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(Adler fourth from the left)

SEMINARS: TEACHING AND LEARNING BY DISCUSSION

Mortimer Adler

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Lectures and other forms of instructive speech are teaching by telling. This is didactic teaching. The seminar is different. It is teaching by asking and by a discussion conducted through questions asked and answered and with answers often disputed. This is Socratic teaching.

There is a third form of teaching, which is coaching. This is indispensable for the development of intellectual skills as much as it is for athletic and bodily skills. The skills of reading and writing, of speaking and listening, and of observing, calculating, measuring, and estimating, cannot be inculcated by means of didactic instruction. Skilled habits can be formed only through practice under supervision by a coach who corrects wrong moves and requires that right ones be made.

The three kinds of teaching—didactic, Socratic, and coaching—are correlated with three kinds of learning. The acquisition of organized knowledge in basic fields of subject matter is the kind of learning that is aided by didactic teaching—teaching by telling,

lectures, and textbooks. The development of all the intellectual skills is the kind of learning that requires coaching. The third form of teaching—the Socratic method of teaching by asking and by discussion—facilitates the kind of learning that is an enlargement of the understanding of basic ideas and values.

This tripartite distinction of kinds of teaching and kinds of learning, diagrammed below, is the focal point of *The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto*, which was published last year. While I was nominally the author of that book, it expressed the views agreed upon by my associates in an effort to propose a much needed radical reform of basic schooling in the United States.

Among other things, the reform calls for the restoration of coaching in our schools. This has almost disappeared from the first twelve years of schooling. The reform also calls for the introduction of Socratic teaching, the seminar method of teaching. Seminars, in which the teaching proceeds by asking and discussion, are, with very few exceptions, not present at all during the first twelve years of schooling. Nor are they present in any but a few colleges.

Their absence leaves a large and deplorable gap in the development of the growing mind. From long experience with it, I also know that the seminar kind of teaching and learning makes the most fruitful contribution to the continued growth of the mature mind.

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I have been conducting seminars for sixty years now, with students in high schools and colleges and with adults who have engaged in the reading and discussion of great books or who have been participants in the Aspen Executive Seminars.

Long experience has convinced me that seminar teaching, on the Greek or Socratic model, not the German one, belongs not only in the colleges but should be carried on also in the high schools, where students have proved every bit as able to profit from seminars that I have conducted as have their college counterparts—have shown themselves even better participants in some ways.

I am further convinced that the seminar method is appropriate for the continued learning of adults, especially the improvement of their understanding of basic ideas and issues. That should begin, however, and can, when they are much younger.

In the past few years, when the Paideia Group was at work formulating its proposals for the reform of basic schooling in the United States, I have conducted seminars at Aspen for young people ranging in age from ten to eighteen. At the invitation of various school systems, I have gone around the country demonstrating the Socratic method of teaching by conducting seminars for high school students, to be observed by teachers in those school systems. From this most recent experience, I have been fully persuaded of the necessity to introduce this kind of teaching and learning at all levels of basic schooling.

Students who have participated in these seminars have told me, in the most poignant terms, that this was their first experience of being asked to think about ideas and issues, their first experience in expressing and defending their views about important subjects.

On occasion after occasion, it has been patently obvious that their prior schooling had not given them any preparation for the kind of learning that a seminar provides. They have not been prepared to think for themselves in answering questions about important ideas, nor prepared to speak clearly and coherently as well as to listen well.

Ideas, issues, values—these constitute the ideal subject matter for seminars. Reading great books or selections from them provides the substance for discussion, but other well chosen reading materials are also useful for the purpose, as in the Aspen Executive Seminars.

It is even possible to conduct seminars by the questioning method in which no reading materials at all are used. Instead, the participants can be asked to state what understanding they have of a fundamental idea, such as progress, or liberty, or justice. When their answers are laid on the table and examined by further questioning, the discussion proceeds to explore the idea from every angle and to deal with the issues raised by conflicting views about its significance.

