

By Scott H. Knecht
Seminaries and Institutes

Asking the Right **Questions** in the Right Way

Learning how to prepare for, create, ask, and respond to questions can make all the difference in how you learn and teach the gospel.

There are a lot of things that can go into creating a great lesson or a great family conversation. Activities, silent study, and working with groups are a few of the tools that gospel teachers—whether it be those with formal callings, volunteer seminary or institute teachers, or parents—might use to enhance their teaching.

But included in the top two or three necessary skills that all teachers should possess is the ability to work well with questions: to create them, to ask them, and to encourage meaningful responses. President Henry B. Eyring, First Counselor in the First Presidency, said, “To ask and to answer questions is at the heart of all learning and all teaching.”¹ To be an effective teacher, it is imperative to acquire this skill. Here are five suggestions for doing just that.

Seek the Most Effective Responses

Sitting in a class as a learner and hearing a great question reminds us of the power of excellent teaching. But how to create and ask

effective questions is puzzling and may look daunting to many teachers. Fortunately, it is a skill any teacher can learn.

As you create questions, try to determine what type of response the question will elicit. Some questions seek a specific type of response—one that corresponds exactly to the question asked. Those questions work well in a math class (“What is the area of this square?”) or in a science class (“At what temperature does water boil?”) because there is only one discoverable and verifiable answer. They are also useful in gospel study as a way to get the facts in place to begin a discussion but do little to fuel discussion. In general, however, those kinds of questions are used the most because they are easy to prepare.

We ask things like, “What did we study last time?” or “Tell me the name of . . .” These questions often cause those you teach to freeze up. They think they know the answer but aren’t sure and so are afraid to venture a guess. The teacher often interprets this silence as a sign that the question was



too hard, when in reality the question is too basic to elicit anything more meaningful from learners than a quick answer.

In order to generate classroom discussion, a much more useful question is one that invites a variety of thoughtful responses. When you ask this kind of question, you can find out what those you ask are thinking about the subject or what they are puzzling over during your discussion. For example, Moroni chapter 1 contains four verses, each full of deep feeling. What would happen if you read all four verses with those you're teaching and then asked, "Which of those verses causes the deepest feelings inside of you?" Give them a minute to start talking. Since you are not asking for a specific response, almost anything they say is useable. I've used that very chapter with that very question and received some incredible responses that generated deep discussions.

Those are the types of questions that invite thinking and feeling as opposed to questions that require recall or simply a statement of facts. There is a time and place for recall, but the teacher can say much of

what needs to be recalled, as in, "Remember that last time we talked about Moroni 1 and how each verse contains some powerful lessons . . ." Just by my saying that, it will stir up thoughts, and learners will be more likely to jump in and continue the discussion. However, if I say, "What did we talk about last time?" I will usually be met with silence and shrugs.

Ask the Second Question

A common question used by gospel teachers is some variation of this: "So how important is faith in your life?" At first glance that sounds like a meaningful inquiry, but if you think about it, there is only one answer: "Very important." Of course, faith (and any other gospel principle) *is* very important, but that type of question generally leads nowhere by itself because you still have to ask the follow-up question, which is something like: "Why is it so important?" or "Will you give us an example of when it

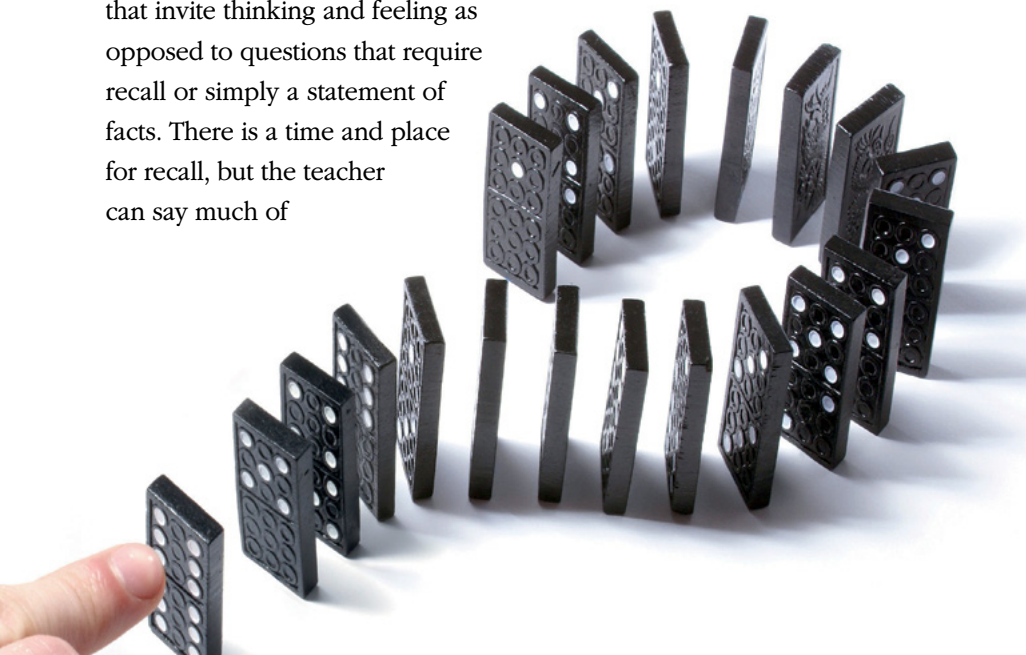
was important in your life?" Those questions can get things going in class, so go right to them and skip the first question. Asking the second question first will save time and keep the discussion moving better.

