

# Questions,



BY BRIAN GUDMUNDSON

*Teachers, what do your students say when they leave your classroom?*

“**I** sure enjoy going to class. I learn something every time I attend, and I always feel the Spirit.” Or, “I’m so glad to be out of there. It’s so boring. The teacher does all the talking.”

Learning the art of teaching can be a challenge, but Doctrine and Covenants 88:122 outlines several principles that can help you become a more effective teacher and change the lives of your students: “Appoint among yourselves a teacher, and let not *all* be spokesmen at once; but let one speak at a time and let *all* listen unto his sayings, that when *all* have spoken that *all* may be edified of *all*, and that every man may have an equal privilege” (emphasis added). According to this verse, learning is enhanced and class members are edified when they have the opportunity to participate, and one of the best ways teachers can help class members participate is by asking questions that encourage students to think, feel, and share.

## THE HEART OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

### Asking Questions

Speaking to religious educators in the Church, President Henry B. Eyring, then of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, said:

“To ask and answer questions is at the heart of all learning and teaching. The Master asked, answered, and sometimes chose not to answer questions in his ministry. . . .

“Some questions invite inspiration. Great teachers ask those. That may take just a small change of words, an inflection of the voice. Here is a question that might not invite inspiration: ‘How is a true prophet recognized?’ That question invites an answer which is a list, drawn from memory, of the scriptures and the words of living prophets. . . .

“But we could ask the question this way, with just a small difference: ‘When have you felt you were in the presence of a prophet?’ That will invite individuals to search their





prepared questions. This will allow the Spirit to have a greater influence on each person. The principles taught *by the Spirit* during these discovery experiences will be tailored to the specific needs and spiritual level of each student. The lessons you will teach will then change the hearts, minds, and lives of Heavenly Father’s children.

The following suggestions will aid you in formulating great questions for your lessons.

**Questions to Avoid**

1. Yes/No questions. (Will prayer help us develop faith?)
2. Questions that require only one- or two-word answers. (Which principle of the gospel is faith?)
3. Questions with obvious answers. (Is faith in Jesus Christ an important principle of the gospel?)
4. Clichéd questions. (How can we use faith in our daily lives?)
5. Controversial questions. (Have you ever lived contrary to the prophet’s counsel and been blessed in your actions?)

**Productive Questions**

Asking questions which cause students to think, feel, and share leads to discussions which give students the opportunity to be edified and to edify one another. This can be accomplished by using a series of search, analysis, and application questions.

*1. Search questions.* These questions help students discover facts, understand a scriptural story line, or grasp basic doctrine. They help students focus on the particular text being studied and provide the foundation for deeper gospel questions. For a question to qualify as a search question, the answer to the question must be found in the material being studied. Using Doctrine and Covenants 88:122 as our text, search questions might include:

- How many times does the word *all* appear in this verse?
- What are two things each class member is supposed to do?
- What is the promise when *all* participate?

Search questions may also be reworded to form “look for” *statements* given to the class just prior to reading the text. For example, “As we read this verse, *look for* how many times the word *all* appears.” This simple activity focuses students on what will be discussed and adds purpose and meaning as the text is being read.

**A**s you give students time to ponder your questions, the Spirit will witness to them, and they will feel prompted to share their impressions with the class.

memories for feelings. After asking, we might wait for a moment before calling on someone to respond. Even those who do not speak will be thinking of spiritual experiences. That will invite the Holy Ghost.”<sup>1</sup>

Elder Gene R. Cook, formerly of the Seventy, has also counseled us on the role of a teacher in the classroom. He said: “*The major role of a teacher is to prepare the way so that the [students] will have a spiritual experience with the Lord. . . . All true gospel teaching is done by the Holy Ghost. . . . We must be careful not to get in the way. . . . The most important thing a teacher can do is to help the student feel the Spirit of the Lord.*”<sup>2</sup>

How much should students participate in class? A teacher who takes up most of the class time speaking is likely talking too much. In many lessons, student participation can fill about half of the lesson time.<sup>3</sup>

