERIENCE

The growth and development of special interest groups have become a major focus for the Association. In this context, the Association is learning to create spaces and opportunities for capacity building among diverse participants, including those deeply immersed in its work and those newer to the process but keen to participate. It does so by endeavoring to foster a culture in which the vitality of any collaborative space is understood to depend on the quality of relationships and the approach to learning among all who participate.

This culture can be seen, for example, in the recent work of the Advancing Organizations group, which has been deepening collective understanding across different perspectives and sources of information. Its facilitators describe making sense of the group's work as akin to "solving a jigsaw puzzle, with a twist: we don't have all the pieces on hand, and since it is impossible to make sense of the pieces in isolation, we have to discover where the missing pieces are hiding—some in the Bahá'í Writings, others in secular or scientific sources, and still more in the experiences of individuals, communities, and institutions." The group began simply as a reading group focused on a single book, curious about what insights from the Writings might emerge from reading it together. "It is only with the passage of time," they reflect, "that we've come to appreciate the fruits of the journey, and the opportunity

for everyone to contribute and participate.” Every member, they observe, “possesses pieces to the puzzle, and it’s only through a process that invites diverse people to participate in different degrees over time that the puzzle is slowly but surely taking shape.”

The Agriculture group reflects a similar culture of sustained, open inquiry: originating in the 1990s and relaunched at the 2018 Atlanta conference, it has developed a body of work across more than thirty reading groups and fifty monthly online sessions. The range of texts explored—from Wendell Berry’s reflections on culture and agriculture to Indigenous perspectives on food systems, from studies of regenerative farming to FUNDAEC’s work on education and development—reflects a commitment to engaging the full breadth of the discourse. The group describes itself as “very outward-looking,” with members recently participating in a range of agricultural initiatives across North America and internationally.

The Climate and Environment group has also built its work on deep and wide-ranging engagement with a number of texts. Since 2021, it has worked through writings by Joseph Romm, Katharine Hayhoe, Tim Jackson, Jeff Goodell, and Kate Marvel, among others, alongside books on sustainable food and water security, key Bahá’í writings, and documents of the Bahá’í International Community such as *One Planet, One Habitation*. It has also connected with related Bahá’í-inspired initiatives, including the International

Environment Forum and FUNDAEC. This breadth of reading has helped participants develop the shared understanding needed to engage the environmental discourse with both scientific literacy and principled conviction.

The Technology and Society group provides yet another example. Emerging from initial reading group experiences in 2022, it assumed a more defined form in early 2024 and has become increasingly consolidated over the past two years. The group’s convenors note that “the movement of this special interest group reflects the influence of individuals and institutions that foster the intellectual life of the Bahá’í community”; they have taken inspiration from ISGP seminars and Farzam Arbab’s essay on the intellectual life of the community, and have benefited from “direct accompaniment from individuals with experience that further guided [them] toward distinctive readings and authors and supported reflection on [the group’s] movement through the field.” To date, the group has engaged some 250 individuals in the study of twelve books and a range of articles. The group’s convenors explain that its various spaces, including reading groups, seminars, facilitator planning spaces, training sessions, conference breakout sessions, and discovery spaces, function as “interrelated components of a broader process of inquiry.” In engaging with the wider academic literature, they have found that this literature “addresses fundamental questions extensively and arrives at a degree of convergence around certain

key ideas, including the co-construction of technology and society and the recognition that technology reflects underlying values"—points of reference that contrast with influential yet often unexamined assumptions in popular discourse, and that provide a basis for organizing sustained inquiry.

Another group that has been building momentum is the Social Sciences one, which is emerging as a special interest group bringing together social scientists from a range of disciplines to examine the presuppositions of their respective fields and of social inquiry more broadly in the light of the Revelation. Participants describe the experience as transformative: the space allows for reading closely and methodically, making connections across disciplines and sources, and attending to concepts—what lines of inquiry they open and what they foreclose—in ways that individual study does not always afford. The continuity of the space has proven particularly generative, with participants returning session after session to find that insights from seemingly disparate sources often illuminate each other and converge in unexpected ways. The back-and-forth between larger and smaller spaces, moreover, has been invigorating, enriching participants' understanding of insights from the Revelation on themes such as the three protagonists of society-building, the nature of the community as a protagonist in its own right, and the interplay between the individual and the collective. Pierre Bourdieu and other thinkers have offered analytical tools

for reading social reality, and participants have found themselves discovering unexpected convergences between these analyses and the conceptual framework of the Faith. The group has also organized a series of participatory webinars in which presenters share their ongoing work as social scientists, focusing on how they are learning to contribute to academic and professional discourse in their fields and on how they correlate insights from their respective disciplines with the teachings of the Faith. Themes explored in these webinars have included prefigurative climate action, the biology of human rights and the dehumanizing brain, and rethinking care, justice, and knowledge through a maternal health case study. A seminar held in November 2024 explored three interrelated themes: the role of diversity in achieving objectivity, the development of moral virtues in the pursuit of research, and the engagement of complexity through the use of multiple frameworks. Drawing on the ideas of Helen Longino, Iris Murdoch, Mary Midgley, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Simone Weil, as well as those furnished by the evolving Bahá'í conceptual framework, participants reflected on the moral, intellectual, and structural prerequisites for generating meaningful knowledge in a world striving for unity. The group understands this conversation as part of a sustained collaborative effort to lay the foundations for deeper engagement with social science discourses from a Bahá'í perspective.

The Health group's trajectory has also been defined by successive stages

of learning, each prompting a reorientation of its approach. From 2016 to 2022, annual seminars brought together twenty to sixty health care professionals and students for broad, inclusive conversations. These were “uplifting and joyful spaces,” but the same foundational conversation tended to repeat itself each year as new participants arrived, while deeper questions about how to participate meaningfully in specific health discourses remained difficult to pursue. Beginning with the Nine Year Plan, three developments transformed their approach: the involvement of a growing number of participants shaped by the institute process and ISGP seminars, bringing a new orientation toward the analysis of discourse; the introduction of sections of *Participating in Public Discourse* (Book 14 of the institute process) into the seminar structure; and the emergence of focused collaborative sub-groups exploring mental health, trust and trustworthiness in medicine, professional identity formation, and palliative care. By 2025, the group had reconvened its larger seminar after a two-year hiatus; this space now functioned less as a general gathering and more as a community where collaborative groups and interested individuals could connect, share what they were learning, and identify questions of common concern. This experience shows that the vitality of a space evolves through participants’ willingness to reflect honestly on what is and is not working and to reconfigure it accordingly.

