

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Great Books, Democracy, And Truth

(Excerpted from *Reforming Education* by Mortimer Adler in 1977 with material added in 1988)

Part 1 of 2

I

Because of its title, *The Closing of the American Mind*, by Allen Bloom sold widely, probably much more widely than it was read. Its misleading but attention-grabbing subtitle: *How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*, lamented the failure of our colleges to serve our democratic society, but paid little attention to the dismal deficiencies of basic schooling in the United States, which are much more important as far as serving democracy is concerned.

With regard to the academic malaise that Mr. Bloom describes, but mistakenly regards as recent, his analysis of its causes is both inaccurate and inadequate. Worse, his slight effort to propose a cure falls far short of what must be done to make our schools responsive to democracy's needs and to enable our colleges to open the minds of their students to the truth.

These are serious indictments. But for me the book's most glaring defect is with regard to the undergraduate use of the great books over the last sixty years, and the more recent introduction of them to basic schooling by the Paideia program. Allan Bloom either has no knowledge of these facts or is gravely at fault for neglecting to report them. There is but one reference in *The Closing of the American Mind* to the "good old great books approach." Nevertheless, he proposes that approach as a remedy for the reform of our colleges.

Before Allan Bloom was born, I was a student in the first great books seminar that John Erskine taught at Columbia University in 1921. From 1923 to 1929, with Mark Van Doren, I taught great books seminars at Columbia University. At the invitation of Robert M. Hutchins, President of the University of Chicago, I brought the great books educational program to Chicago in 1930, and Hutchins and I taught the great books there long before Allan Bloom arrived on the scene. We continued teaching them while he was a young student at the University of Chicago.

Allan Bloom either is ignorant of the work that had been done at Columbia and at the University of Chicago; or worse, he intentionally ignored it in order to foster the impression that his recommendation that the great books be read by college students was his own educational innovation. However, this interpretation of his failure to tip his hat to his many predecessors, especially those at his own university, is partly negated by the fact that he refers to "the good *old* great books approach" (italics added). Hence, one might conclude that his recommendation of the "great books approach" is qualified by the condition that they be read and taught in the style that he, Allan Bloom, and his teacher, Leo Strauss, have read and taught them.

That is most certainly not the way that John Erskine, Mark Van Doren, Robert Hutchins, Stringfellow Barr, Scott Buchanan, Jacques Barzun, Lionel Trilling, Otto Bird (the last three of whom were students of mine), and many others taught them long before Allan Bloom arrived at the University of Chicago. When I come to the consideration of the great books in relation to philosophical truth, I will try to explain why the dialectical rather than the doctrinal style of reading and teaching the great books is much to be preferred in the education of the young.

II

Erskine's great innovation was the undergraduate seminar in which students and teacher sat around a table and engaged in critical conversation about the ideas in an assigned text. Erskine developed the first list of some sixty great books to be read by college juniors and seniors. Nothing like it ever existed before in undergraduate instruction. Seminars, in the German style, had been conducted, but they were only for Ph.D. candidates and for the consideration of their doctoral researches.

Erskine's original reading list has been considerably revised and expanded since the early 1920s at Columbia itself, at the University of Chicago, at Saint John's College, and at other institutions (Notre Dame, Saint Mary's College) that adopted the great books seminars but all subsequent lists of great books have retained about 85 percent of Erskine's original list.

In 1928 a grant from the Carnegie Corporation enabled Scott Buchanan (who later became Dean of Saint John's College in Annapolis) and me to organize fifteen great books seminars for adults in New York City. This, so far as I know, was the first attempt to employ the reading and discussion of great books as a major form of continued learning for adults, later to become a national program under the auspices of the Great Books Foundation. There were two leaders for each of these seminars.

Before Hutchins went to Chicago, he and I discussed the Erskine list of great books that I had been teaching at Columbia. Hutchins confessed that in his undergraduate years at Yale, he had not read more than three or four of those books. Hutchins knew that his duties as president of the University of Chicago would get in the way of his own education unless he himself taught a course in which he had to read the books he had not read in college. He asked me to come to Chicago mainly for the purpose of teaching a great books seminar for entering freshmen that he and I would conduct as Mark Van Doren and I had done at Columbia. We did so from 1930 until 1948. From that, many other achievements followed.