It would take too many pages to report my experience with the Aspen Executive Seminars over the last thirty years. From this experience I have learned a great deal about the ideas there discussed—more, perhaps, than any of the other participants involved.

Instead, for the benefit of the readers of this book, I have put into Appendix II a speech that I delivered at the Aspen Institute in 1972. It not only indicates the sequence of readings used in the

seminars, but also summarizes what I and the other participants have learned as a result of our discussion of the ideas treated in those readings.

In the remainder of this chapter, I am going to try to distill from my seminar teaching experiences, under a wide variety of circumstances and with a wide variety of groups, the suggestions and recommendations I am able to formulate concerning the conduct of such seminars.

All the rules and recommendations set forth in the two preceding chapters, intended to provide guidance for making conversations of every sort more profitable and pleasurable, apply, of course, to the kind of conversation that takes place in a seminar. Seminar discussion is simply that special kind of conversation or two-way talk in which a moderator, or sometimes a pair of moderators, exercises some control over the course of the conversation and the direction it takes from beginning to end.

The additional rules or recommendations that may be helpful mainly concern how moderators should play their special part in these proceedings and how the participants should try to respond in ways that make the seminars fruitful.

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Let me begin by saying what seminar teaching by questioning and discussion is not.

It is not a quiz session in which a teacher asks Yes or No questions and says right or wrong to the answers.

It is not a lecture in disguise in which the teacher asks questions and, after a brief pause or after listening to one or two unsatisfactory responses, then proceeds to answer his own questions at length, thus in effect giving a lecture that is punctuated by the questions asked.

It is not a glorified "bull session" in which everyone feels equally free to express opinions on the level of personal prejudices or to recount experiences that the narrator of them regards as highly significant of something or other.

None of the foregoing counterfeits of the seminar provides the kind of learning that a seminar should afford when it is properly conducted by questions and answers and by the discussion of their

significance. For the purpose of such learning, discussable subject matter is required—ideally, basic ideas, issues, or values proposed by the moderator either on the basis of reading done or without such reading.

There are other prerequisites. One is duration. A good seminar needs sufficient time for its development—at least an hour and a half, more often two hours or more. The canonical fifty-minute classroom session is much too short a duration for the development of the discussion that should take place.

A second prerequisite is the furniture of the room in which the seminar is to occur. It should have a hollow square table; or, even better, the kind of large hexagonal table used in Aspen, around which the participants sit, able to face one another as they talk. The seminar room should be the very antithesis of the ordinary classroom or lecture hall, in which the teacher or lecturer stands in front of auditors who sit in row after row to listen to what he has to say. That kind of room may be ideal for uninterrupted speech and silent listening, but it is the very opposite for good two-way talk in which everyone is both a speaker and a listener.

A third prerequisite is the state of mind that the participants bring to the seminar. It should be both open and docile.

All the participants, including the moderator, should be prepared to change their minds as a result of the discussion in which they engage. They should be open to views that are new to them. They should be docile in considering such new views, neither stubbornly resistant to something they have never thought of before nor passively submissive.

The virtue of docility (i.e., of teachability), which is the cardinal virtue in all forms of learning, should predispose them to examine new views before they adopt or reject them and also to be openly receptive of them for the sake of examining them. Persons who are stubbornly contentious or disputatious, who argue for the sake of argument, not for the sake of learning, as well as persons who are too submissive or acquiescent and do not exercise their minds critically, lack docility.

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The task of the moderator is threefold: (1) to ask a series of questions that control the discussion and give it direction; (2) to examine the answers by trying to evoke the reasons for them or the im-

plications they have; and (3) to engage the participants in two-way talk with one another when the views they have advanced appear to be in conflict. The conversation that then ensues among the participants themselves, and sometimes with the moderator involved in it, is the very heart of a good seminar.

In order to perform the second and third of these tasks well, the moderator must be as active in listening as in questioning. From my long experience with seminars, I know this to be the moderator's most important obligation and the one most difficult to discharge well.