Altogether, the different groups are learning to build on strengths, assess challenges and new opportunities arising from growth, and persevere in the face of ambiguity. As the Advancing Organizations facilitators put it, it is important not to “wait until your understanding feels complete” or assume that “mastery is required in order to make meaningful contributions,” since “every engagement, no matter how small, surfaces new puzzle pieces that help the group move forward.” Their advice, therefore, is simply to begin from wherever the group finds itself.

WIDENING THE CIRCLE OF PARTICIPATION

The second object of learning is how to enable growing numbers of diverse participants, intent on “transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives, and promoting the use of consultation,” to assist one another in contributing to the discourses that influence the direction of spiritual and material progress.

The experience of the Indigenous Studies group speaks directly to the question of widening participation. One of its most significant accomplishments, its members write, is “making scholarship accessible to all participants, regardless of their formal academic background.” They note that the reading group format has “allowed individuals from many walks of life to engage meaningfully with complex questions,” challenging “the assumption that scholarship must be confined to professional academics.” Great care

has been taken “to listen attentively to each voice,” with participants mindful of “the distinction between information that is accumulated and knowledge that is illuminated through insight and reflection.” Early on, members realized that “most participants—regardless of educational or professional background—knew very little about Indigenous lives today, history, spiritual beliefs, and cultures.” This recognition “became an important starting point,” prompting them “to approach the subject with humility and with a commitment to learning rather than presuming expertise.” They found that “discussing works of fiction that are grounded in experience seems to generate thoughtful, sensitive and respectful comments from all participants. . . . Especially for those who have limited or no contact with Indigenous friends, reading these stories truly seems to reduce notions of differences felt, such as ‘them’ and ‘us.’” As noted below, members also came to see art “as a vehicle for learning and achieving deeper understanding,” finding that “artistic forms—whether visual, narrative, or performative—have the capacity to convey experience, memory, and meaning in ways that purely analytical discourse may not.”

They have also recognized “the importance of focusing on the education of junior youth,” and have initiated an online reading group studying *Braiding Sweetgrass for Young Adults*. The group has engaged these young participants in fostering greater appreciation for Indigenous perspectives on

reciprocity, relationship, and responsibility—dispositions the group views as foundational to the kind of engaged, outward-looking orientation it seeks to cultivate from an early age, enabling ever more meaningful participation in the discourses of society. Organizing this study group is viewed as “a first step in linking [the Indigenous Studies group’s] learning about reconciliation with practical educational action among youth.” Through the Indigenous Studies group’s discussions, participants have come to understand that reconciliation is “not a single event but an ongoing process.” Drawing on Jody Wilson-Raybould’s insight that “reconciliation is a marathon, not a sprint,” members have further noted that it “may, in fact, resemble a relay marathon, requiring sustained effort across generations, with each participant contributing to a larger, collective journey.

The experience of the Indigenous Studies group reflects a broader aspiration that has shaped the Association’s approach to participation across all of its spaces. Wider participation has been fostered through reading groups and seminars focused on promoting racial harmony, the role of women in society, Africana studies, and other themes that invite participation from communities whose voices have historically been underrepresented. This expansive understanding of who belongs in these spaces reflects guidance the Universal House of Justice offered in its letter of 19 October 1993, which cautions against any narrowing of the term “Bahá’í scholarship” that would

“effectively establish a demarcation between those admitted into this category and those denied entrance to it.” What is sought instead is a community “in which the members encourage each other” and in which it is recognized that “every one is, in his or her own way, seeking to acquire a deeper understanding of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh,” bringing that understanding to bear on the discourses that shape the life of society. The Association’s effort to make its spaces readily accessible—to those with and without formal academic credentials, across disciplines and generations—is an embodiment of that vision, albeit one still being realized. The Africana Studies Group has exemplified this commitment by bringing Africana intellectual traditions into sustained dialogue with Bahá’í insights on oneness and social transformation. Some of the fruits of this work were shared at the 46th annual conference in a plenary session on Bahá’í perspectives on reparations, and were further explored at the 47th conference in a thematic seminar on Africana discourses of social transformation, among other gatherings. Engagement of this nature has proven generative for both the group and the wider Association, opening new lines of inquiry into the relationship between Bahá’í principles and questions of justice and social transformation.

A broader challenge the Association is still learning to navigate concerns the tension between widening participation and maintaining disciplinary focus. When individuals unfamiliar

with a particular discipline join discipline-specific conversations, discussions can sometimes lose direction and turn inward toward Bahá’í community concerns rather than remaining oriented toward the ways Bahá’ís can contribute to relevant academic and professional discourses. In the ideal, discipline-specific spaces complement the more interdisciplinary or thematic spaces created by many reading groups and seminars by allowing for more intensive, more extended engagement with a given field. In this regard, the Association has been learning how to maintain the integrity of specialized settings while keeping them open and accessible to those interested in actively pursuing their specific objects of inquiry. It has also started designing on-ramp materials on different themes that build understanding in layers, enabling participants to engage meaningfully with related concepts and assumptions while being drawn forward into more focused engagement in the area.

Along these lines, the Technology and Society group has navigated this tension in organizational terms, eventually introducing “invitational spaces intended for participants with prior experience in the discourse, while continuing to offer publicly announced groups open to all,” moving in the direction of “a more refined realization of the aim of universal participation.” This logic resonates with the way the Universal House of Justice describes the three educational imperatives in its message of 12 December 2011, each of which is “distinguished by its own

methods and materials, each claiming a share of resources, and each served by mechanisms to systematize experience and to generate knowledge based on insights gained in the field,” giving rise, quite naturally, to distinct discussions suited to each. Similarly, the Association is learning to create opportunities for widening participation while also creating spaces distinguished by a level of focus on a particular line of inquiry that promotes depth of understanding.

The Advancing Organizations group has found that this spirit of open participation, when it takes hold, itself gives rise to the most generative conversations—those arising from participants sharing partially formed ideas, honest observations from practice, and genuine questions for mutual exploration. When this occurs, the emphasis shifts “from asking ‘What is new or impressive?’ to asking, ‘What is useful to the collective process of learning?’” Such an approach, they continue, “has been both liberating and challenging. It requires a willingness to share ideas that are still forming, to speak from experience rather than abstraction, and to remain open to having one’s ideas and assumptions tested by others.”

DEVELOPING AN OUTWARD-LOOKING CULTURE

The third object of learning is how to develop an outward-looking culture in which participants in different Association spaces understand themselves to be contributing to the

discourses of their fields in ways that are concurrently aligned with the society-building power of the Faith.

