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Scott H. Knecht

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Photo by Cathy Yeulet

A Great Question Is Just the Beginning

SCOTT H. KNECHT

Scott H. Knecht (knectsh@ldschurch.org) is the Seminaries and Institutes area director for the California South Area.

In his book *Living a Life That Matters*, Harold Kushner explains that relatives of crime victims are allowed in the American legal system to make a victim impact statement. This oral statement is made in court after a guilty verdict and before sentencing, and it allows the relatives to speak of the impact of the crime on their family. He states, “The intended purpose was to assist judges and juries in matching the severity of the sentence to the impact of the crime on people’s lives. But . . . there was another, unintended consequence. In about half the cases where family members are invited to give a statement, once they have been listened to it no longer matters to them how severe the sentence is. . . . The experience of being listened to and taken seriously by the judge and jury cured that feeling of helplessness that being a victim imposed on them, and restored their power.”¹

Likewise, students can feel a sense of hopelessness if they are not listened to or taken seriously. As I observe classes and notice the students who sit silently in those classes, I wonder if they feel powerless to affect their own fate in their education. Perhaps they need a teacher who can be like Kushner’s judge and jury—an audience who can take them seriously and

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restore empowered learning. If students never have the opportunity to speak and express themselves or to be taken seriously as thinkers and wonderers, how often do they feel helpless in the classroom? How often does that feeling of helplessness translate into boredom, frustration, and finally dropping the class? When I've asked teachers why their students don't say much, they generally respond that students are free to speak at any time. This is usually true; however, the teacher has a fundamental responsibility to facilitate the process by inspiring students who may seldom feel encouraged to speak. In fact, many students have had experiences in their classrooms where they have offered a response and been told quickly and unequivocally that it was the wrong response. When they hear the teacher say, "That is wrong," what they usually hear is "*You* are wrong," and this almost guarantees that they will not venture another response soon.

The Outcome of Great Questions

A truly effective teacher is someone who knows how to inspire students to respond. It takes time and patience to encourage the students enough so that they feel comfortable, but this is a large part of the teacher's job. A stimulating question is the best place to start. The *Gospel Teaching and Learning* handbook offers these guidelines about great questions: "It is worth great effort to carefully craft questions during lesson preparation that will lead to understanding and engage the minds and hearts of the students as they learn. . . . The teacher should . . . thoughtfully design the question. . . . A few carefully chosen words can make a great difference."² Great questions beget responses. And a talented and effective teacher will do something with the responses beyond nodding and saying, "Thank you." The teacher's response to a student response can create a dynamic that breeds conversation, thinking, and learning. The teacher becomes, in Kushner's language, the judge and jury who listen, empowering the students and removing their feeling of helplessness. The students can then begin to actively participate in their own learning.

This paper will examine four ideas that can help teachers create the kind of classroom where great questions launch great learning.

Answers Versus Responses

One day a colleague and I visited an early-morning seminary teacher. After the class, the three of us discussed how the lesson succeeded and how it could have been improved. The teacher showed some frustration with the class

because there had not been as many answers to his questions as he would have liked. We talked of ways to remedy this problem, and then my colleague said something that has caused me to ponder for a long time. He said, "In seminary we are not so much looking for answers as for thoughtful responses." I think that is a profound statement.

An answer is a specific, narrow type of response: it corresponds to the question and is the type of response we look for in math or science classes where a question requires a specific solution. For example, when a math teacher asks for the square root of a number, an "answer" (or specific response) is required. When a science teacher wants to know the genus or species of an animal, the students must provide a specific answer. When we ask the types of questions that require specific answers, we receive them, and the inquiry and thought process ends.

