



Part 2: Creating a Transformational Sunday School | An Interview with Dan Duckworth

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Kurt Francom (Host):

Welcome back! We're in the studio for Part 2 of my interview with Dan Duckworth. It's been a few weeks for us since we recorded Part 1—new clothes, maybe a little more wisdom. In our last discussion, we focused on culture in general, where it comes from, and how that relates to Sunday School culture. You also described some principles and the key components of what makes up Sunday School: its membership, the teacher, and the dynamic of gathering.

Now, I want to keep moving. Last time, you brought up an important point for anyone in leadership: real improvement isn't just about tactics, but about a change of nature. Transformation is essential, but that's difficult. What does that really look like for a Sunday School teacher? If someone wants to become a transformational leader or teacher, what actually has to change?

Dan Duckworth (Guest):

Transformation—with that word, what we really mean is that your belief system needs to fundamentally shift. Each of us interprets real-life situations through the lens of our experiences and the narratives we've constructed. That lens shapes everything we see and do.

So transformation requires disruptive experiences—something that shakes up your paradigm and makes you question whether your current way of seeing things is really the best or only way. Suddenly, possibilities you hadn't imagined become conceivable.

In practice, transformation looks like a cycle—a process of experimentation and reflection, again and again. Each time, you challenge your beliefs: what does it mean to teach, to help people

“learn and live the gospel”? The handbooks may define those phrases, but people generally assume “this is what learning looks like,” and we operate under that paradigm. We’re trying to challenge those assumptions for both learning and living. This isn’t just theoretical; it’s practical. You can’t accomplish this by just studying Teaching in the Savior’s Way or the handbook in isolation. You act differently in your real setting and learn from your results.

Kurt:

That reminds me of our earlier discussion on culture—how culture can feel broken in some settings, especially Sunday School, and people ask, “What do we do to change it?” My take is that you need to walk up to the walls of the current culture and push, just to see if it pushes back. If it does, that’s feedback—information you can use. Culture is naturally resistant to disruption because it’s uncomfortable; it induces growth and often uncertainty.

Dan:

Exactly. You need to prod and poke culture and learn from those reactions. Adaptation is critical, and it’s an iterative process that doesn’t happen overnight.

For example, I heard from a high councilor that one of our Sunday School teachers recently tried something totally different, and it energized the room. I don’t know every detail, but she envisioned a different way of showing up, had the courage to try it, and it worked. Sometimes, her approach might seem cheesy to others, but she did it anyway because she was energized by a new vision. People often ask, “How do you get the confidence to try new things?” Confidence comes when your new vision of the situation aligns with your new behavior. Even if others are still operating from the old paradigm, you can confidently step into the new scenario, and your authenticity helps others make that shift with you.

Kurt:

So using that teacher as an example—she invited people into a new kind of scenario. That’s the disruptive aspect. But sometimes leaders misunderstand and think any change will do, so they just “do something different” for its own sake. I call it the “ex-girlfriend syndrome”—just do the opposite of what you did before. We saw it when ministering replaced home teaching; people got excited for the new approach, but were also critical of the old. The point is, change for its own sake isn’t what you’re talking about. You’re talking about pushing the boundaries and learning from what happens.

Dan:

Exactly. I’ve tried things that didn’t work out as intended. A while ago, I guest taught Elders Quorum and did an activity I knew would be provocative. Some people resisted hard and wouldn’t join in. Experimentation isn’t about massive upheaval—it’s about intentional, incremental attempts based on your growing awareness of your purpose in that setting.

In leadership circles, “purpose” and “why” can become cliches, but it’s powerful to keep asking: what’s the greatest good I can accomplish in this situation? That discernment requires trial and error.

Kurt:

In Part 1, you highlighted discernment—even Christ, when He visited the Nephites, responded in real time when the situation needed something different. That’s so important, and our tradition emphasizes following the Spirit, even when it means changing plans on the spot.

Dan:

Yes. Think about the account with Christ and the Nephites: He had a script and went off-script. That raises the question—does that mean God (or the leader) made a mistake? Authors like Terryl and Fiona Givens have explored the idea that God’s omniscience doesn’t mean He knows all outcomes in advance. There’s room for mystery and emergence, and the leader must be responsive to the evolving situation, rather than slavishly following a blueprint. You act, the situation changes, you adjust. That’s true leadership.

Kurt:

So, bottom line—if someone wants to be a transformational teacher, do they just “do things differently”?

Dan:

Let’s step back. When I started teaching Sunday School to 16- to 18-year-olds, I experimented for years, creating new experiences. The impact was profound—lives changed. Eventually, I was called as Stake Sunday School President, and felt my job was to help others become transformational teachers. But most people can’t conceive of what that means because it’s so far outside their lived experience in schools or church. Reflecting on my journey, I realized I had seen transformational teaching modeled by others, especially leaders like Bob Quinn, a world-class expert who taught with minimal lecturing and focused on group process.

There’s a scripture: “Let there be one among you appointed to be a spokesman, that all may be edified of all.” When I experienced classes where everyone was truly engaged, and all were “edified of all,” I finally understood what transformational teaching looked like. But for most, without that model, it’s hard to even imagine.