This orientation flows from two dispositions central to the Association’s approach: correlating insights from the teachings with those of modern thought, and harmonizing perspectives from various sources. It takes inspiration from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s own example. As Shahriar Razavi explains, His public addresses in the West typically strengthened constructive currents of thought already present in the wider discourse, finding and reinforcing what was in sympathy with the Bahá’í teachings rather than simply opposing what was wrong. Progress in this area has taken several forms. Facilitators and participants are gaining experience, inviting individuals from the wider academic and professional community to participate alongside them in reading groups, seminars, and conference sessions. Following the 30 December 2021 guidance of the Universal House of Justice, they are learning to view all involved as potential partners to collaborate with and to foster fellow-feeling among groups that may traditionally have been less inclined to engage with one another. At the same time, they are learning to be present in new ways in academic and professional spaces in the wider society.

As noted in the companion essay on the Association’s approach to learning in this volume, Haleh Arbab captures the disposition these groups are working to embody: Bahá’í engagement with a discourse involves neither

dismissing existing knowledge in the field nor uncritically accepting it, but rather combining full mastery of the field with the capacity to examine its underlying assumptions in the light of the Revelation. This is what the Public Health group is demonstrating when it holds together the material and spiritual dimensions of health; what the Economics group is enacting when it sifts rather than dismisses the assumptions of Economics 101; and what the Climate and Environment group is exemplifying when it cultivates a shared analytical vocabulary grounded in both scientific knowledge and spiritual principles. This integrative orientation also resonates with the concept of Two-Eyed Seeing developed by Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall, which holds that the strongest knowledge emerges when Indigenous and Western ways of knowing are brought into complementarity, each enriching the other—a vision that speaks directly to the disposition the Indigenous Studies group is working to embody.

The experience of the Public Health group offers a helpful illustration of these outward-looking dispositions in practice. It was formed in 2021 to create a space where people could come together to read, consult, and potentially contribute to the discourse on religion and public health, a relationship its members quickly recognized as difficult to understand if the human being is treated as purely material. Holding together the material and spiritual dimensions of health became “a central feature of the group’s inquiry.”

During a first phase of action, the group undertook a qualitative research study, including interviews with public health leaders and practitioners, to explore how religion and public health are defined and how their interaction is perceived in professional and community contexts. “This step translated our internal conversations into conversations with a wider network of colleagues extending from academic public health to applied practitioners.” The research resulted in a peer-reviewed publication, presentations at professional conferences, and a new university course on Faith and Public Health. The group has now entered a second phase, hosting public seminars that “create conditions in which participants can explore the relationship between religion and public health in an environment of mutual respect, and cultivate relationships that support ongoing collaboration.” Throughout, participation in reading groups has proven foundational. “Under the guidance of the Association,” its members reflect, “the reading groups created a certain rigor that would not have been possible to sustain in an informal arrangement,” providing a space for questions about human nature to be explored with curiosity, an opportunity to develop facility with a new vocabulary, and a source of mutual support that helps to advance a new area of inquiry. As they observe, engaging in professional discourses that seek to reexamine certain assumptions “is like diving underwater together. There is uncertainty and a lack of clarity. It requires patience

and perseverance to explore the depths together, and most of the time, the destination is unknown. Diving with a group feels much better than diving alone.”

A further illustration is the decade-long process by which two scholars developed their work on contributive justice and constructive agency, which unfolded across ABS reading groups, seminars, conference panels, university classrooms, and professional academic spaces in an integrated way. The content of their manuscript, *Rethinking Social Justice*, was further enriched by a two-day colloquium co-hosted with the Kroc School for Peace Studies at the University of San Diego. The details of this journey are captured in their reflections in this volume. The entire process exemplifies how an outward-looking culture can produce scholarly contributions that are simultaneously grounded in Bahá'í insights and fruitfully engaged with the wider academic discourse on social change.

Other groups are also learning how to strengthen their outward-looking orientation. In the Evolution and Consciousness group, engagement with the concept of latency—the understanding that capacities present in a species' potential are progressively actualized under the right conditions—has begun to shape the research directions of different facilitators. In one case, it has prompted investigation of convergent evolution in cognition across distantly related species as a possible neural expression of latent

capacity. What began as a seminar designed to help undergraduates navigate a contested discourse has begun to generate the kind of dynamic Haleh Arbab describes in her essay, in which the Revelation functions both as a lens through which scientific findings can be read more fully and as a source of insights that go beyond what materialistic assumptions alone can yield.

Since 2021, the Climate and Environment Group has been exploring how its participants can become “active protagonists for sustainability, agents of change who promote the integration of spiritual values with scientific knowledge.” Two sources have proven particularly generative in grounding this aspiration. First, the Bahá'í International Community's *One Planet, One Habitation* articulates the conviction that “each of us enters the world as a trust of the whole” and that our choices must take into account the well-being of future generations—a framing that has helped participants situate their engagement within a vision of intergenerational responsibility. Second, the Universal House of Justice's 29 November 2017 letter on climate change grounds the work explicitly in justice, noting that those who do the least to cause climate change are most affected—a recognition that gives the group's outward engagement its moral urgency. Central to this aspiration is a shared analytical vocabulary the group has developed for reading environmental discourse, including an awareness of the frames through which environmental issues are perceived and

acted on. Participants recognize the importance of drawing on the best available expert syntheses, while acknowledging the evolving nature of scientific knowledge, as humanity navigates the dual challenges of mitigating the causes of climate change and adapting to its effects. Grounded in Bahá'í principles of justice, moderation, and the oneness of humanity, this framework allows participants to engage the discourse not merely as concerned observers but as informed contributors.

That same letter, moreover, has served as an important orienting reference, characterizing the 2015 Paris Accord as “a starting point for constructive thought and action that can be refined or revised on the basis of experience and new findings over time” and modelling the posture of principled, non-partisan engagement with a contested public discourse. The group has also learned that outward-looking engagement operates at multiple levels simultaneously. At the level of daily life, they share a range of practical actions, from home gardening and teaching children about recycling in their classes to career choices aligned with sustainability and engagement with local government on environmental policy. Here, the group draws on James Speth, founder of the World Resources Institute, who argued that the deepest environmental problems are not technical but moral, including selfishness, greed, and apathy. The Bahá'í teachings, participants in this group are finding, offer a viable framework for the spiritual and cultural transformation

these root causes require. At the level of discourse specifically, members have developed practices for conversation with family, co-workers, and co-volunteers that move beyond argument about scientific evidence toward exploring shared values and helping others overcome the anxiety or paralysis that the scale of the environmental crisis can produce. They are, moreover, learning to bring this conviction into the varied outward spaces in which they find themselves.