A response, however, is open-ended: it extends and builds upon the thought process that was started by the initial question. For example, when teaching John 7:17, the teacher could ask, "How can we ever know if the doctrine of Christ is true?" A student may answer, "Do his will." That line of inquiry is now over because the answer has ended the conversation. Instead the teacher could ask a great question, such as, "The verse says that we should do the will of God. How have you personally discovered his will, and what have you done with it once you've discovered it?" That question will create a response—more than one. A response continues the conversation; it demonstrates the students' participation in a process that leads to understanding and learning. In a gospel teaching setting, the best questions are designed to elicit responses, not just answers.

Helping students to understand and believe that a teacher wants responses may be difficult initially; they have been trained, through many academic experiences, that giving an answer is all teachers expect. The best teachers know that "the ability merely to reach 'correct' answers has little significance if it does not reflect functional understanding."³

In his book *The Art of Changing the Brain*, James Zull tells the story of a memorable college class that got him excited about actively participating in his own learning. Zull was tired of watching his friend receive all the attention from the professor; he felt the need to participate in the class. When he ventured a response, he was surprised to be drawn out by a professor who wanted to engage intellectually with him. This class was the turning point in his educational career. He says, "Many things made my experience in

[Professor] Wall's class valuable, but the one that meant the most was that he wasn't looking for an answer. He was looking for a process."⁴

One sign of an effective teacher is the ability to create questions that engage students—questions that beg for responses, not answers. Answers quench the fire of discussion. Responses fan the flames.

Listen

Here's a common scenario: A teacher prepares a well-crafted question that he is sure will stimulate discussion and learning. He poses that question in class, full of confidence. Nobody responds, so he poses it again. He wants to fill in the silence (it has been almost three seconds since he asked!), but he has been taught to choke back that urge and wait. He does. Then a student speaks and offers a response. In his elation he gushes out his thanks and quickly jumps to fill in what he thinks the student left out. Only as he begins to speak does he realize that he isn't quite sure what the student said. In his excitement, he failed to listen.

Students need to be heard, and teachers need to believe that students have something to say that is worth listening to. Ken Bain counsels college teachers, "I cannot stress enough the simple yet powerful notion that the key to understanding the best teaching can be found not in particular practices or rules but in the *attitudes* of the teachers, in their *faith* in their students' abilities to achieve, in their *willingness* to take their students seriously . . . , and in their *commitment* to let all policies and practices flow from central learning objectives and from a mutual respect and agreement between students and teachers."⁵ Bain's suggestion to the academic world sounds similar to a comment from *Gospel Teaching and Learning*: "Teachers should have faith that with proper guidance and encouragement, students can understand the scriptures, learn to identify doctrines and principles, explain the gospel to others, and apply gospel teachings in their lives."⁶ Both these sources witness the same truth: *listen* to students and trust they have something worthwhile to say.

Even if a student is speaking and the teacher is silent, the teacher may not be listening. It takes effort and concentration to really listen. Parker Palmer writes, "Attentive listening is never an easy task—it consumes psychic energy at a rate that tires and surprises me. But it is made easier when I am holding back my own authoritative impulses. When I suspend, for just a while, my inner chatter about what I am going to say next, I open room within myself

to receive the external conversation."⁷ Notice some of the keys to attentive listening: the teacher has to hold back authoritative impulses, suspend inner chatter, and suppress the desire to jump in right after the student has finished to clean up and rearrange. Teachers must listen, absorb, think, and incorporate the student's comments into the class conversation. Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught this truth: "To teach you first have to observe and listen so that you can discern and then know what to say."⁸

In the story of James Zull, Professor Wall demonstrated the art and skill of listening: "Most compelling of all, [Professor] Wall listened to his students. He *wanted* to hear our philosophies and our ideas."

Zull continues by saying that eventually he became an active participant in the classroom discussion even though that was not his current model for learning. He really just wanted to sit and listen but was drawn into participation:

And when Wall called on me, I discovered that he took me just as seriously as any other student. He listened carefully and asked a question about a part of my idea that I hadn't expressed very well. I clarified the idea in better language, and when he understood, Wall nodded and suggested that I pick up a book . . . in his office after class.

