



# GUIDE FOR DISCUSSION GROUPS

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## WHY HAVE YOU READ THIS BOOK? WHY READ THIS BOOK WITH OTHERS, MAYBE EVEN IN A GROUP?

IF YOU are wondering whether to invest your time in this book, I encourage you to ask yourself the following questions: What did you like most about your education? What did you like the least? Do you wish you had more knowledge of one kind or another? Do you wish you understood better how to connect knowledge to practical wisdom for life?

Or, if you are reading this guide after you have reached the end of the book: What led you to read it? What were the questions or concerns that brought you to invest your time in reading it? How has the book helped you cultivate a greater commitment to ideas, practices, and people? What can you do to take what you have learned from the book back to your own environment?

Whether you are reading this guide for discussion groups before or after you read the book, I encourage you to think about giving the book to at least one other person and asking him or her to read it with you and discuss it. Why? We learn most deeply when learning alongside others, sharing what we learn, and listening to what they have learned. As a



## THE LOVE OF LEARNING

teacher, I am blessed to do this every day—my job is to bring great ideas to communities of learners and guide them through these ideas so that they might apply them in their own lives.

I have been blessed to be a professor for more than fifteen years, teaching hundreds of students from college freshmen to advanced doctoral students; leading seminars for other scholars to introduce them to new texts and ideas; running countless discussion groups of varying sizes, whether church groups or student groups; and I have participated in many more discussion groups and seminars myself. All of these experiences as a teacher and life-long learner have helped me assemble this guide for reading this book in a group.

### WAYS TO READ THE BOOK

DEPENDING ON your background or purpose, you can read the book over a variety of different lengths of time. For any of these formats discussed below, I recommend you make use of the videos that were the original dialogues, or the video clips. Videos are dynamic: they grab our attention and open up questions. The written text allows our minds to slow down, ponder certain points deeply, and look back at the arc of a dialogue with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

These chapters grew out of a series of dialogues—they were originally spoken out loud. I recommend reading out loud from the text regardless of which format you use. Naturally, when discussing more than one chapter in a session, one has less time to read the entire chapter out loud. I recommend, however, highlighting key sections, quotes, or entire paragraphs, and reading them out loud together. We learn with our minds and our ears; reading and listening reinforce each other.



You may also choose from the list of references at the end of each chapter to do additional reading, and/or read sections of the Short Guides to Key Texts in Educational Philosophy, or chapters from those sources.

Here are some suggestions for various formats for a discussion group on this text.

1. Read one chapter at a time, adding the introduction and conclusion to the first and last weeks, respectively. This format would work well to read the chapters out loud together and discuss.

2. Read two chapters at a time over a four-week period, adding the introduction to Chapters 1 and 2 in Week 1 and the conclusion to Chapter 7 in Week 4. In this format, reading should be done in advance, but I encourage you to pick certain sections to read out loud.

3. You could set aside an entire day and split the chapters into 4 sessions, following the same breakdown as Suggestion 2.

4. This book can also be taught as part of a longer course on education or philosophy. Each chapter can be assigned along with some primary readings from the books in the Short Guides and/or some of the additional readings listed in the references of each chapter. For this model, I have found it helpful to combine additional readings from the denser philosophical texts with some of the more contemporary pieces that get at current debates and challenges in education.

## WHOM TO GATHER?

ALTHOUGH THIS book is aimed at anyone with a life-long interest in learning, it could be fruitful for groups to read this book together who can then apply the insights to their particular circumstances. Some particular groups of people who might benefit from reading this book together include:

## THE LOVE OF LEARNING

- ✦ Educators (teachers at any level from K–12 or higher education; anyone who works in student life, like high school guidance counselors or deans in higher education).
- ✦ Policymakers (legislators and administrators).
- ✦ Students.
- ✦ Parents.
- ✦ Life-long learners.
- ✦ Families.

The first meeting of a discussion group is crucial. Ask everyone to introduce themselves, say what brought them to the group, and what they hope to get out of it.

How big should the group be? As an educator, I have seen time and again that in groups larger than twelve, in-depth discussion becomes harder. Maybe this is the reason Jesus had twelve and only twelve disciples. Groups with six to eight people work well because everyone has a chance to talk, and you will hear a variety of perspectives. But groups of two, three, and four are also great. If you are fortunate to have more than twelve people interested in reading this book, I would recommend finding ways to get people to actively engage with each other about the reading, such as breaking down into sections of three or four people, for part of the time, and having one person per section report back to the main group.

## TIME

HOW SHOULD the time in a discussion group be allocated?

If you have two hours, you may wish to discuss the reading over a meal. Take thirty or, at most, forty-five minutes to gather, eat, converse,

and then start the discussion. Or you can reverse the order, having the formal discussion first and then continuing to talk over a meal.

If you have less time, meet for at least one hour or preferably an hour and a half. Provision of snacks and water, coffee, and tea is always pleasant. But by all means do not feel pressured to be Martha the anxious hostess: people can bring their own snacks and water.