In the Advancing Organizations group, the most meaningful contributions have arisen from dialogue that brings together “observations from scientific advances, the Faith, and personal experience,” enabling participants to gradually learn “how to bring our professional thoughts, speech, and actions into coherence with the principles we espouse.” The group notes that people may initially adopt incentive structures that appeal primarily to self-interest, but “upon deeper introspection, they recognize that economic rewards are not the only (or even an effective) driver of individual performance.” Surfacing assumptions such as these through sustained dialogue, the group is finding, can itself be a meaningful contribution to the wider discourses in which they are engaged.

Alongside this, the Agriculture group anchors its outward engagement in both authoritative guidance and professional knowledge. Bahá'u'lláh characterized agriculture as the most important of the five principles “conducive to the advancement of mankind” in

the Tablet of the World. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, they observe, established the model farming community at Adasíyyih, which helped save Haifa residents from starvation during the First World War. This scriptural grounding gives the group’s outward engagement coherence, enriched by professional knowledge as expressed through its YouTube channel, its connections with the Berry Center in Kentucky, and its engagement with agricultural communities across North America, Kenya, and Uganda. The group’s thirty-four facilitated reading groups and fifty-two monthly online sessions to date, featuring leading experts in food production and agriculture, have built a body of shared learning that informs and continues to deepen their outward engagement.

The Health group’s experience further underscores the value of applying the lessons of the institute process to outward-looking engagement. From their earliest seminars, participants began discovering what such engagement could produce in their individual professional lives. One participant notes that the consultations during the seminar helped her formulate a research proposal for her graduate studies, ensuring that both her questions and methodology were inspired by the Revelation. Another reports having gained experience correlating concepts from the Revelation with the practice of medicine, learning to weave conversations about the nobility of the human soul into end-of-life care discussions with patients and families. When the group

subsequently incorporated the first unit of Book 14 into its 2023 seminar on health equity, participants experienced “identifying elements of our shared conceptual framework that are relevant to health care and analyzing the prevalent understanding of them in our health systems.” This proved so helpful that the group organized regional studies of Book 14 across Ontario, Alberta, and Arizona, making the study of the institute materials a central feature of its evolving approach. These examples suggest that outward-looking engagement is not only a collective aspiration but also finds greater expression in the daily professional practice of individual participants.

HELPING YOUNG ADULTS PARTICIPATE

The fourth object of learning is how to help young adults—in particular university students and recent graduates—view participating in professional and academic discourses as a core dimension of their service that is coherent with the imperatives of community-building and social action, the objectives of the training institute, and the programs of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity.

A significant development in recent years has been the offering of seminars for youth and young adults, both at the annual conference and increasingly at decentralized locations. These gatherings generally aim to help young people, especially undergraduates, navigate challenging

issues in the discourses of their fields. Between April and November 2025, the Association organized multi-seminar gatherings in five locations—Boston, Calgary, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Providence Point (Ottawa/Montreal)—bringing together 160 participants, predominantly youth and young adults. Each gathering offered two to four concurrent seminars, with attendance ranging from eleven in Calgary to fifty-four in Los Angeles. Beyond these multi-seminar gatherings, single decentralized seminars have taken place in several other locations across North America in the last two years, as well as at the annual conference.

These decentralized seminars represent the latest expression of a campus engagement tradition that extends back to the Association's founding mandate. The Campus Associations for Bahá'í Studies in Canada and college Bahá'í clubs in the United States strove to cultivate a Bahá'í scholarly presence on campuses by connecting students and faculty to the Association's broader intellectual life, organizing speaker tours, and encouraging systematic study. The current model extends that tradition. The Association is now exploring ways to build students' capacity to engage in the discourses of their own fields from a Bahá'í perspective—reflecting an evolving understanding of what intellectual capacity-building requires—an understanding that has been greatly strengthened in recent years by ISGP.

MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT

Four sets of materials focused on mental health, technology and society, economics, and evolution and consciousness—the latter two written specifically with students in mind—have been well received and are proving effective at fostering shared understanding of fundamental questions within these given discourses. The economics materials were the first to be developed and have since inspired the development of materials in other fields. They emerged from a decade of collaborative engagement with the economics discourse documented by Jordan van Rijn.⁴ This account traces the group's evolution from collective reading and reflection to the development of a heuristic for reading a discourse, and finally to the writing of a document specifically designed to help undergraduates understand Economics 101 principles through the lens of the Bahá'í conceptual framework. That seminar document, refined through use at the annual conference and in smaller settings, has become a prototype for a broader set of student-facing materials now being deployed across decentralized gatherings. It has thus shown how a sustained collaborative initiative, given sufficient time and accompaniment, can generate resources of lasting practical value. All such materials aim to model how to engage with a particular

4 See, "Learning to Sift," *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1-2, 2023.

discourse—clarifying its underlying assumptions and correlating insights from the Revelation with its key ideas by identifying similarities and differences—while also creating conditions for participants to think independently, consult freely, and begin to see themselves as potential contributors to the discourse rather than merely students of it.

The Economics group's account of how it developed these materials helps to illuminate what the process requires. Motivated by the observation that students "appear to become more selfish and less cooperative after studying economics," the group created its document "Engaging Introductory Economics" to help students "reflect on the assumptions and principles taught in introductory Economics 101 courses in light of the conceptual framework of the Bahá'í community." As such, the document encourages participants "to engage ideas in terms of their best possible interpretation and seek to understand their most noble aspirations," drawing on Bahá'u'lláh's admonition not "to view with too critical an eye the sayings and writings of men." The process is bidirectional. On the one hand, as Farzam Arbab has observed, it requires asking which of "our societies' cherished conceptions of human psyche, which elements of today's elaborate theories of social progress, which methods of education, which conceptions of work, wealth, love, justice, freedom and authority are

the playthings of childhood and infancy."⁵ On the other hand—and equally important—the group has found that, when approached with humility and openness, one can learn a great deal from the economics discourse, while not uncritically accepting some of the more limiting assumptions and conceptions present in the field. On the question of human nature, for instance, the group does not disagree with the characterization of the individual as self-interested and competitive, but considers it an incomplete picture. It is this spirit of sifting rather than dismissing that the materials reflect. The group maintained this collaborative work for six to seven years despite considerable competing demands on its members, motivated by the vision of "having a practical service component." They state that "there is something powerfully inspiring in having a concrete view of who we are serving and accompanying through our efforts, as opposed to simply engaging in an intellectual exercise."

The Evolution and Consciousness group, inspired by this model of materials development, developed materials on evolution and consciousness—two domains where scientific and spiritual perspectives are often presented as incompatible. Their two documents—one on evolution, one on consciousness—emerged from learning across several years of ABS spaces focused on science and religion, methodologies in science, and mind and consciousness,

and have been facilitated in fourteen locations to date. The conviction animating both documents is that students often face a false choice between creationist rejection and materialist acceptance of evolutionary science, and that the Bahá'í conceptual framework offers a coherent third path.

