

A GUIDE FOR LEADERS OF GREAT BOOKS DISCUSSION GROUPS

Reading Great Books alone will not do.

What should an autodidact do to continue learning throughout his or her adult life?

My answer can be summed up in three words: “Read and Discuss”—reading Great Books alone will not do. Solitary reading is as undesirable as solitary drinking. To enrich one's understanding of what one has read, one must discuss it with others who have read the same book, with or without the guidance of someone who is a better reader than most of us are.

Nor will discussion itself serve this purpose without any control by or reference to topics or themes developed in the great conversation to be found in the Great Books. Without that control, discussion usually denigrates into superficial chatter, after-dinner chitchat, or what is worse, a bull-session that is nothing but an exchange of opinions with everyone speaking in turn without anybody listening to what anyone else has said.

The regulative maxim for the autodidact is “read and discuss” with emphasis on the word “and” to signify that the two activities must be done in planned conjunction with each other, not each in absence or deprivation of the other.

—Mortimer J. Adler



EDITOR'S NOTE

We have had numerous requests for a Guide for Leaders from those of you who have started or are planning to start your own Great Ideas or Great Books Discussion Group.

Here, we are publishing only the first Chapter. If any of you would like the entire 50 page document, just drop us a note and we will send it via e-mail, MSWord or PDF.

Originally published in 1951 by the Great Books Foundation—for the most current information on materials and programs, visit their Homepage at: <http://www.greatbooks.com/>

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Chapter 1

The Great Books program

This is a guide for leaders of Great Books discussion groups. It is intended as a supplement to the Leader Training courses offered by the Great Books Foundation. Simply studying this guide will not make you an expert leader. Time, experience with a group, and a growing awareness of proper methods which comes only from continuing, critical re-examination—can make you a competent leader. In this guide we have attempted to set forth the end and method of the Great Books program. Briefly put, the end is liberal education for all interested adults. The method is reading and group discussion of an organized list of great works, under the guidance of two

persons trained in the Socratic, or “questioning,” method. This brief statement obviously raises more questions than it answers: What is meant by liberal education? why for adults? why all adults? why in groups? why with an organized list of readings? why through questioning? The answers to these questions require an understanding of the principles which distinguish the Great Books program as a unique educational venture.

What is liberal education?

Knowledge, to be truly knowledge, must consist of more than a memory of facts or a particular interpretation of facts. Genuine knowledge involves understanding the process of reasoning by which facts have been interpreted. It includes a grasp of cause, the why and wherefore, the underlying principles and basic assumptions on which a fact depends for its meaning. This insight we call understanding. It is not enough simply to know certain things—to be, as Socrates would put it, “of right opinion”—but one must be capable of joining in the process by which truth is sought. This is the first principle of the Great Books program: that all men can join this process; that man is a rational creature, capable of understanding. So we define liberal education as the education of the understanding, as opposed to the acquisition of facts; it is education that liberates the human mind from the particular and the immediate—it is the education of man as man: not as doctors or lawyers, housewives or secretaries, but in that dimension that makes the animal-man human—the power to speak, to abstract, to imagine, to transmit the tradition, to reason. Its subjects are science and philosophy, poetry and history, politics and ethics, wit and tragedy—the different expressions of man’s understanding.

This leads us to our second principle: that is, that there is a common core of problems that have occupied all men, in all places and in all ages, and that the discussion of these problems throughout history is a “conversation” which is reproduced best in the great books. These books represent our tradition, our civilization, and some of the finest attempts made to state the basic questions of human existence and to answer them. The reading and discussing of these works can open the mind to that “perpetual vision of greatness,” which the late Alfred North Whitehead described as the necessary ingredient of true education.

Why for adults?

Suppose we agree that liberal education is worthwhile: how does it concern adults? Isn’t education something one either gets or doesn’t get when in school? Not at all, and everyone knows it isn’t.

Education is in reality a lifelong business, and liberal education is that kind of education most possible, not in the ages of formal schooling, but in adulthood. Liberal education is that growth peculiarly possible to adults. Why? In reading and discussing great books, adults bring to their studies a breadth of experience which no school child or college youth can. Adults have lived in one way or another the problems that form the subject matter of great books; younger people have not, and they are unable to subject the authors to the test of experience. Training for liberal education must begin in the schools, but liberal education itself is the business of a mature adulthood.