Kurt:

So how do you help people experience or learn transformational teaching at scale, given the logistical challenges (everyone meeting at different times)?

Dan:

It’s basically impossible in our church structure to bring everyone together for an immersive experience. So my approach has been to develop a set of actionable principles for the classroom.

Here’s a foundational principle: **Empower people to co-create the experience.** In our stake, we use the metaphor of the “master chef.” Traditionally, teachers see themselves as preparing a gourmet meal for others to consume. But with transformational teaching, your job is to bring the “raw ingredients” and the utensils, and then enable the class to prepare the meal together. They learn most deeply from what they help create.

Kurt:

Let's get practical. In a Relief Society room, packed full, what does co-creation look like? Is it just asking good questions, or is there more?

Dan:

Engagement is what matters—people connecting with each other and with gospel ideas, either through introspection or interpersonal dialogue. Ideally, after a genuinely significant spiritual experience, we'd all naturally share it and process it together, like people do after a major event ("Did you see the fight last night?"). In practice, classroom engagement often needs help.

Here's where the **Pareto Principle** comes in: focus 80% of class time on engagement (inner and interpersonal dialogue), and only 20% on content delivery—framing ideas, setting up tensions, introducing questions. We can't just "let them loose"; people need just enough structure to engage. So, design the lesson to facilitate this dynamic.

Kurt:

That 20% warmup is crucial—getting people comfortable and ready to participate, whether through an icebreaker, setup questions, or some other activity.

Dan:

Exactly. I actually have a template:

- 6 minutes for opening (icebreaker/prayer)
- 5 minutes to introduce an idea or framing question
- 20 minutes engagement (reflection or discussion)
- 5 minutes to regroup
- 5 minutes to close

Within 45 minutes, you need the courage to let go—don't over-prepare or try and control everything. My best lessons begin simply by reading the scriptures and noticing what actually creates tension or curiosity in me, then using that to set up the class for engaged exploration. As the teacher, you become more of an **experience designer** than a content deliverer.

Kurt:

What about sticking to the assigned scripture block? Aren't we supposed to cover the whole thing?

Dan:

Frankly, I rarely try to "get through" the whole block. Some weeks, a single verse is plenty. The Come, Follow Me manual even says not to try teaching the whole assigned reading. Your goal isn't to cover content but to create an experience where people can encounter the Spirit and

wrestle with meaningful questions. The scriptures are there to provoke that kind of wrestling with belief, not just to impart minute doctrinal details.

Kurt:

So you're saying that in practice, your prep is mostly searching the scriptures not just for themes, but for live tensions and questions you personally feel?

Dan:

Yes, and then I trust that anything that resonates with me on a human level is likely to resonate with others. For example, when studying the Tree of Life vision, I used the question, "How does the love of God manifest in your everyday experiences?" All lesson activities and reflections stemmed from that single animating question. Focus all planning and real-time decisions around that core, letting go of the rest.

Kurt:

What's the value in introducing "tension" or messiness—not just safe topics?

Dan:

Growth only happens in zones of discomfort. Safe questions rarely engage deep transformation. If you ask people to wrestle with real doubts, pains, or questions, it can feel awkward—they might initially resist. But as trust builds, pushing through that awkwardness yields authentic breakthroughs. It's important, though, to only stretch as much as people can tolerate while maintaining trust.

Kurt:

For teachers new to this paradigm, what other principles would you add?

Dan:

A few key ones:

- **Build authentic community:** Connection, trust, and shared vulnerability are required for people to open up. Icebreakers like "Roses and Thorns" (one good and one hard thing from the week) help.
- **Be led by a single driving question or theme:** Give yourself permission to ignore the rest and focus on the question that animates you and your class the most.
- **Hold positive tension:** Frame the lesson so genuine questions and dilemmas come into focus, and resist the urge to smooth over tension too quickly.
- **Resolve all tensions in Christ:** After surfacing deeper questions or struggles, help the group center those tensions back on Christ at the end, fostering hope rather than leaving them "undone."

- **Guide participants from desire to intention:** At the end of class, take a minute of silence for each participant to reflect on their “one thing”—an insight or intention to act on. Then, quickly go around the room sharing those takeaways (private, succinct, without debate). This honors diverse experiences and underlines that God, not the teacher, is in charge.

Kurt:

That’s powerful. This style of teaching might feel risky or uncomfortable for leaders or teachers, especially when classroom dynamics are unpredictable. What would you say to help them start?

Dan:

Start small. Remember, as a leader or teacher, your job is not to control or direct learning, but to create the right conditions for transformation—what Harvard’s Ron Heifetz calls the “zone of productive disequilibrium.” Your role is to lead people into just enough discomfort, hold them there, and trust that the real work happens individually and with God. The more you let go of needing to be the “master chef,” the more space you leave for God to be the one who engineers transformation.

Kurt:

Thanks, Dan. This has been enormously helpful. These principles don’t just change classes—they change lives.