The challenge these materials address is not new. Haleh Arbab, for example, identified it a decade earlier, arguing that students who encounter strong materialistic worldviews at university struggle to maintain coherence between their religious convictions and their academic formation. Her proposed response is to enable students to take ownership of their education by reflecting on the conceptual framework that guides Bahá'í participation in discourses of society. This vision is informing how the Association and its different groups understand their role with young scholars. The materials being developed by these groups represent an effort to carry this work forward, helping students learn not to choose between rigorous academic engagement and Bahá'í conviction but to weave the two into productive interaction.

This work likewise reflects Farzam Arbab's observation that the intellectual life of the community depends on cultivating, at its grassroots, "a worldwide, intellectually and spiritually sound conversation" in which the learning is "profound but not so pointlessly difficult as to scare away most people," a culture that "allow[s] everyone to enter the conversation at

the most accessible levels and then build capacity for increasingly more complex thought."⁶ Paul Lample's essay reinforces this vision, noting that developing the habits and sensibilities needed for this kind of scholarship is a formation that begins early, deepens over a lifetime, and is collective in character, oriented not toward the expression of personal opinion but toward the shared pursuit of truth.

Guided by these principles, the Technology and Society group has been introducing concepts into its materials based on its engagement with the technology discourse in various reading groups and seminars, finding that "undergraduate students have engaged with these ideas with great openness, creating space for further consultation." In terms of designing the materials, the group underscores the importance of being in a mode of learning, and that "the generation of content unfolds not as an immediate outcome of reading but through a disciplined and collective process of reflection, consultation, and refinement, through which thought gradually attains clearer expression." The Health group has similarly begun asking, from within its renewed collaborative space, what concepts might be helpful for students "as they enter the field of health and before they are shaped by its dominant paradigms," leading to a first concept paper and ongoing refinement through seminar experience.

6 Farzam Arbab, "Intellectual Life" 17.

POINTS OF LEARNING

Several points of learning have emerged from this experience with seminars.

One concerns the nature and purpose of the seminars themselves. The Association has found it helpful to make explicit that these gatherings are not intended to present definitive Bahá'í positions on topics, but rather to serve as exploratory spaces that require active exchange and full participation. Participants have found them stimulating and relevant to their studies, and some have noted that they complement what they have been learning through ISGP programs. The Evolution and Consciousness group has contributed a related insight: when apparent contradictions arise during discussion, the group has learned to treat them as productive rather than threatening on the premise that truth cannot ultimately be contradictory, and that a seemingly unresolved tension, honestly named, is an invitation to deeper inquiry into a given aspect of reality.

Other points of learning concern recruitment, facilitator capacity building, and institutional coherence. Personal conversations and word of mouth through youth networks and ISGP alumni have proven more effective for recruiting to seminars than general announcements, with the invitation process itself becoming an avenue for conversation about the Association's purpose and a reminder that the relationships being cultivated among young adults are part of the

seminars' work. Pairing new facilitators with experienced co-facilitators in preparation sessions leading up to the gatherings has proven an effective approach to building facilitation capacity. Deliberate engagement with Auxiliary Board Members, Local Spiritual Assemblies, and, in some cases, university partners has proven equally essential to the success of the seminars, strengthening both the quality of the experience and institutional understanding of the Association's evolving role. In California, conversations with all twelve Auxiliary Board Members serving the Los Angeles and San Francisco areas helped spread the word and drew several Auxiliary Board Members and Local Spiritual Assembly representatives to Saturday evening reflections during the seminars, deepening relational bonds while enabling financial and logistical support. The experience in several locations also demonstrated the value of university partnerships in reducing organizational burden and supporting financial sustainability, suggesting a model worth building upon as the seminar network continues to expand.

As these seminars have multiplied and matured, a number of important questions have emerged for further consideration: how to help participants move from reading texts to reading society and discourse; how to adapt materials to serve participants of varying academic backgrounds while maintaining depth and rigor; what spaces and processes need to be put in place to help a widening network of individuals

learn to facilitate these seminars confidently; and how local seminars can catalyze the formation of reading groups, special interest groups, and other ongoing Association activities both online and more locally. Such questions have been the subject of consultation with Continental Counsellors, National Assembly members from both countries, and close collaborators, and are animating the Association's ongoing conversations about how its activities can best complement and strengthen the pattern of action taking place in communities across North America.

ADVANCING PUBLICATIONS

The fifth object of learning is how to assist a growing number of authors in publishing articles and books that contribute to the intellectual life of the community and to academic and professional discourses.

The editorial process for *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* has evolved considerably during the last thirteen years, becoming not only more rigorous and systematic, but also more collaborative and more characterized by a spirit of accompaniment. Two milestones within this period helped establish the model that the *Journal* has since been working to develop. The first was the volume *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition: Reflections on Bahá'í Practice and Thought* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018), edited by Geoffrey Cameron and Benjamin Schewel and published in collaboration with the Association. Although

not a *Journal* publication, the writing and publication of this book was a precedent-setting experience in which contributing authors met regularly to achieve coherence across their essays and assist one another in developing and refining their drafts. The discipline and quality of that collaborative process directly inspired the *Journal's* own subsequent experiments in collective scholarship.

The second milestone was the thematic issue on constructive resilience (vol. 30, no. 3, 2020), which brought together nine authors whose essays were the product of a self-organized collaborative process unfolding over three years. In his editorial commentary, Michael Sabet describes that issue as “one early milestone in learning about this kind of collaboration”—an experiment grounded in a particular conception of knowledge, which holds “that an elicitive and reflexive mode of engaging with ideas creates insights, elucidates questions that are obscure, and generates understanding.” The issue also introduced a broader stylistic range than the *Journal* had previously published, welcoming personal and introspective voices alongside traditionally academic ones on the grounds that “scholars who seek to share the knowledge generated by reflection on their own life experience must necessarily speak in a different voice from those studying phenomena outside themselves.”

Building on these precedents, the Editorial Committee is further expanding its role beyond soliciting and

receiving articles from individual authors to include supporting and accompanying collaborative writing projects emerging from sustained collective initiatives, such as long-term reading groups. Through such endeavors, authors approach a common topic from a range of perspectives and benefit from each other's insights as they develop their articles. A related development involves qualified peer reviewers consulting directly with authors on how to strengthen their submissions. This practice has proven a rich source of learning for all involved, with authors feeling supported and accompanied, and reviewers gaining experience in mentoring.