“Hence a young man is not a proper hearer of lectures
on political science . . .” —Aristotle

But why all adults?

Education is the cornerstone of democracy because the exercise of democracy requires from every citizen the ability to make free, responsible, and intelligent judgments. Hence not just the acquisition of facts, but liberal education in reasoning and understanding must be as wide as citizenship itself—which, in a democracy, is universal. And never in the history of mankind has there been more need than there is today for reasonable judgments, freely arrived at, disregarding propaganda and prejudice, and flowing from true understanding.

Can all adults read great books?

In the words of Robert Maynard Hutchins: “The great books were not too difficult for the school children of former ages or for the founding fathers of this Republic, most of whom studied them. We cannot assume that our stock has deteriorated or that the books have become harder.” Yet one of the tragically significant characteristics of our modern society is that we are no longer familiar with the primary sources of our culture, as were the ancient Greeks, the Restoration English, or the framers of our Constitution. Why have we lost contact? The answer lies not in our inability to read—anyone capable of serious reading can read a great book and profit by it—but rather in the reading habits formed by the modern emphasis on brevity, synopsis, and picture which give us “facts” in a hurry but seldom exercise the mind.

Of course, a person who has had little formal education may read differently and with perhaps more initial difficulty than the average college graduate. A hallmark of great works, however, is an essential and persistent simplicity, and they can be read at many

levels of meaning and comprehension. The experienced and the beginner will not both get the same thing out of Aristotle's *Politics*, necessarily, but they will both find it thought-provoking at the first (and tenth) reading.

In a large sense, a great book is a book the matter of which is initially over anyone's head. Yet how much better it is for man to stretch than to stoop! Although great books are not easy, they are elementary. They require no specialized knowledge before we can begin to understand them, and are without reference to any materials beyond our own experience of life. Diversity of formal educational backgrounds within a discussion group actually helps the learning process; for each participant gets the stimulating benefit of the divergent backgrounds.

Why in groups?

Couldn't one read great works by himself, understand their ideas and issues, and so start for himself a liberal education? There are several reasons why the answer is "no." There's the practical one that it is easy to break a date with a book and yourself, but not quite so easy to break a date with a book and yourself and twenty other people who have read it and want to discuss it with you! But even assuming one were of the most excellent private reading habits, would a liberal education follow? If liberal education is the education of "man as man," and man is not only an individual but an individual in society, then that education, to be liberal, must encompass the development of man's mind in communication with fellow individuals in society. How better to practice and achieve those arts of communication than through group discussion of a common reading?

Above and beyond the development of the arts of communication (which we will discuss shortly), group discussion in the Great Books program affords experience in intelligent tolerance, the give-and-take of ideas, and reasonable argument, all essential to the citizenry of a democracy and for learning, ultimately, to *think for ourselves*. Two readers, in discussion, serve to check each other's interpretations, correct each other's misconceptions. Multiply this ten-fold and you have the potential informative and corrective power of group discussion at its best. Twenty pairs of eyes, twenty minds, twenty modes of expression, and twenty points of view brought to bear upon the same idea or issue can be the antidote for our individual "blind spots" and intellectual prejudices, those persistent stumbling blocks to the liberated human understanding.

Why an ordered list of readings?

Isn't "democracy" in education letting the people choose what they are going to read? The Foundation believes that this question contains a misunderstanding of both democracy and education. Choice without reason and experience, simply for the sake of choice, is more a part of tyranny than of democracy. In education it would lead to the anarchy of all values and ideas. Not with assumed authority or mere caprice, but from experience and by trial and error over a considerable period of time, the Great Books Foundation, its leaders and groups, and hundreds of co-operating agencies have developed the present reading lists. The lists have evolved from considerations both practical (copyright costs, availability of good texts and translations) and educational (the pattern of proceeding from ancients to relative moderns chronologically within any given year, and the difficulty of ideas involved). The lists are still evolving and they undergo constant re-examination. (The first three years of reading were completely revised and published in new editions in 1955 after seven years of testing and evaluating.) Because the Foundation is dedicated to the end of liberal education for all interested adults, it has undertaken to publish a uniform, inexpensive body of materials for reading and discussing, chosen from the generally accepted classics of our civilization.

