Ten Tips for Better Questioning in Class by Lisa Van Gemert

We’re all familiar with the dynamic of a class in which a few (or even one) class members answer all the questions, while the rest of the class doesn’t participate at all or only reluctantly.

There are many reasons why people don’t answer. They may be shy, insecure in the appropriateness of their response, afraid to be wrong, intimidated by others they feel are more capable, or simply take more time to formulate an answer and the question has been answered by the time they have a response.

Similarly, some class members speak frequently because they are naturally extroverted and love to answer, they have confidence in their responses, they don't need a lot of time to formulate answers, they worry that if they don't respond the teacher will think they don't know the answer, or sometimes they are seeking attention.

As teachers, we have the responsibility to keep the questioning balanced and flowing, with all class members engaged and participating to the extent that they are comfortable. Here are some tips for helping that to occur:

1. If the class is good-sized, divide the class into imaginary quadrants and rotate among the quadrants in your questioning, moving in a clockwise and then a counterclockwise direction. This ensures that you will cover the entire room.

2. Be proactive and deliberate in calling on people to answer. Don't be a slave to the raised hand. Call on people without raised hands, and call on the same person more than once in a row. This brings energy into the room because no one knows where the next question is going. If one person dominates the discussion, speak with him or her privately. Young children may need a physical reminder to help them. You can give a child four or five pennies before class starts. Every time he/she makes a comment, he/she must surrender one of the pennies to you. When the pennies are gone, comments stop.

3. Be aware of "wait time." Ask a question, and then wait a few seconds before you call on anyone. This allows for deeper thinking, and allows those who take a little longer to formulate responses to participate.

4. Pause before responding to responses. Allow a pause after a class member responds before you comment, ask another question, or move on. This allows members to truly think about what was said. This is called "wait time two" in education, and it is one of the most neglected and most important parts of questioning strategy.

5. Invite class members to respond to other participants' responses. Questioning should not be a ping pong game, with the class on one side of the net and the teacher on the other, with the teacher asking, the class responding, and then the teacher speaking again. The ball of conversation should be bouncing all over the room. Asking questions such as, "Who agrees with that statement?" or "Where else have you seen something like what was just described?" makes the person who initially answered a teacher and contributor to the class, a valuable addition, not simply an echo of the teacher's agenda.

6. Set the expectation of participation early in a kind and inviting way. Say, "We all have something to contribute. I hope that if you have not participated a lot in the past, you will be willing to share your thoughts with us today" or words to that effect. Never force participation - this will only cause resentment and frustration. See the next tip for handling youth who won't participate.
7. If there is a youth member who will not respond to questions in class, speak with him/her privately. Ask why. Really listen to the answer, and carefully think and pray about it. Do not respond or come up with counter arguments. Simply listen. After you pray about what the young person said, even if it is "I don't know," go back again and share the thoughts you had. Come up with a plan together. Long periods of silence from a class member alter the dynamic of a class, and it is not in harmony with the curriculum for youth, which is participatory and interactive. Some specific ideas that might help are to invite the parents to share insights into the youth member, making it clear that you are coming from a position of love and not criticism. Match the person with another class member in answering. Give the person a heads-up the night before class that you will be asking a particular question. Make sure you are not allowing any one individual or group of individuals to dominate the conversation.

8. Avoid answering your own questions. If you ask a question and no one answers, wait. And then wait some more. If you keep talking, giving away so much that the answer is overly obvious, people will be reluctant to answer because the answer seems almost silly at that point. A single rephrasing may help, but avoid giving the answer or something so close that any answer is pointless. Sometimes you can back into it by giving the negative answer. For example, if you say, "What is one thing you already know about the atonement?" and no one responds, you can, after a period of waiting, prompt, "Is the atonement only applicable to members of the Church?" or some other question whose answer is no. People are sometimes more comfortable with what they don't know than what they do.

9. Use simple strategies for calling on people - popsicle sticks with names for younger classes, for example. Having a strategy ensures that you will feel more in control, and that can make you feel more relaxed. When the teacher is more relaxed, everyone is more comfortable. This assists in creating an environment in which it feels safe to answer.

10. Decide ahead of time how you will respond to incorrect answers. Will you correct the inaccuracy in class or privately? How will you decide what needs to be corrected? Will you have other class members correct? How will you make sure correct doctrine is taught, while ensuring that no one feels embarrassed by being wrong? Prayerfully consider the needs of your class as you evaluate this.

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