Volumes 33, no. 3 and 33 no. 4 (2023–24) represent a recent expression of what such a collaborative model can produce. These two issues were the fruit of a process spanning more than four years, in which a group of friends studied, consulted, wrote, and reflected together on the relationship between science, religion, and collaborative inquiry. In his editorial commentary on these issues, Sabet describes a process that illuminates what such scholarship can look like at its best. The spiritual quality at the genesis of the project, he writes, was love, including a shared love for the capacity of science and religion to investigate reality, expressed as deep curiosity and a desire to understand, which, in turn, deepened friendship and trust among the participants. That trust made honest feedback possible and allowed participants to share tentative understandings, unresolved

puzzles, and points where they were stuck. The group strove to work in a deliberate learning mode, beginning with abstracts that were each given focused consultative attention across two or three weekly meetings, and allowing topics to shift fluidly over time as they shared outlines, drafts, and reflections on their respective pieces. In this way, they aimed to deliberately apply the very insights they were gaining about Bahá'í consultation to the consultative dynamics of their own group. At later stages, the group convened two seminars to invite feedback from participants across a wide range of academic disciplines, ensuring diversity of perspective that helped to uncover elements of collective thinking that had been taken for granted. Sabet also notes that the constructive resilience issue had established an important precedent for this model, one that the science and religion issues were explicitly building upon, and that the Association hopes will be extended further as more collaborative initiatives find their way into print.

This emphasis on collaboration does not displace the individual scholarly voice. The *Journal* continues to welcome and actively encourage articles by single authors, and the accompaniment offered through the review process is designed to strengthen individual contributions as much as collective ones. What is shifting is not the value placed on individual scholarship but the recognition that collaborative and individual efforts are mutually enriching. Each makes the other more rigorous,

more expansive, and more deeply rooted in the life of the community. Over the period from 2023 to 2025, seven issues of the *Journal* were published, each reflecting the evolving range of both individual and collaborative efforts increasingly characteristic of the Association's scholarly work. Volume 35 no. 3 included a paper by a group of social scientists, "Aspirational Trends in Social Science Methodology"—a collaboratively written article that exemplifies the Association's efforts to cultivate a consultative approach to scholarship.

Other collaborative writing projects by various special interest groups are at various stages of development for future issues. This, along with the development of seminar materials, is proving vital to their learning process. As shared by the Technology and Society group, "producing written materials helps consolidate thought among collaborators and clarify ideas emerging from the discourse." They also state that "these materials [serve] as useful starting points for consultation, particularly in introducing such concepts into technical contexts where they are less commonly explored." This group has additionally published "Insights from the Discourse on Technology and Society" in *Bahá'í Canada*, opening the possibility for more groups to publish in venues beyond the *Journal* itself. Yet another form of publication is the Agriculture group's YouTube channel—with over 450 subscribers and more than fifty recorded presentations—which has created a durable

repository of accessible learning to complement the Association's formal spaces.

ABS Publications has similarly proceeded steadily on multiple fronts in recent years, further advancing the collaborative spirit animating the *Journal's* work. In 2020, Michael Karlberg's *Constructing Social Reality* was published. In 2022, John Hatcher's *The Body of God, A Study of Bahá'u'lláh's Súrih of the Temple*, appeared. In 2023, Nader Saiedi's *Gate of the Heart* was republished in softcover and e-book formats. In 2024, Kim MacQueen's *Visions of the Sacred: Conversations with Bahá'í Artists* was published, alongside republications of Saiedi's *Logos and Civilization* and June Manning Thomas's *Planning Progress: Lessons from Shoghi Effendi*, with a new preface by Todd Smith. In 2025, two further books appeared: *In Pursuit of a More Superb Mission*, a stand-alone version of Paul Lample's plenary address at the 2024 ABS annual conference, and *Revelation, Reality, and Reason: 'Alí-Murád Dávudí's Philosophical Discourses on the Foundations of Bahá'í Belief*, edited by Vargha Bolodo-Taefi.

This culture of publication reflects what Farzam Arbab envisioned when he called for "more and more talented Bahá'ís in each field" to "begin to collaborate with one another and together advance the frontiers of knowledge in their areas of expertise."⁷ It reflects

7 Farzam Arbab, "Intellectual Life" 9.

the strengthening of an already existing scholarly culture in which “the relationship created among those who walk the path of service is one of accompanying each other—not competing with each other, not managing each other, not manipulating each other, and not gaining power over each other,”⁸ making it easier to avoid the dangers of elitism. This culture, including the individual scholarly endeavors that both complement and help to sustain it, is ultimately in service of the following vision expressed by Shoghi Effendi: “The Cause needs more Bahá'í scholars, people who not only are devoted to it and believe in it and are anxious to tell others about it, but also who have a deep grasp of the Teachings and their significance, and who can correlate its beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world.”⁹ Each writing group, each thematic issue of the *Journal*, and each collaboratively developed seminar document is a step toward meeting that need.

INCORPORATING THE ARTS

The sixth object of learning is how to draw, where appropriate, on the arts as a means of disseminating knowledge and consolidating understanding. Artistic expressions, whether literary, visual, or musical, enable participants to engage with ideas through aesthetic and experiential modes that enrich and

enliven understanding, complementing analytical discussion and other forms of learning.

The arts have been present in the Association's work from the beginning, such as in the poetry included in the Bahá'í Studies Notebook series in the early 1980s and, more recently, in every issue of the *Journal*, the professional interest seminar on the arts established in 1985, the Arts Special Interest Group that sustained an ongoing conversation about artistic practice and Bahá'í scholarly life across many conferences, and in publications such as *Crystallizations: 20 Works by Bahá'í Artists* in 1996. More recently, this publishing tradition has continued with works such as Kim MacQueen's *Visions of the Sacred*, which brings together a diverse range of artistic voices that explore the relationship between spiritual principles and artistic expression.

Based on the learning generated in various consultative spaces, three connected areas of inquiry have recently been identified: first, how the arts can be more effectively integrated into various Association spaces; second, what artists themselves are learning regarding advancing discourses about the arts; and third, how the arts can play a direct role in disseminating learning pertaining to various discourses. Recognition of this contribution is growing across reading groups, seminars, working groups, and the annual conference itself. Reading groups have taken up a widening range of themes at the intersection of the arts, knowledge,

8 Farzam Arbab, “Intellectual Life” 18.

9 Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Bahá'í Scholarship* ¶13.

and community life—exploring speculative fiction, narrative and ethics, storytelling and cinema, music, media, and creativity—as well as texts that directly address the role of the arts in community building, examining, for example, how the arts can be integrated into teaching and social outreach, study circles, devotional programs, children’s classes, youth activities, and the Nineteen Day Feast. Other groups have explored the relationship between science and art as complementary dimensions of human capacity, understood in light of the teachings of the Faith. This framing has significant implications for how participants understand themselves and the communities they serve. The conviction animating much of this exploration is captured in the words of the Universal House of Justice: “Access to knowledge is the right of every human being, and participation in its generation, application and diffusion a responsibility that all must shoulder.”¹⁰

Several seminars have, moreover, been organized to explore how artistic expression can deepen contributions to discourse. Through reading, discussion, and artmaking, participants have worked to better understand the spiritual nature and powers of the arts and to develop basic skills for channeling their vitality into the activities of community life. These seminars understand artistic engagement as integral to intellectual inquiry, and specifically as a vital means of accessing dimensions

of understanding that purely conceptual approaches cannot reach. Spaces have also been created for facilitators to share learning about incorporating the arts into their reading groups and seminars.