Write Your Questions Beforehand

It is very helpful to do two things as you prepare your lesson. First, write the question out. Don't just think of it; write it. Choose words carefully and read them over a few times to make sure that the question asks what you want it to ask in a clear way.

Second, ask yourself, what will those I teach do when I ask that question? There have been times when I thought I had a really good question written, then I said it out loud, and as I pictured my class, I knew it would fall flat. The question may have worked for a different class, but for my particular class I knew it would fail, so I started over. I know that if I have two or three really well-thought-out and well-written questions in my lesson plan, I can start conversations. Other questions will naturally follow, but I need well-crafted starting points.

This technique works just as well at home. We seem to have a lot of spontaneous gospel discussions in my home when the questions and answers flow, but there have been times when something more serious and direct needed to be said to a particular child. In those cases I learned that if I prepared specific questions, practiced my delivery



of them, and worked through scenarios of possible outcomes, things went a lot better. Those questions weren't written on paper; they were written in my heart, and I could use them as needed.

Don't Be Afraid of Silence

If you've created a really good question, one that causes thought and allows for some latitude in response, then don't be surprised if it takes people a few seconds to come up with their answers. There could be silence, but don't be alarmed. Surface questions—the ones that only require certain answers (e.g., "How many Articles of Faith are there?")—get answered quickly. Deep questions—those that require responses—often need time to simmer in a learner's mind. In this case, silence is your friend. Let it happen, and when those you are teaching begin to respond, you will be pleasantly surprised at what they come up with.

Ask Questions about the Scriptures

If you truly want to enhance your ability to create and ask effective questions, you need to learn to ask great questions about the scriptures during your study and preparation time.

One way to approach scripture reading is to do it for personal inspiration. We read chapters and verses to enjoy the beauty found therein and to be edified with doctrine and truth. A different approach, which works better for parents or teachers preparing

lessons, is to read the scriptures and probe the scriptures with questions. I do this to stimulate thought as I'm trying to decide how best to help those I teach to understand the scriptures. Here is an example: Doctrine and Covenants 18:10 contains a phrase that is well known and lifts our spirits, "Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God." I love that thought, but if all it is to me is inspirational, then it is not as useful in a class.

What if I pondered this question as I studied and prepared: "So what is the worth of a soul? I know it is great, but can we put a value on it?" One night at dinner one of my daughters asked that very question, and it stimulated a lot of discussion. This is where we ended up: The worth of a soul is what someone will pay for it, and what did our Father pay for our souls? He paid with the blood of His perfect Son. That makes each soul valuable beyond description. We would not have arrived at that conclusion without the question directed to the text itself.

That dinner table conversation could easily be replicated in other teaching settings. If you want to ask better questions of those you teach, ask real questions about the scriptures as you read and study and prepare. Be full of wonder and don't be afraid to probe. The scriptures can always hold up to increased scrutiny. The better you become at asking questions about the scriptures while you study, the better you will become at asking those same great questions of those you teach.

Continue to Develop Your Teaching Ability

There is a tendency to look at great teachers and think that they were just born that way. They appear to have a gift that would be difficult for the average person to acquire. Of course, the ability to teach is one of the gifts of the Spirit (see Moroni 10:9–10), so some of the skill you are seeing may be a gift from heaven—but it's a gift open to all who seek it. So much of what great teachers do is available to you also through study and practice. Learning to ask effective questions is such a skill. As you prayerfully seek the ability to do that, you will find that there is great worth in creating questions that stir those you teach into thinking, and your ability to do that very thing will increase. ■
The author lives in California, USA.

NOTE

1. Henry B. Eyring, "The Lord Will Multiply the Harvest" (satellite broadcast address to religious educators in the Church Educational System, Feb. 6, 1998), 5–6.