In 1936, Hutchins established a Committee on the Liberal Arts. He invited Stringfellow Barr and Scott Buchanan of the University of Virginia to join us in planning an ideal, completely required curriculum for a liberal arts college. The reading and seminar discussion of great books for four years were central to that curriculum. This resulted in a greatly expanded list of great books, including works in mathematics and the natural sciences that had been for the most part absent from the original Erskine list. It also resulted, in 1937, in the establishment of the completely required New Program at Saint John's College, the fiftieth anniversary of which has recently been celebrated. The renown of Saint John's College, which was generally known as "the great books college," led other institutions in the 1940s, such as Notre Dame and Saint Mary's, to adopt modified versions of the program.

There were other, even more far-reaching results of what had been started at Columbia and Chicago.

In 1940, I published *How to Read a Book*, which should have been entitled *How to Read a Great Book*. That volume contained in its appendix a list of the great books, one that enlarged Erskine's original list and the one in use at the University of Chicago and at Saint John's College. It was a best-seller in 1940 and has been in print ever since. It has been used by many high schools and colleges in English courses as an instrument for cultivating skills in reading, and was revised in 1972 by Charles Van Doren and me.

In the 1940s, Hutchins and I also established the Great Books Foundation for the purpose of promoting great books seminars for adults all across the country. In that connection, I developed the first manual of instruction for the guidance of ordinary lay persons in the conduct of great books seminars. I also trained the first generation of seminar leaders in Chicago. During that same period, Hutchins and I conducted a great books seminar for Chicago's civic leaders, many of whom were trustees of the University of Chicago. Begun in 1943, it continues to this day, although its membership has changed considerably.

There are still other significant developments of the great books movement. The University of Chicago operated extension courses for adults in University College, which was then called “the downtown college.” With the enthusiastic endorsement of Dean Cyril Houle of that college, I outlined another modification of the Saint John’s program. It was called “The Basic Program of Liberal Education for Adults” and began its long and successful career in the late 1940s. Allan Bloom and other students of Leo Strauss at the University of Chicago were among the young men who were enlisted to teach the great books in that program. It was his first teaching job.

In the great books seminars that Hutchins and I conducted for Chicago’s civic leaders at the University Club were Walter and Elizabeth Paepeke. Their growing interest in the great books as an educational instrument for adults led in the early 1950s to the establishment of the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies. Starting out with just great books seminars, the Aspen seminars, especially the Executive Seminars, developed in other directions, but a handful of great books has always been at the core of the reading lists.

Another by-product of the great books seminars that Hutchins and I conducted at the University Club was the publication in 1952 by Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., of the Great Books of the Western World. William Benton, then a vice president of the University of Chicago, was a participant in that University Club seminar. When in 1943, he became owner and publisher of Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., he asked Hutchins and me to edit a set of great books for it to publish. We worked hard on that project for eight years, during which time I invented and produced the *Syntopicon* of the great ideas to accompany the set.

Then on a grant from the Ford foundation the Institute for Philosophical Research was established to undertake a dialectical examination of the great ideas. Since then, it has published a series of books, beginning with a two-volume work, entitled *The Idea of Freedom*. Finally, in 1982, after three years’ work with a group of eminent associates, I wrote and published *The Paideia Proposal*, an educational manifesto that called for a radical reform of basic schooling (kindergarten through twelfth grade) in the United States, and outlined a completely required curriculum that involved great books seminars in elementary and secondary schools.

I mention all this as background because *The Closing of the American Mind* and the reviews of it—both adverse and favorable—have made me realize that it is necessary to retell the story of the great books movement for the present academic generation, whose memories do not go further back than the 1960s, or at most, the end of the Second World War. It is also necessary to restate as clearly as possible the fundamental notions that underlie the selection of the great books, the proper way to discuss them in seminars, their use in a truly democratic system of education, and their relation to the pursuit of truth.

I would like, first, to discuss the ideal of a truly democratic system of education, which does not yet exist in this country and which Bloom’s book nowhere considers. Second, I think it necessary to examine truth and error in the great books, and their bearing on the proper way to conduct discussions of them, which is the dialectical method, not the doctrinal style employed by Allan Bloom and his teacher, Leo Strauss. Third, I must deal with a problem that deeply concerns

Allan Bloom—the prevalent skepticism about moral philosophy and the prevalence of subjectivism and relativism about values among students and professors—the causes of which Mr. Bloom inaccurately diagnoses. Finally, here and in the epilogue, I will set forth the fundamental notions and principles of the great books movement.