I was filled with confidence as [Professor] Wall and I exchanged ideas. We were having a conversation, a comfortable back-and-forth as though we were peers. . . .

That was the most successful class in my college life. It wasn't *what* I learned that made it successful. Rather, it was the fact that learning came alive for me. I had entered into the action.⁹

What seems to have drawn Zull out of his shell was his teacher's willingness to listen to and treat him as an important member of the class. Wall showed his regard for his students by listening to them. It is not surprising that another student would say, "The best teachers I had always made you feel good about yourself and your abilities."¹⁰ After studying the best teachers in colleges throughout the United States, Bain says, "More than anything else, the most successful [teachers] treated anything they said to their students—whether in fifty-minute lectures or in two-minute explanations—as a conversation rather than a performance."¹¹ All successful conversations imply listening. The sooner a teacher begins to understand how to listen and incorporates the skill into the classroom, the sooner the students will begin participating and teaching will become a good conversation—a conversation that leads to understanding and learning.

Respond

Once a teacher asks an effective question, a student responds, and the teacher listens to that response, the next step can make a big difference in how the class proceeds. The teacher has three options.

Option 1: Reject the Student Response

Rejecting the student's response is dangerous because it stops the action and may lead the students to think that they don't know much. It alerts the class members that they should give a "right" answer or not respond at all. Rejection stifles participation.

In the book *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell tells about going to see an improvisational troupe one night:

What is terrifying about improv is the fact that it appears utterly random and chaotic. It seems as though you have to get up onstage and make everything up, right there on the spot.

But the truth is that improv isn't random and chaotic at all. . . . Every week they [the improv troupe] get together for a lengthy rehearsal. After each show they gather backstage and critique each other's performance soberly. Why do they practice so much? Because improv is an art form governed by a series of rules, and they want to make sure that when they're up onstage, everyone abides by those rules.¹²

In the same way that improv actors have rules to follow to maintain the flow of the comedy, teachers must follow the basic rules of conversation to maintain the flow of the lesson. Rejection breaks a rule of conversation and will almost always inhibit—and sometimes stop—the flow of discussion. Teachers need to practice the skill of accepting what students say and then building on their comments.

Continuing the previous example about John 7:17, the teacher may ask, "How have you personally discovered God's will?" A student may say, "I never have. My parents just force me to do what they say is right." The teacher could choose to reject that response, smile, and move on; or he could choose to accept it and try to build on it. He could say, "John, I'll accept what you say, but can you honestly say that you personally have never discovered anything about God's will for you? What have you found from your service in the priesthood, from your patriarchal blessing, or from insights into the scriptures?" Those follow-up questions may stir some thought and additional comments from John. If he maintains his original statement, perhaps a follow-up comment could be, "John, I'm confident that you have had an experience where

you have discovered God's will, even if it was hard to identify at the time. I'm hopeful that as you listen to others' comments, something will jog your memory, and you will recall at least one experience where you discovered God's will."

Option 2: Accept the Response Casually

If the teacher simply nods in acknowledgement of the comment, many students will see that reaction as equivalent to no response at all. It is better if the teacher verbalizes appreciation, at least thanking the student for the input. Doing so can often be very effective.

Option 3: Fully Accept the Response as Part of the Conversation

Great teachers will yearn to have conversations with their students and decide to engage their comments. In his study Ken Bain found that "[the best teachers often] paused for ten seconds at a time, looking at students. Some teachers often visibly struggled with understanding an idea or how best to explain it, creating a sense of spontaneous exchange and prompting students to feel a part of that same struggle and a part of the conversation."¹³

As the architect of the learning experience, the teacher has the power to get the class going and to include as many students as possible in the conversation. And teachers have to be patient during the conversation because the best ideas from students sometimes come last. In *Teach Like a Champion*, Doug Lemov says:

Most class discussions are structured, unwittingly, around the false assumption that the first ideas to be generated or the first students to raise their hands will be the ones most conducive to a productive conversation: ask a question, call on a hand. But the first answer is not always the best answer. Some students require time to generate ideas or to feel confident enough in their ideas to offer to share them. Ideas get better even for the students whose hands shoot up right away when they benefit from a few moments of reflection.¹⁴

Some students want to be included only after they've had plenty of time with their own thoughts and reflections. There is a place for that too, and teachers can help meet their needs if they remember that often the person "who looks least engaged may be the most committed member of the group. A cynic, after all, is a passionate person who does not want to be disappointed again."¹⁵ The responses that the teacher gives to the students who respond both early and late in the conversation make the most difference. Even student responses

that come later can replenish the cycle and keep the conversation going in a direction that will deepen understanding.

In some ways our students have been trained to give answers without thinking. Teachers get so excited when a student says something—anything!—that they honor the comment quickly without examining it, as though all answers are equally acceptable and useful. In order for students to learn, the teacher must initiate sincere thought, and sometimes that means provoking the students. *Provoke* is a word that has a negative connotation, but it also has additional meanings: to stir up, to arouse, to call forth, to incite or stimulate, or to induce or bring about.¹⁶ We want that process to happen in class; we want to arouse thought and stimulate thinking and questions. Professor and author Robert Leamson contends, “A basic law of physics says that a system will not change unless there is an imbalance of forces, and biology posits a change in students’ brains if learning is to occur. *Something* must push or pull them into trying out new circuits, because it’s more comfortable to not do it. A classroom where students are learning will have a feel of healthy tension about it. Healthy tension is not debilitating.”¹⁷

A teacher who asks a question that engages students, expecting them to struggle with it and respond, can be similar to a coach who places a swimmer in the ocean on a wave, hoping for and helping the swimmer to come to the shore of understanding and learning.

For we are all, like swimmers in the sea,
Poised on the top of a huge wave of fate,
Which hangs uncertain to which side to fall.
And whether it will heave us up to land,
Or whether it will roll us out to sea,
Back out to sea, to the deep waves of death,
We know not, and no search will make us know;
Only the event will teach us in its hour.¹⁸

As in the image painted by this poem, a well-crafted question places students on the top of a wave that can either bring them to shore or send them back out to sea to flounder and remain lost. We don’t know what will happen until we ask the question and deal with the responses. One of the basics of effective teaching is to trust the students,¹⁹ so we ask the questions and trust that students will respond and participate. In Bain’s study of exceptional teachers, he reports: “Good teachers know how to talk well, but they also can get students talking. Indeed, we often heard classes buzzing with lively conversations as questions and ideas darted around the room. Yet talk can be cheap. . . . The

exceptional teachers did not just want to get students speaking; they wanted them to think and learn how to engage in an exchange of ideas.”²⁰

A necessary part of exchanging ideas is getting students to actively participate in discussions. The *Gospel Teaching and Learning* handbook defines a *discussion*: “A class discussion occurs as teachers verbally interact with students and students verbally interact with each other in a manner that fosters learning.”²¹ Lively conversations buzzing around a classroom often result from the following cycle: a good question, a sincere response, and teacher-student interaction that invites more engagement and discussion from other students. As Leamson puts it, “Inspiring and instructing young people to verbalize and articulate thought will likewise initiate a circle of positive feedback between thinking and language and send students off on their own spiral of lifelong learning.”²²

Reshape Student Responses

Even when we receive sincere responses to our questions, we sometimes have to reshape those responses to help them fit into the larger discussion. Parker Palmer in *Courage to Teach* says: “But if I learn to ask good questions, deflect answers, and connect my students in dialogue, the job is still not done. I must learn the skill of lifting up and reframing what my students are saying so that we will have benchmarks of how far we have come and how far we have to go toward whatever we are trying to learn.”²³

Many common answers to gospel questions are simple, unexamined truths. They may be true, but they still merit further examination, even if we have already accepted them. Knowing that they are true is the *what*, but taking the time to examine them strengthens our faith by helping us understand the *why*. A skilled teacher can conduct that examination by helping a student reshape a response.

