

CONDUCTING A WELL-TUNED

# Group Discussion




By Dustin West

Seminaries and Institutes

**W**hen you lead a gospel discussion, it might be helpful to think of yourself as a conductor of an orchestra. Those you are teaching are not the audience listening to the concert. They are in the orchestra, playing their parts to create music. The conductor coordinates the musicians, brings out the best in each, and helps their music become an inspiring work of art.

Meaningful gospel discussions can be like beautiful music. A good discussion results in a deeper understanding of the doctrines of the gospel being discussed as well as a genuine desire to apply gospel truths.



*Meaningful gospel discussions can be like conducting beautiful music. One of the teacher's key roles is to direct the discussion so learners have the opportunity to feel the Spirit and discover truths for themselves.*

Here are several principles that will improve the discussions you lead:

**Teach people, not lessons.** Those you teach will be more willing to participate in discussions when they feel that you care more about them than getting through the lesson. Learners want to feel that you have prepared yourself to fortify and increase their faith in the Lord, rather than just present facts. Learners who feel loved by their teacher and by other class members will be more willing to share insights and experiences.

**Invite inspiration.** Time together is an opportunity for you and those you teach to receive revelation, not just a chance for you to share what you know. One of the teacher's key roles is to direct the discussion so learners have the opportunity to feel the Spirit and discover truths for themselves. When revelation flows, all are edified—both teacher and learners—and rejoice together (see D&C 50:22). You can know that your discussions are edifying when you are learning from the Spirit as well as teaching by the Spirit.

#### TO THE TEACHER: "CAN I FIT IT ALL IN?"

**T**he lesson materials, the chapters of scripture, the insights you gained as you studied—it's all so good, but your hours of study often can't be replicated in a designated period of time. Your task is not to share all you learned but to direct the class time in such a way that learners discover truths for themselves—much as you did in your own preparation. Pray for help, and the Holy Ghost will teach you what to focus on. As you focus on a few truths, you can allow for a more meaningful discussion that penetrates deeper into the hearts of those you teach.

**Invite all to participate.** Participating does not necessarily mean that everyone has to answer a question out loud. Some prefer to participate simply by listening or by taking notes. Others are willing to share their thoughts as long as they have time to ponder and prepare. You might consider contacting a few of those you teach ahead of time and asking them to come prepared to share their thoughts on a particular topic.

There are several other ways to help learners participate in the discussion. For example, you could:

- Ask them to ponder how they would answer a question before you ask for responses.
- Ask them to write their answers on a piece of paper. Then you could ask a few of them to share their responses with others.
- Invite them to respond to questions with someone sitting next to them or in small groups.

Sometimes you may have a member of the group who dominates the discussion. If this happens, you could say something like, “Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t

shared yet.” In some cases it may be necessary to speak to this person privately to thank him or her for sharing and to explain the importance of encouraging other participants to share.

**Don’t be afraid of silence.** Silence may feel like a lull in your discussion, but for learners it can be valuable pondering time.

**Ask meaningful questions.** Ask questions that encourage learners to think deeply about the meaning of scripture passages and gospel principles. As you prepare your lesson, think of questions that will help those you teach understand and apply the truths they learn. A few well-phrased questions can make a great difference.

**Listen carefully.** Often teachers are so worried about what they are going to say next that they don’t listen carefully to comments. If you sincerely listen to those you teach, they will feel valued and be more likely to participate. President Thomas S. Monson stated: “[Everyone] has a story waiting to be told. Listening is an essential element as we teach and as we learn” (“Examples of Great Teachers,” *Ensign*, June 2007, 108; *Liahona*, June 2007, 76).



**Learners who feel loved by their teacher and by other class members will be more willing to share insights and experiences.**

**Ask follow-up questions.** When learners share insights and experiences, you might sense that they have more to share. Consider asking follow-up questions such as these: What about that is important to you? When have you seen this in your life? What does this mean for us today? Who else has something to say about this? Who has a related thought that they would like to share? What other scripture passages teach this truth?

**Acknowledge responses.** When someone gives a response, it needs to be acknowledged in some way. This can be done by making an appreciative comment about the response or by asking a follow-up question.

**Keep the doctrine pure.** Remember that the primary goal of teaching the gospel is not just to have a good discussion.

Rather, it is to learn the doctrine so that our hearts can be changed and we can be converted. During the discussion, part of your responsibility is to ensure that true doctrine is being taught.

If someone shares something that is doctrinally incorrect, you have the responsibility to state the doctrine correctly. You could build on a correct portion of the answer, share a scripture or teaching from general conference, or bear your testimony.

Using these ideas, you can have some great gospel discussions. You won't be using discussions just to pass the time. You can lead effective discussions so that learners will receive personal revelation, develop unity with each other, and deepen their understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. ■

## TO THE LEARNER: YOUR VOICE MATTERS

Having a good discussion about the gospel is a responsibility you share with the teacher. Here are some situations you may have wondered about:

*I have something to say, but my teacher hasn't asked for comments. Should I interrupt?*

You might wait for an appropriate moment to catch the teacher's eye and signal your willingness to contribute. If you feel inspired to share, do your best to act on that prompting.

*I'm not sure my comments are valuable, so should I really raise my hand?*

You have a perspective and experiences that others may not have. As you prepare for class, you gain personal insights that could be a blessing to other learners.

Elder Richard G. Scott (1928–2015) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught that when we raise our hands during a gospel discussion, we “signify to the Holy Ghost [our] willingness to learn.” So if your comments are appropriate to

the topic and the time allows, you can share them. Elder Scott explained, “Participation allows individuals to *experience* being led by the Spirit” (“To Learn and to Teach More Effectively” [Brigham Young University Education Week devotional, Aug. 21, 2007], 5, speeches.byu.edu).

*I'm scared to talk in front of so many people. What do I do?*

As you work to overcome this fear, you might start small. Try volunteering to read a scripture or a quote. Then look for opportunities to answer questions or to share insights. As you demonstrate your willingness to participate, you will be blessed with the courage to speak and the words to say. When we “open [our] mouths,” we find that “they shall be filled” (D&C 33:10).

If you find it easy to comment, you may want to ask yourself if, rather than sharing your own thoughts again, there's a way for you to encourage one of your fellow learners to comment.