

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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**Mortimer Adler's Greatest Idea: Teaching Kids How to Think**

**By Susan Walton**

**Education Week October 5, 1981**

Twenty-three high-school students stood outside the entrance to the conference center of the Wye Plantation in Easton, Md., talking quietly amongst themselves. Sophomores, juniors, and seniors from eastern Maryland high schools, the students were waiting to begin a three-day seminar, held last May, on six Great Ideas: goodness, truth, beauty, liberty, justice, and equality.

The students, under the guidance of Mortimer J. Adler, the educator and philosopher, would discuss two great ideas each day.

Many of the students were a bit dubious about the seminar. They had accepted the invitation to participate, and most said they had read Mr. Adler's book, *Six Great Ideas*, on which their discussions would be based. But they had found it heavy going, and many had read it more than once.

The author, a short, slightly plump man who wears his nearly 80 years lightly, also waited outside the conference room where the seminars were to be held. Unlike the students, Mortimer Adler was very sure of himself. "Watch and listen," he told several observers who were skeptical of the students' ability to carry on a serious philosophical discussion. "Watch and listen."

### **Using the Socratic Method**

For the next day and a half, Mr. Adler used a loosely structured version of the Socratic method to encourage and entice the students through three "great ideas." By the end of the third session, most of them agreed with him: High-school students can carry on intelligent philosophical discussions.

Yes, they told observers, they would very much like to have such discussions in their regular classes. Yes, they thought their classmates would also like that. No, they were not bored. Yes, most of them said, the experience would likely prove useful to them in the future.

One student, a high-school junior who was proving particularly talented at the Socratic method, replied that he was "really not in a position to make a value judgement on that at this time." A few who had been silent during the day's discussions complained that they had not had a chance to argue back; they suggested that they had not been intellectually bested so much as outmaneuvered.

It was not the first time in his 60-year career in education and philosophy that Mr. Adler had left his audience both impressed and slightly irritated. Although at the age of 78 he is well known as an educator, philosopher, and one of the original editors of the "Great Books" series, his professional life has been characterized by controversy from the beginning.

In 1917, when he was 15, Mr. Adler dropped out of high school when his principal, as a punishment, cut him off from all extra-curricular activities. He became a copy-boy at the *New York Sun*, where, he writes in his autobiography,

Philosopher At Large, each day he placed his own anonymous editorials on the editor's desk, along with those by the regular writers.

It was reading John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* that put an end to Mr. Adler's career in journalism and sent him back into the classroom—but not before some of the editorials made it into the paper.

Mr. Adler began his formal quest for knowledge at Columbia College—now Columbia University. There, he took a “General Honors” course taught by John Erskine, the educator, author, and musician who taught at Columbia for many years. Mr. Erskine's course covered “great books” (although not so labeled at that point), and was taught in a style that

Mr. Adler would use this with the Maryland high-school students 60 years later.

This teaching style, based on a seminar format, is used very little in the public schools, Mr. Adler said during the Wye Plantation seminars. If teachers were exposed to similar seminars during their training, he added, they would be more comfortable using them in their own classrooms.

### **‘Any Teacher Can Do It’**

“Learning how to carry on this kind of discussion comes from being involved in it yourself,” he said. “I learned it, insofar as I learned it at all, from being a student in John Erskine's class at Columbia in 1921. I watched Erskine do it, and, when I was asked to do it myself as an instructor, I simply imitated Erskine.”

“I say that any teacher can do it,” he continued. “I say that all any teacher has to do is think. All you do is take a text that raises important questions and do the requisite thinking. The important thing is to know what the questions are. You've got to ask the questions.”

Mr. Adler stayed at Columbia as an instructor in the psychology department although, he has said, philosophy remained his primary interest. But in 1929 he made another significant shift, this time to join Robert M. Hutchins, the newly appointed 30-year-old president of the University of Chicago.

There, Mr. Adler continued the “great books” work—teaching them, writing about them, and eventually, with Mr. Hutchins, selecting and annotating the “Great Books” series that was published in 1952 by the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

The “great books” have been the cornerstone of Mr. Adler's career ever since. Consisting originally of 143 works by 86 authors, the official set of Great Books began with Homer and continued through Aristotle, Shakespeare, William James, Melville, and others to Mr. Adler's own works. The series also included a two-volume index of 102 “great ideas” called *The Syntopicon*, which Mr. Adler compiled with the assistance of a team of graduate students.

The series, which has been revised several times since it was first published, was criticized by some writers and educators, who believed that the authors and texts included did not represent the world's best thinking and writing.

The writer and editor Dwight McDonald, for example, commented in 1952 that the editors "failed to overcome the two greatest barriers to a modern reader's understanding and enjoyment of the Great Books—that their authors were largely foreigners in both time and place."

The series was never incorporated into public-school curricula, as the editors hoped it would be. But there are "Great Books" discussion groups, sponsored by the nonprofit Great Books Foundation, for adults and young people in most parts of the country.

### **Classes Are Too Short**

Through the years, Mr. Adler has remained loyal to the idea that philosophy and classical literature belong in the secondary schools. He cited several reasons for their absence.

"In the first place," he said, "you can't teach [them] in a normal classroom, where you're sitting back-to-back. And in the second place, you can't do it in the 50-minute class hour. You have to take two periods. And you'd be surprised how many schools can't meet either of those two demands, outside the normal classroom, outside the normal period. In fifty minutes you just get started."

The limiting factor, according to Mr. Adler, is not the students. "Children of this age are just ripe for dealing with important, difficult subjects, subjects of great human interest," he says, "subjects they enjoy thinking about. They obviously enjoy thinking. They find it exciting." But students are not, he says, "all equally good at this sort of thing."

The seminars for high-school students are Mr. Adler's way of demonstrating that high-school students can understand and discuss philosophy.

So far, he has held several seminars under the auspices of the Aspen Institute in Aspen, Colo., and another in Oakland, Calif., at the invitation of Superintendent Ruth Love. Ms. Love, now superintendent of the Chicago public schools, has invited him to hold a seminar there in March 1982.

Mr. Adler uses the seminars to teach students how to discuss philosophy, as well as to introduce them to some of the central ideas of western civilization. He also experiments with teaching styles, about which he also holds firm opinions.

"The ideal seminar," he said, "is conducted for two hours with one question. For example, the subject is Hamlet. [On that] you only need to ask one question." Mr. Adler pauses for emphasis. "What happened?"

He continued: “One says to the students, ‘You read the play; tell me what the story is.’ Then you go around the room and tell the students that as soon as they hear something incorrect, they should raise their hands.

“No one can tell the story without everyone else saying, ‘No, that’s not what happened’” he suggests. “And no one can tell the external story without introducing their interpretation of motives and reactions and reasons. Everyone’s reading of the play is different, and so you spend two hours getting everyone to tell you what happened in the play. That’s an ideal seminar.”

In the course of the Wye Plantation discussion, virtually everyone—including Mortimer Adler—changed his or her mind. Mr. Adler liked that; it was a sign, he said, that one of his favorite activities, thinking, was going on. “The most wonderful thing that can happen in a seminar is to have them put on a piece of paper an answer which they give up later after a closer reading of the text,” he said.

If he has his way, the students of the future will have, at least, a better chance to become intimately acquainted with great books and great ideas.

Together with a group of other educators, Mr. Adler is putting the final touches on the “Paideia Plan,” a curriculum that he believes should replace much of what is taught in the public schools. But as he said in a speech to a meeting of chief state school officers in August, he did not think that his curriculum would be adopted in this century.

But he is undeterred. The final plan will be probably be released in the spring of 1982.




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