For example, in a certain class the teacher posed a question about 2 Corinthians 4:8–10. The question had to do with the dual nature of human beings—physical and spiritual—and asked how Paul would expect us to deal with physical problems. A sister in the class responded, “Just have faith.” While that is a proper answer, it does not lead to meaningful learning if it is left unexamined. That response needed some shaping. The teacher honored the response by acknowledging it and thanking the student for it; then he asked some questions that caused the class to examine the response more closely. “Let me tighten the screws a little on your response,” he said. “To ‘have

faith' is an acceptable but incomplete response. Let's suppose that you go to work at your teaching job tomorrow, and the principal tells you before school starts that because of budget cuts, your job no longer exists, and last Friday was your last day. On your way home your car's engine blows up. When you arrive home, having walked from the automotive disaster, you find that there has been a fire in your house. Then your husband comes home to say that the person who owed him money for a job has filed bankruptcy and will not pay. Now, do you still answer that question with 'have faith,' and if so, how do you proceed in your life on a practical basis?" To this thought-provoking question the student's answer was still "have faith," but it was now coupled with some very specific suggestions for how to show faith, how to act on faith, and how to live a life filled with faith. The rest of the class got involved, and a marvelous discussion ensued. It would not have gone that way if the teacher had not honored the initial answer and then helped reshape it into a more discussion-friendly response.

If we are looking only for an answer, then the answer "have faith" works well. If we are looking for thoughtful responses that will allow an exchange among the students, the teacher, and the Spirit, then that answer needs to be examined and reshaped. At one point during my own teaching, I realized that students were offering simple, unexamined answers and that I was allowing those answers to stand. In order to change this, I posted a sign in the classroom that read: "The following answers, while true, are not allowed to stand alone in this classroom. They must be accompanied by an explanation." I then listed about ten short answers, such as "Have faith," "Keep the commandments," "Follow the prophet," "Pray," etc. At first the students were not quite sure how to respond to that sign. But they soon found out when they gave an answer like one on the list. I would smile at them and silently point to the posting on the door. Eventually I didn't have to refer to the sign because other students were doing it when they heard an unexamined answer. Soon they all received the message, and we heard and gave thoughtful responses instead of simple answers. Many of those responses led to excellent discussions and discovery.

Answers can be examined by provoking (or stirring up) the students, which will communicate to them that their teacher has confidence in and expects more of their abilities. Bain suggests that this confidence from a teacher will help students rise to the challenge of more complex thinking: "Students will be buoyed by positive expectations that are genuine, challenging

yet realistic, and that take their work seriously."²⁴ For example, a teacher poses a question about the Sabbath day and how to keep it holy. The students all agree that working on the Sabbath is improper and doing so would not be keeping it holy. But I had a bishop one time that was a police officer; he had to work certain Sundays. Was he breaking the Sabbath by agreeing to work? He had a temple recommend, so he must have been worthy, yet he still worked on the Sabbath. What about emergency room nurses who labor on the Sabbath? What about those who work to bring us the general conference broadcasts—the technicians and others who run the cameras? Are people such as these Sabbath breakers or Sabbath keepers, and what are the principles behind keeping the Sabbath holy? When we present these principles from various perspectives and through different lenses, we can conduct a useful examination. As we do so, we honor the responses of students, and we can use their responses to further learning.