The Indigenous Studies group offers an example of this integration in practice. Participants in this group have come to see art as a vehicle for learning and deepening understanding, finding that artistic forms—whether visual, narrative, or performative—have the capacity to convey experience, memory, and meaning in ways that open additional pathways of perception and empathy, allowing participants to engage more fully with the realities being explored and to approach questions of reconciliation with greater sensitivity and insight. Discussing works of fiction and narrative grounded in experience generates thoughtful, sensitive, and respectful engagement from group participants, each ready to listen and learn, suggesting that storytelling is a powerful tool for transcending differences and widening the circle of participation. The group’s engagement with art has encompassed an examination of metaphor, imagination, and the cultural dimensions of artistic expression. They also share that, through movement, participants have explored the concept of reciprocity; through short skits, key concepts have been embodied and communicated in ways that verbal explanation alone could not. A virtual seminar they have held on reconciliation has been further enriched by a series of three- to five-minute artistic

presentations—including poetry, quilt art, paintings, visual art, and short films—that explored the meaning of reconciliation. These creative expressions have demonstrated how art can serve as a means of inquiry, reflection, dialogue, and collective understanding.

Another practice taken up within some Association spaces is PhotoSophia (drawing on the Greek roots of light and wisdom, and created by Chuck Egerton for his doctoral research), employed by the Whiteness and Patriarchy reading group, whose work centers on dismantling inherent patterns of racism and sexism. This art form uses a photographic self-portrait and combines sacred long-looking with arts-centered inquiry and deep heart-searching as a form of intentional self-reflection. Grounded in Bahá'u'lláh's admonition that "true loss is for him whose days have been spent in utter ignorance of his self,"¹¹ the practice invites participants to bring themselves to account and consider how willful ignorance becomes a serious obstacle to overcoming ingrained patterns of racism and sexism in community-building efforts. Used with adults, youth, and children in communities around the world, PhotoSophia creates conditions that help participants foster a humble posture of learning. It reflects a growing recognition of the arts, at their most generative; not only a means of communicating insight but as a sacred practice. It cultivates inner transformation—develops

attentiveness, honesty, vulnerability, and an openness to change—without which sincere collective inquiry cannot take root.

The annual arts seminar at the conference, organized by the Arts group, has become an increasingly important occasion for this learning. Building on the momentum of the seminars held in the previous two years, its various reading groups, and its monthly online reflection spaces, the 2025 Calgary seminar drew participants into workshops on visual, literary, musical, theatrical, and textile arts, with an emphasis on Indigenous art and the full participation of those who did not consider themselves practicing artists. Participants described the experience as enriching, uplifting, and empowering, a space where trust developed quickly, with the arts becoming a genuine means of collective inquiry. The aspiration is to deepen this integration throughout the conference as a whole, enhancing artistic expression in devotions, plenary sessions, and breakout spaces, so that it becomes a living thread running through the entire gathering, coherent with and enriching the Association's intellectual life in this setting.

The Arts group, moreover, sustains a range of interconnected activities: periodic reading groups, monthly online reflection spaces, seminars connected to the annual conference, special interest group meetings, and connections with other initiatives, including writing groups and other artistic collectives. Its reading groups have explored

11 Bahá'u'lláh, *Aṣḥ-i-Kullu'l-Khayr*.

the concept of art as active spirituality—the idea that creating is akin to worship—as well as how the arts serve as tools for healing, personal growth, and unlocking creativity. Discussions have emphasized the importance of knowledge, skill, and the pursuit of excellence, and have considered how the arts connect minds, hearts, and souls. Participants have also reflected on methods for promoting personal, educational, and community transformation through artistic practice, and on how to draw on the arts across the full range of ongoing activities in community life. A recurring theme in the group’s conversations has been the coming era and the role the arts will play in it, inspired in particular by Shoghi Effendi’s statements on the connection between the development of the arts and the flourishing of Bahá’í culture. The relationship among these various spaces, and how learning generated in each can more deliberately strengthen the others, remains an active area of attention.

In general, what animates this group and the object of learning more generally is the conviction, expressed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and central to Bahá’í understanding, that the arts are not ornamental but civilizational. They are among the primary means by which the truths that animate the human spirit are made accessible, memorable, and transformative. As such, the Association continues to explore what it means to weave them into the full fabric of its work.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

A number of additional insights are worth highlighting, all of which align closely with the previous essay in this issue on the Association’s approach to learning.

The first is that learning in action constitutes an essential mode of inquiry. The Advancing Organizations group has found that “the central question is not primarily how to generate or disseminate new ideas, but how to cultivate the capacity to learn in action.” The Economics group has sustained its collaborative work for six to seven years, not because its members achieved clarity before acting, but because they embraced action as a means of generating clarity when reflecting. The Technology and Society group has found that “reflection and action remain integrated within a coherent process of learning.” The Health group’s most significant advances have come from focused collaborative initiatives in which a smaller group of friends has been “reflecting and learning together, participating in conferences and, in some cases, writing together.” The consciousness portion of the Evolution and Consciousness group’s seminar materials has itself been transformed through the process of facilitation: what began as a largely critical analysis of physicalist neuroscience evolved, through successive iterations and participant feedback, into an exploration of how consciousness matures socially, through language, consultation, and participation in communities

oriented toward truth. The Climate and Environment group has found a parallel dynamic, with participants gradually integrating spiritual values and scientific knowledge through direct engagement in the professional and civic spaces they inhabit. Participants note that sustainable technologies are increasingly cost-effective, creating real openings for principled engagement—and that when spiritual conviction and scientific literacy are developed together in sustained collaborative spaces, participants find themselves equipped to contribute not only to the group's internal learning but to these wider spaces as active protagonists.

