

## **Paideia: The Shared Inquiry Method of Learning**

“Know thyself” “Nothing in Excess” -- inscribed on the temple at Delphi.

"Hard is the Good" -- Plato's *Republic*

*Paideia comes from “Arete”, the Greek word for “excellence” and represents the Socratic approach to learning that was the cornerstone of Plato’s Academy in the 4th century B.C. The modern version that comes closest to Plato’s methods is called the Shared Inquiry approach, renowned for its development through the Encyclopedia Britannica’s Great Books Program.*

The goal of Paideia programs is to instill in adults and children the habits of mind that characterize a self-reliant thinker, reader, and learner. Paideia 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.

Shared inquiry leaders do not impart information or present their own opinions, but guide 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, participants 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.

Paideia or Shared Inquiry Discussions help students develop the following skills:

- \* Generate unique ideas for solutions
- \* Support opinions with evidence from the text
- \* Develop ideas in response to divergent perspectives

- \* Weigh the value of competing evidence
- \* Learn to demand evidence and reason to support opinions and conclusions
- \* Become comfortable with having their ideas challenged by critical reflection
- \* Listen to evaluate and learn from others
- \* Use both agreement and disagreement in a collaborative effort to construct meaning
- \* See and hear the validity of divergent perspectives

**Shared Inquiry Discussion:** the central activity of all Great Books programs. In Shared Inquiry Discussion, the leader poses an interpretive question for the group to consider and try to answer, and then maintains a posture of only asking questions. Because there is more than one valid answer to interpretive questions, this process becomes one of sharing ideas and interpretations so that all participants come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the selection.

**four rules:** There are four rules that organize Shared Inquiry Discussion:

- 1) Only those who have read the selection may take part in the discussion.
- 2) Discussion is restricted to the selection that everyone has read.
- 3) All opinions should be supported with evidence from the selection.
- 4) Leaders may only ask questions, not answer them.

In Shared Inquiry, participants raise and try to answer interpretive questions, or questions for which the text will support more than one answer.

**interpretive question:** A question that can be answered in more than one way based on the evidence of the text.

For example: from the fairy tale “Jack and the Beanstalk” for the question "Why did Jack trade Milky-white for the five beans?" the text will support many answers, including, "The old man tricks Jack into making the trade" and "Jack is not very smart and believes the beans are worth more than his cow."