As we reshape our students' responses, we can provide them with insights on why these gospel principles apply to them personally. Zull says, "If we want to help people learn we must help them see how it matters in their lives. I stress, we must help *them* see. The learner herself must see it and believe it. That does not happen just because we say, 'It matters!' Our job is not that easy."²⁵ Returning to the example of the Sabbath day, students will need to understand the answers to the questions, What does it mean to keep the Sabbath holy? Why does it matter in their lives? All students will have to come to terms with this doctrine. Real-life situations demand that our students understand more about how to keep the Sabbath than just avoiding work. We won't help students much when we accept an unexamined answer as a cure-all solution to a real-life question. A teacher should "give students many opportunities to use their reasoning abilities as they tackle fascinating problems and receive challenges to their thinking."²⁶ Challenges can come in the form of reshaping responses and inviting, urging, requiring, and assisting students to examine clearly the responses they offer. Zull explains, "We try to save time by explaining things, but as I have noted many times, our explanations are often ineffective. Meaning develops when the learner *actively tries* his own ideas."²⁷

Palmer appropriately summarizes the importance of reshaping responses:

Some questions close down the space and keep students from thinking. . . . Other questions open up so much space that they lose students in a trackless wasteland. . . .

The questions that help people learn are found somewhere between these extremes.

...

Of course, the skill of asking questions goes beyond asking the right kinds of questions to asking them in a manner neither threatening nor demeaning—and receiving responses in the same open and inviting way. . . .

When we learn to ask good questions, we discover that yet another competence is needed: the ability to turn a question-and-answer session between the teacher and individual students into a complex communal dialogue that bounces all around the room.²⁸

Practice and Application

As with any worthwhile skill, a teacher must practice asking great questions and honing class discussion. The teacher can adapt these skills to his or her personality and style, and great questions and discussions will take different shapes with each teacher and class. However, if we want to help our students be involved in their own learning and be excited about the process, we must draw them out; a fundamental process for that includes posing a good question that requires a response instead of an answer, listening to what the student says, reacting to student responses in ways that keep the conversation going, and helping to reshape the student responses.

In the August 2012 Seminaries and Institutes broadcast, Chad Webb, an administrator for Seminaries and Institutes, made this comment about responding to student participation in the panel discussion:

It's really interesting to watch a class and have a student comment and then have the comment almost be dismissed. The student no longer feels like his or her contribution is needed or appreciated. Compare this to a teacher who really confirms and appreciates students and what they're doing to participate and help in the class. It really lifts the class. It encourages more participation and unity just by the way the teacher responds to the students.²⁹

If we can internalize this idea—that we are responsible for the quality of the class discussion—and then work to make it part of our everyday teaching, we stand a much better chance of helping students really learn the gospel. They will learn not only the *what* of the gospel but also the *why*. **RE**

Notes

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2. *Gospel Teaching and Learning: A Handbook for Teachers and Leaders in Seminaries and Institutes of Religion* (2012), 58.

3. Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 94.
4. James Zull, *The Art of Changing the Brain* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2002), 212.
5. Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, 78–79.
6. *Gospel Teaching and Learning*, 48.
7. Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 135.
8. David A. Bednar, in “A Conversation on Leadership” (Leadership Enrichment Series, February 24, 2010), 14.
9. Zull, *Changing the Brain*, 211–12.
10. Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, 79.
11. Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, 118.
12. Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2005), 113–16.
13. Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, 118–19.
14. Doug Lemov, *Teach Like a Champion* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 139.
15. Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander, *The Art of Possibility* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000), 39.
16. See *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., “provoke.”
17. Robert Leamson, *Thinking About Teaching and Learning* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 1999), 87.
18. Matthew Arnold, “*Sobrab and Rustum*” and *Other Poems* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1906), 14.
19. See *Gospel Teaching and Learning*, 48.
20. Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, 126.
21. *Gospel Teaching and Learning*, 63.
22. Leamson, *Thinking About Teaching and Learning*, 31.
23. Palmer, *Courage to Teach*, 134–35.
24. Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, 72.
25. Zull, *Changing the Brain*, 52.
26. Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, 87.
27. Zull, *Changing the Brain*, 188.
28. Palmer, *Courage to Teach*, 133–34.
29. Chad Webb, in “A Panel Discussion with Elder Dallin H. Oaks” (broadcast to Church Educational System religious educators, August 7, 2012).