Why through questioning?

Why not lectures? So far, in discussing the Great Books program as the core of liberal education, we have talked largely about the content. The Great Books program also involves a method—the method of learning through discussion.

Learning is a participative process. As Socrates long ago discovered, it is concerned with activity of the mind. Lectures have their uses in the learning process. But rarely is a mind made active by lectures alone. Lectures can be filled, crammed, flowing over with words, facts, isolated information. Yet almost never does a lecture force the mind to think for itself.

In group discussion, with leaders asking questions designed to explore the reasons for your answer, with group members challenging your assumptions and your conclusions, the mind is forced back upon itself, forced to justify a position in the light of reason, or to abandon it. In the Great Books program one learns the responsibility of assertion. And a man who is to be questioned about his reading reads more carefully, analyzes and accepts or rejects more critically. He is, in a word, more alert as a participant than if he were simply a passive member of an audience. In the art of

questioning lies your role as a leader of a Great Books discussion group.

The end of the Great Books program, then, is free liberal education for all interested adults. Its method is reading and group discussion of an ordered list of great works, under the guidance of two persons trained in the skills of questioning.

The liberal arts

If the end of liberal education is the growth of man as man, what are its means, its tools? For the purposes of this guide, we can concern ourselves with the arts of reading, speaking, and listening, which, when combined with the art of writing (an art not directly exercised in the Great Books program), constitute the passive and active means of human communication. Two are ways of expressing oneself, two are modes of receiving expression. Since thinking must involve the symbols of communication, he who reads well, listens well, speaks well, and writes well can be said to think well.


Reading, speaking, listening—fairly simple functions of which any normal person is capable, you say. Why call them “arts”? Reading, speaking, and listening are not only arts but, among most of us, bidding fair to become lost arts. It is true that we can see print upon a page, make coherent sounds, even hear sounds (though we generally find them less coherent than the ones we make). But is this really the art of reading or speaking or listening?

We can read simple sentences. Are we equally comfortable with a style which is involved, subtle, balanced, dependent, elliptic? Are we able to grasp equally well prose and poetry? Comic books, pictures, digests, have lessened the challenge of the printed page, and lessened our ability to understand abstract terms and abstruse reasoning. How often, when reading, do we see what is on the printed page? How much more frequently do we see what we want to see? Each of us is capable not only of “wishful thinking” but of “wishful reading” as well. To read with comprehension, yet retain sharp memory of the parts, is indeed an art, and an art you will find the average adult sorely in need of.

Speaking, that’s easy! We all speak. Yes, but do we communicate? Or are we living in a private world of our own sounds, using private meanings, private connotations, in public places? So many of our arguments never come to grips with a communicable issue, but bog down in the private meaning of words loosely used and ill defined. How better can we improve the communicativeness of our

language than in a group, publicly asserting, defending, exposing our thinking? To use precisely the right word, with precisely the right shade of meaning, is difficult. But continued effort, especially after we have had a few experiences with the misunderstandings that arise from mistaken connotations, will help us to say what we mean, in such fashion that our meaning will be understood.

In the art of human communication, listening is simply the other side of the coin to speaking. In any ultimate sense, no one can communicate well, no matter how well he speaks, unless he can listen well also. It is impossible in group discussion to join issue, to speak intelligently, unless you have heard the issue stated. Frequently we dismiss discussions as fruitless when they might be made to yield rich harvests if only the discussants (if we might mix a metaphor) were not wearing blinders over their ears! Seriously, he who has not developed the art of listening is indeed lonely, for he has banished himself to the world within his own head, alone.

Reading, speaking, listening, these are the liberal arts involved in the Great Books program. And it is to the exercise of these arts that the Socratic, or questioning, method of the Great Books program is especially directed. This is an important point for leaders to bear in mind. We said earlier that “anyone capable of serious reading” can grasp the significance of the great books. We meant that art of reading, an art, we pointed out, acquired nowadays by few adults. This indicates that the Great Books program not only must direct participants to its end, liberal education, but must help them to develop the means to that end, the liberal arts of reading, speaking, listening. 

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