III

Many readers today think of democracy in twentieth-century terms as constitutional government with universal suffrage and the securing of natural, human rights. The other two quite different senses of democracy are the senses in which Plato and Aristotle in antiquity and Rousseau in the eighteenth century used the word: either for mob rule or for a constitutional government with citizenship restricted to men of property. In our terms, they used the word “democracy” to signify an oligarchy that conferred citizenship on men of small property instead of restricting it to those having large estates. (In Athens, at its most “democratic” extreme under Pericles, there were only 30,000 citizens in a population of 120,000. Excluded were women, slaves, and artisans.)

Neither for them nor for Allan Bloom, who admires the political philosophy of these oligarchs, does the word “democracy” stand for the political ideal the only perfectly just form of government. That use of the word makes its first appearance in 1861 in John Stuart Mill’s *Representative Government*. Mill was the first great political philosopher who spoke for universal suffrage, extending it to women and to the laboring classes. He thought that justice required securing political liberty and equality for all, with few exceptions. But in 1863 Mill was a reluctant democrat who feared the unenlightened self-interest of the working-class majority; and so advocated plural votes for the upper classes to help them defeat majority rule.

All of Mill’s predecessors in Western political theory thought that democracy, in *their* sense of the term, was either the worst form of bad government or the least desirable of the good forms of government, and none had even the slightest conception or even conjecture of democracy, in the twentieth-century sense of the term, as a political ideal to be realized in the future.

Bloom’s readers have to guess in which of these radically different senses of democracy he uses the word. On the one hand, he could not be complaining about the failure of our educational institutions to serve democracy if he did not think of it as a desirable form of government. On the other hand, can any reader of *The Closing of the American Mind* fail to detect the strong strain of elitism in Bloom’s own thinking, as evidenced by his devotion to Plato, Rousseau, and Nietzsche, and by his advocacy of reading of the great books by relatively few in the student population, certainly not by all?

The recency of constitutional democracy in this country explains and may even justify our not yet having a truly democratic system of public schooling or institutions of higher learning that are concerned with making good citizens of those who attend our colleges.

In 1817, Thomas Jefferson, as much an oligarch as John Adams, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and all the rest of our founding fathers, called upon the Virginia legislature to give three years of common schooling to all the children of the state. After three years, he advocated dividing the children into those destined

for labor and those destined for leisure and learning (and citizenship and public office), and sending only the latter to college.

In our twentieth-century understanding of the term “democracy,” Jefferson’s educational program was thoroughly antidemocratic, but it still exists in the United States today. Though virtually all the children in our schools are now destined to become citizens, we still divide them into the college-bound and those not going from high school to college. The quality of schooling given the non-college-bound does not prepare them for citizenship or for a life enriched by continued learning; nor, I should add, does the quality of education given the college-bound when they get to college. It is still a fundamentally antidemocratic system of schooling with a sharp differentiation between two tracks, one for those of inferior ability and one for their betters.

The first real departure from Jefferson’s antidemocratic policy (dominating American education from 1817 to the present day) occurred in this century with startling pronouncements by John Dewey and Robert Hutchins. *The Paideia Proposal* in 1982 was dedicated to them because of their commitment to a democratic system of education.

In 1900, John Dewey said that the kind of schooling that the best and wisest parents would want for their children is precisely the kind of schooling that the community should want for all its children. Any other policy if acted upon, he said, would defeat democracy.

In his epoch-making book, *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey enunciated a position the opposite of Jefferson’s. He said all the children in our nation, now that it was on its way to becoming democratic, had the same destiny to lead lives in which they would earn a living, act as intelligent citizens of the republic, and make an effort to lead a decent and enriched human life.

Bloom’s book does not manifest the slightest commitment to a program for giving *all* the children the same quality of schooling to enable them to fulfill their common destiny. Nor does it give its readers any indication that the most grievous failure of our schools and colleges to serve democracy, now that democracy has at last come into existence, lies in the early differentiation of students, with different tracks for different students. In the early 1930s President Hutchins was asked whether great books seminars, then open only to a picked handful of students, should be accessible to all the students in our colleges. His brief reply was crisp and clear. He said that the best education for the best was the best education for all. Great books seminars in our public schools and in our colleges should be available to all the students there, not only to the few who elect to take them or who are specially selected. That is not the answer to be found in Allan Bloom’s book.



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