With the focus of helping students participate and feel the Spirit, much of your lesson preparation should be devoted to developing inspired questions that will help your students *discover* gospel principles *for themselves*. Using carefully worded questions, you can guide your students through a discovery experience, which will have far greater effect than a lecture experience, in which a teacher dumps information on students. When you do this, students will move from being idle listeners to active participants as they search their hearts for answers to prayerfully


2. *Analysis questions.* These questions should build on the information found from asking search questions. They help students discover a deeper level of understanding beyond the facts or story line and help them to think about and ponder the principles being taught. These questions may explore what the characters were feeling or how the principles in the scripture passage relate to other gospel principles. Analysis questions for Doctrine and Covenants 88:122 might include:

- According to this verse, how does a teacher’s role differ from that of the students?
- *How* are class members being edified?
- What does the word *privilege* mean to you in the context of this verse?

3. *Application questions.* These questions build on the information discussed from the analysis questions and should help students apply what they have learned *to their own lives*. Responses to application questions may differ considerably from student to student as the Spirit whispers to the heart of each individual according to his or her needs and spiritual level. Remember, the Spirit is doing the real teaching in your classroom. Application questions for Doctrine and Covenants 88:122 might include:

- What do you feel is being taught in this verse?
- How can you invite the Spirit into your classroom by asking questions?
- What can you do to ensure that each student has an *equal privilege* to speak during your lessons?

4. *Questions that lead to testifying of truth.* Application questions which draw on past experiences of students are particularly powerful. These questions encourage students to bear witness of ways the principle being taught has *already* affected their lives. As they ponder these questions, students will come to recognize times when they have experienced the Lord’s hand in their own lives. These are spiritual experiences that will invite the Holy Ghost. As your students share their experiences, the Spirit will testify to the other students the truthfulness of the principle being taught, and thus “all may



## HELPS FOR HOME EVENING

Consider having each family member create and share a short lesson using the ideas in this article. This could be accomplished by:

1. Selecting a small scripture block and teaching a simple lesson using the three types of questions discussed in the article.
2. Discussing with family members the questions you used and how they worked in the lesson.
3. Inviting family members to plan and teach their own lesson using the same questioning ideas.

Give encouragement and help to family members during their lesson preparation. Praise them after they finish teaching.

be edified of all.” In sharing, class members also become more committed to living the principle about which they are testifying. Examples of these kinds of questions for Doctrine and Covenants 88:122 might include:

- When have you felt the Spirit as you have participated in a classroom discussion?
- How has hearing the testimony of another class member strengthened your ability to live the gospel?
- When have you witnessed the blessing of “all being edified of all” during a classroom discussion?

### Getting Your Class to Participate

If your class is not accustomed to participating, you will need to be patient after asking a question and wait for your students to respond. The silence may feel uncomfortable at first, but don’t give in. As you give students time to ponder your questions, the Spirit will witness to them, and they will feel prompted to share their impressions with the class. It is also important that when students do respond, you acknowledge each one’s comments in a kind and loving manner, which will encourage more participation. You might use phrases that compliment and encourage each student who participates, such as “Thank you for sharing that with us,” “Thank you for going first,” “That’s a very good point,” “I hadn’t thought of that,” and so forth. As you actively listen to your students’ responses and then sincerely acknowledge each one, you will create an environment in which even those who are timid or new to the gospel will begin to participate.

Wherever you are in your development as a teacher, if you are open to the inspiration of the Spirit, Heavenly Father will help you grow in your capacity to teach. As you reflect on the principles taught here, you will feel the promptings of the Spirit instructing you on how to apply these principles in your teaching. Remember, the Spirit is the real teacher and will instruct us individually according to our needs. ■

#### NOTES

1. *The Lord Will Multiply the Harvest* (satellite broadcast address to religious educators in the Church Educational System, Feb. 6, 1998), 5–6.
2. *Teaching by the Spirit* (2000), 12, 15; emphasis in original.
3. See Jonn D. Claybaugh and Amber Barlow Dahl, “Increasing Participation in Lessons,” *Ensign*, Mar. 2001, 34.