The second insight is the role of humility as a governing disposition. The Economics group is learning to approach the discourse “in a spirit of open-mindedness and loving sympathy,” drawing on Bahá'u'lláh's admonition not “to view with too critical an eye the sayings and writings of men.” The Technology and Society group is cultivating “the discipline of striving first to understand the basic meaning intended by an author” and resisting the tendency to approach ideas “as positions to be accepted or rejected wholesale, as though one were joining a camp, but rather to sift through them with a posture of humility and discernment.” As Razavi observes, what protects participants from both dogmatic religious assertion and uncritical assent to every claim advanced within a discourse is the capacity to “weigh knowledge in the balance of spiritual principles”—a standpoint that allows

one to “recognize and adopt valid and insightful ideas whatever their source, without prejudice.” The Indigenous Studies group is coming to understand scholarship itself as “a process of sincere collective learning that integrates intellectual exploration with humility, openness, and a willingness to be transformed through shared insights.” The Evolution and Consciousness group is discovering a related form of humility in its facilitation work, finding that seminar participants who arrive with strongly held positions—whether creationist or materialist—are best served not by being corrected but by exploring their ideas in relationship to a conceptual framework that offers points of unity and ways of transcending false dichotomies.

Closely related to this posture is, third, what the Advancing Organizations group identifies as the role of love as a governing principle in discourse. In environments where organizational challenges are often approached in an adversarial manner, the group is learning that “when contributions are grounded in a sincere desire to serve—to uplift colleagues, to strengthen institutions, and to contribute to the betterment of society—the tone and quality of discourse changes markedly.” This does not mean avoiding difficult truths, but rather approaching them “in a way that invites participation and builds capacity, rather than diminishing it.” The posture of love, in other words, is the primary condition under which mutually beneficial inquiry becomes possible. The Universal House of

Justice affirmed in its letter 23 March 1983 that the great advances in Bahá'í scholarship will come from those who, "while well versed in their subjects and adhering to the principles of research, are also thoroughly imbued with love for the Faith and the determination to grow in the comprehension of its teachings." This includes the disposition to impart divine love in every space, doing so in a manner that is both intellectually rigorous and outward-looking.

The fourth insight is the significance of accompaniment. The groups in this essay link the sustainability of their efforts with this essential feature of the conceptual framework. The image of "diving together" used by the Public Health group evokes not only the support that comes from shared endeavor but the particular quality of attention and trust that sustained accompaniment makes possible. The Health group has similarly found that its most generative moments have emerged from the companionship of a smaller circle of friends thinking together over time, a pattern that has proven essential to the development of its emerging framework on health. The Agriculture group has been building a body of work across its reading groups and online sessions, sustained by both individual initiative and group encouragement and planning. The Technology and Society group's systematic approach to coordination reflects the same understanding: that sustained learning requires collaborative planning and reflection animated by the right spirit. The Arts group has similarly found a related dynamic in its

own spaces: that the trust and vulnerability required for artistic inquiry, and for the more profound forms of reflection it makes possible, develop through companionship rather than simply in isolated encounters. Its monthly online reflection spaces, reading groups, and annual seminar together form a continuing environment in which participants regularly return to one another, building the kind of shared attentiveness that allows art to function not merely as expression but as a mode of fostering collective understanding.

The Social Sciences group's experience takes this insight further still. Participants describe how the continuity of their shared space has shaped not only what they think but how they think—finding themselves continuing to make connections between sessions, returning to the same sources with fresh eyes, and discovering, through what each person brings from their own discipline and experience, convergences they could not have anticipated alone. Emerging from this kind of regular accompaniment is not merely a fuller grasp of a given discourse but, reciprocally, an enriched relationship with elements of the Revelation itself, whose teachings participants find illuminated in new and unexpected ways through the very process of correlation and shared reflection. This quality of mutual illumination is among the most significant fruits of the culture of learning the Association is working to cultivate.

None of these groups has reached a final understanding. As the Advancing

Organizations group writes, they are “on the journey toward something more demanding and more hopeful: a way of working, grounded in spiritual principles and expressed through collective inquiry, that enables individuals and groups to contribute, however modestly, to the ongoing transformation” of the discourses they are exploring. This description applies equally to every group in these pages. The Climate and Environment group’s participants are finding that integrating spiritual conviction and scientific literacy opens avenues of insight that a purely technical framing would foreclose. The Evolution and Consciousness group similarly finds that systematic interaction with evolutionary theory, refined through years of collective reflection, gradually sharpens participants’ capacity to bring Bahá’í perspectives on human nature and consciousness into constructive dialogue with the discourse.

Overall, the capacity being built is both scholarly and relational, involving a growing ability to tend to the conditions under which collaborative discovery can take root, deepen, and bear fruit over time. Across all of these groups, what is coalescing is not simply a set of practices but a shared mode of being and doing, so essential to scholarship and the intellectual life of the community—one that is increasingly demonstrating, in academic, professional, and other settings, that the approach to learning the Bahá’í community has been developing through its Plans can generate profoundly

beneficial contributions to the prevalent discourses of society.

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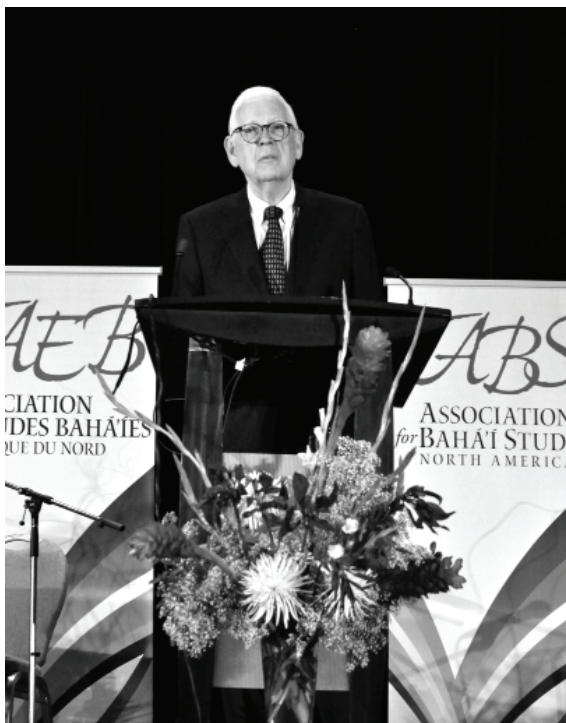
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Attendees of the Health Seminar study together
at the 48th annual conference, Atlanta, Georgia, 2024



Ninth annual conference, Ottawa, Ontario, 1984.
William S. Hatcher presented a paper on behalf of Shapour Rassekh



Douglas Martin presenting "A Hundred Years On,"
plenary address at the 36th annual conference, Montreal, Quebec, 2012