

The Shared Inquiry Method of Learning

The goal of Great Books programs is to instill in adults the habits of mind that characterize a self-reliant thinker, reader, and learner. Great Books programs are predicated on the idea that everyone can read and understand excellent literature—literature that has the capacity to engage the whole person, the imagination as well as the intellect.

Shared Inquiry is a distinctive method of learning in which participants search for answers to fundamental questions raised by a text. This search is inherently active; it involves taking what the author has given us and trying to grasp its full meaning, to interpret or reach an understanding of the text in light of our experience and using sound reasoning.

The success of Shared Inquiry depends on a special relationship between the leader and the group. As a Shared Inquiry member, remember that your teacher does not impart information or present their own opinions, but guides participants in reaching their own interpretations. This is done by posing thought-provoking questions and by following up purposefully on what participants say. In doing so, the teacher helps the students develop both the flexibility of mind to consider problems from many angles, and the discipline to analyze ideas critically.

In Shared Inquiry, participants learn to give full consideration to the ideas of others, to weigh the merits of opposing arguments, and to modify their initial opinions as the evidence demands. They gain experience in communicating complex ideas and in supporting, testing, and expanding their own thoughts. In this way, the Shared Inquiry method promotes thoughtful dialogue and open debate, preparing its participants to become able, responsible citizens, as well as enthusiastic, lifelong readers.

THE FOUR RULES OF SHARED INQUIRY DISCUSSION

1. Only those who have read the selection may take part in discussion. Participants who have not read the selection cannot support their opinions with evidence from the text, nor can they bring knowledge of the text to bear on the opinions of others.

2. Discussion is restricted to the selection that everyone has read. This rule gives everyone an equal chance to contribute because it limits discussion to a selection that all participants are familiar with and have before them. When the selection is the sole focus of discussion, it provides a base for all present to judge whether facts are accurately recalled and opinions can be supported by the reading.

3. All opinions should be supported with evidence from the selection. Participants may introduce outside opinions only if they can restate those opinions in their own words and support the ideas with evidence from the reading.

4. Leaders may only ask questions-they may not answer them. Leaders help participants and themselves to arrive at an understanding of the text by asking questions that prompt thoughtful inquiry.

The goal of a Shared Inquiry discussion is interpretation. As a participant in the discussion, you will gain more if you remember to:

- reserve judgment until you can claim understanding
- temper your urge to speak with the discipline to listen
- substitute your impulse to teach with a passion to learn
- hear what is said and listen for what is meant
- marry your certainties with others' possibilities

Learning Objectives of the Shared Inquiry Method

Reading Comprehension

- Use prereading strategies
- Generate questions about the story
- Make generalizations and draw conclusions
- Answer questions about the story's meaning
- Summarize stories and passages
- Discuss interpretations of the story
- Cite passages to support questions and ideas
- Read with fluency
- Gain exposure to a wide range of words
- Use context to figure out word meaning
- Read with a purpose and take notes to monitor comprehension
- Practice using a variety of reading strategies

Critical Thinking

- Ask interpretive questions
- Generate ideas with a clear focus in response to questions
- Support ideas with relevant evidence
- Respond to other students' ideas, questions, and arguments
- Revise ideas and evidence based on Shared Inquiry discussion
- Modify an argument to incorporate other students' ideas
- Question other students' perspectives
- Compare and weigh evidence
- Evaluate ideas for sense and evidence
- Present ideas logically and persuasively

Listening and Speaking

- Comprehend as stories are read aloud
- Listen actively and carefully to others; listen for differing ideas
- Ask for clarification
- Respond to other students' questions
- Participate in discussion
- State ideas clearly
- Agree and disagree constructively
- Explain and defend arguments

Writing

- Take notes about a story
- Record personal responses before and after discussion
- Use discussion to generate and develop ideas
- Use graphic organizers to plan writing
- Write a first draft
- Write descriptions, narratives, expository essays, and persuasive essays
- Practice creative writing
- Revise writing in response to feedback

TYPES OF QUESTIONS

It's All About Interpretation

The kind of question a leader asks determines the kind of discussion, and even the kind of thinking, that will happen. In Shared Inquiry we distinguish three kinds of questions.

FACTUAL QUESTION

1) A factual question asks, what is the author saying? It is the lowest level of questioning. There is only one correct answer to a factual question that can be supported with evidence from the text. Knowing the facts differs from knowing what the facts mean.

Example from Jack and the Beanstalk: A factual question has only one correct answer that can be supported with evidence.

What was the name of Jack's cow?

What items did Jack take from the Ogre?

How many times did Jack go up the beanstalk?

When a student can correctly answer a factual question, she knows what the text says, and what happened and to whom. But knowing the facts is not the same as knowing what they mean.

INTERPRETIVE QUESTION

2) An interpretative question asks, what does the author mean? It has more than one answer that can be supported with evidence from the text. Use your own curiosity about the meaning of the selection as a means of developing effective interpretive questions.

THE SHARED INQUIRY DISCUSSION FOCUSES ON INTERPRETATIVE QUESTIONS. To answer an interpretative question, the reader must figure out what the text means by what it says. To interpret is to make sense of what is said.

Example from Jack and the Beanstalk: An interpretive question has more than one answer that can be supported with evidence from the text.

"Ah! you don't know what these beans are," said the man. "If you plant them overnight, by morning they grow right up to the sky."

"Really?" says Jack. "You don't say so."

Does Jack believe that the beans will grow right up to the sky?

Parts of the story will support the idea that Jack does believe the man's words, but other parts suggest that he does not. "Really, you don't say so" might be sarcastic and condescending, or it might be naive.

Simply knowing what the text says is not enough. If we want to understand Jack and this story, we need to figure out what the text means by these words.

To answer an interpretive question, the reader must figure out what the text means by what it says.

EVALUATIVE QUESTIONS

3) An evaluative question asks, what do you think of the author's ideas? The reader examines whether or not the author's point of view is in agreement with his or her own beliefs, values, and experiences. This type of question is reserved for the end of the discussion.

Example from Jack and the Beanstalk: An evaluative question asks the reader to decide whether he or she agrees with the author's ideas or point of view in light of his or her own knowledge, values, and experience.

Is it necessary to take risks -- as Jack does -- in order to grow up?

Like an interpretive question, this one can be validly answered in more than one way. Exploring answers to it, however, will lead not to the text as much as it will to the values, beliefs and experience of the reader.

This sort of exploration of one's own point of view and how it compares to that of the story is most worthwhile and valuable only after carefully interpreting. Only after a reader comes to an understanding of why Jack takes the risks he does and what the story is trying to say about that risk-taking will he or she be able to profitably explore evaluative questions.

Checklist for Effective Interpretive Questions

To determine whether a question will be effective, test it for the following elements:

The question has these *essential* characteristics:

- The text supports more than one reasonable answer.
 - I see more than one reasonable answer based on the text.
 - I want to know the best answer.
 - My students want to know the best answer.
 - Answering the question will force my students to figure out the meaning of the text.
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The question has these helpful (but not absolutely essential) characteristics:

- The wording of the question will not confuse my students.
 - The question does not contain terminology that my students might not understand.
 - The question does not contain any ambiguous words or phrases for which my students will have various understandings.
 - My students will understand exactly the part of the story I am asking about.
 - The question does not contain any unnecessary interpretive assumptions about the story.
 - The question does not needlessly refer to the author.
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