The energy required to listen to each and every one of the twenty or twenty-five participants in a seminar is very tiring, but the moderator must strive to overcome fatigue and continue to listen actively throughout the seminar. It is quite easy to give two or three good lectures in a single day, but I seriously doubt that anyone has enough energy to conduct more than one good seminar between sunrise and sunset.

Energetic effort on the moderator's part is also required for questioning. He is not doing his part if he just sits back as a chairman of the meeting and invites the participants to take turns speaking, calling on them in the order in which they have indicated their acceptance of that invitation. That may maintain order by preventing everyone from speaking at once, but it certainly does not produce the kind of learning that a seminar is intended to stimulate. Only Socratic questioning can do that.

That kind of learning stems ultimately from the questions the moderator asks. They should be questions that raise issues; questions that raise further questions when first answers are given to them; questions that can seldom be answered simply by Yes or No; hypothetical questions that present suppositions the implications or consequences of which are to be examined; questions that are complex and have many related parts, to be taken up in an orderly manner.

Above all, the moderator must make sure that the questions he asks are listened to and understood, that they are not merely taken as signals for the person who is queried to respond by saying whatever is on his or her mind, whether or not it is a relevant answer to the question asked.

The moderator should be so insistent upon an understanding of his questions that he should be prepared to ask the same questions over and over again in different phrasings of it and with different

examples to illuminate it. The participants should be warned that they are not to answer a question until they are relatively sure that they understand it. If not, they should persist in getting the moderator to rephrase the question.

All this requires intense activity and great expenditure of energy on the part of both moderators and participants. It should go without saying that it also calls upon both moderators and participants to listen intently and to speak as clearly as possible. Neither should put up with half-minded listening or with garbled, incoherent speech. Neither should rest content with statements that appear to be generally acceptable without also seeking for the reasons that underlie them or the consequences that flow from their truth.

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I have just described what is involved in the conduct of seminars by the Socratic method of questioning without paying attention to what kind of seminar it is. One kind of seminar is that in which the participants are all adults, such as the Aspen Executive Seminars, in which the moderator may not be a professional teacher. Quite different are seminars in schools and colleges, in which the moderator is a professional teacher and a difference in age and maturity exists between the moderator and the younger participants.

In the former case, the seminar serves the purpose of continued learning by mature persons, long after they have left school. In the latter case, it is an essential ingredient in schooling, which is at best a stage of learning that should prepare for continued learning in the mature years of adult life. Without this no one can expect to become an educated person no matter how much or how good the schooling he had while immature.


When members of the teaching profession are called upon to moderate seminars in schools, they soon realize that Socratic teaching is utterly different from the kind of didactic teaching they are so used to doing, which is perhaps the only kind of teaching they have ever done.

Didactic teaching puts them in the position of knowing more than their students. Unless they do, they are not thought by themselves or anyone to be competent teachers. They have knowledge that the students should acquire. The lectures they give are intended to transmit that knowledge from the mind of the teacher to the minds of, the students.

That is not the way Socratic teaching works in seminars. There the teacher as moderator should simply be a more competent learner than the student, more competent in the effort to achieve an understanding of whatever materials are to be discussed, and more competent to do this by means of carrying on an intelligent conversation or discussion.

The teacher, as leader of a discussion, should not regard his competence as consisting in knowing all the right answers to the questions that should be asked and explored. To many of the questions that should be asked, there is no one right answer, but many answers that compete for attention, understanding, or judgment. The discussion leader's competence should, therefore, consist of an awareness of the important questions that have a range of answers deserving consideration and demanding judgment.

When news of *The Paideia Proposal* circulated before the publication of the book, I was asked by *The American School Board Journal* to write an article about my experience in conducting seminars with young people. I was asked also to offer such advice as I could give about how to put this kind of teaching and learning into every school in this country, at least from the seventh grade on.

In Appendix III, I have placed excerpts from the article I wrote—the portions of it that state my recommendations for setting such seminars up and conducting them. 

From his book *How to Speak / How to Listen* (1983)

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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