### BASIC EXPECTATIONS

*TIMELINESS, PRAYER, and respect.* Try to start on time and end on time. Start the group with prayer if you feel comfortable. If everyone in the group does not identify as a person with a faith tradition, or the same faith is not shared, people can take turns starting the group off in a way that makes them feel comfortable. Each member could share his or her own religious tradition, or some such manner of establishing intentions when entering into a learning setting. Many people will have experiences that allow them to lead the group in this way; those who do not will learn from others. Never force anyone to lead in this way if they feel uncomfortable; rarely, or more likely never, have I seen anyone opposed to a group starting off this way even if they do not share the opening prayers or thoughts. This is part and parcel of respecting each person's starting-point.

*Speak openly.* Be willing to challenge others and be challenged yourself. Be civil, as that will help in our common purpose of getting to the truth together. Participate in discussions. Everyone has something to share about every reading. One tip for the denser readings is to focus on a few paragraphs or concepts that you would like to discuss more in depth during class discussions. Through discussions of these texts with friends and colleagues your comprehension of the texts will continue to progress.

## THE LOVE OF LEARNING

*Be careful not to make assumptions about others.* People come from varying backgrounds and fields of knowledge. When bringing in personal experiences or knowledge from your own field to seminar discussions, try to connect them to the shared content of the seminar so that it contributes to understanding the big questions guiding our shared inquiry.

*Practice the intellectual and personal virtues* that will support discussions, such as timeliness in arriving and generosity and forbearance with others.

### DISCUSSION GROUP ROLES

ONE PERSON need not do everything in a discussion group. Here are some responsibilities for a successful discussion group that can be divided up across various people. The roles in a discussion group need not be this formal, but having some roles set in advance can help. Especially for those who have not been in a classroom or been in a discussion group in a while, having an assigned role can help active engagement.

*Discussion Leader.* In my experience, groups that have a discussion leader or facilitator work the best. The discussion leader is supposed to guide the group. At a minimum, the discussion leader gets the discussion going by bringing out a few key points or questions; keeps the discussion going if it slows down; and can bring in additional research about each particular chapter (provided those new insights are kept accessible to those who have not done additional reading). In general, the kinds of questions that can be asked are (1) clarification; (2) inspiration; (3) application; and (4) additional questions beyond the scope of the reading.

If your group has a particularly knowledgeable discussion leader, that person can take on a bigger role to provide insights and guidance that deepen the common understanding of the text. Those insights can

come from one's own experience with the topic and/or from some additional reading or previous knowledge. Be careful not to let the guidance you give—whether that be from personal experience or outside knowledge—take over and become a lecture. Keep your introductory comments, if you make them, to five or ten minutes at the absolute most. If you happen to be an expert on a topic being covered, do not expect that you can lecture and get others to engage deeply with a text they have not read, especially when it is something complex. You can introduce one or two concepts or quotes from outside reading, but not much more.

*Organizer.* Sets the dates of meetings, finds the place to meet, picks the chapters to read at each meeting.

*Note-Taker.* Records the important points and distributes them to the group after each session.

*Participants.* Every group member needs to commit time and energy to do the reading in advance, reflect on the reading, and ask questions. Listen to others. Listen deeply to what is stirring in your own heart and share your insights. Prepare. Complete the reading in advance (or listen attentively if your group is reading the text out loud together) and prepare yourself to share your thoughts. Undoubtedly, some of the ideas are challenging. Do not hesitate to say which ideas you found most difficult and ask for clarification.

## WHERE TO MEET

DISCUSSION GROUPS can be run anywhere, really—whether at someone's home, in a coffee shop, or online. Face to face is normally preferable, but online groups are great for connecting people across distances.

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### GUEST SPEAKERS

ESPECIALLY FOR church groups and classes, inviting guests to the group can be beneficial. People who are experts are often busy, but people also generally like to speak about ideas they are passionate about. Having guest speakers is not necessary for a group to be successful, but it is absolutely worth trying. If you invite a guest speaker, be clear to them what you expect them to do, whether it be to give a lecture, share their experiences, or simply read the text along with your group.

### WHAT TO DO WHEN THE GROUP CONCLUDES

THIS BOOK is supposed to change how you live. I encourage you to make concrete resolutions to further your own education. Don't let this just be another book you read—take action. Can you create your own wish list of lifetime reading and make a plan to read a certain number of books a year? Does your group want to ask each member to define a project you want to work on and hold each other accountable? For teachers at any level, your project could be a new course, a new syllabus, or an orientation program for your students. If the group was a success, does the group want to pick a new book to read together?

### HOW DISCUSSION GROUPS GO WRONG AND WHAT TO DO

SOMETIMES DISCUSSION groups can go wrong. If they do, you can always start off a session explaining the goals and format again. If you



\* *Guide for Leading a Discussion Group* \*

absolutely have to, talk privately to someone who dominates the group discussion or is impolite to others when they participate. Some people rarely participate, and it may be important to ask them if they have time to do the reading or are just shy. People who are shy often prefer to have a role, or an assigned time to participate, and do not like to be called on. They might be great listeners and note-takers.

Some people talk out loud to discover a point they wish to make. This can be hard for others in the group who are unable to follow their comments or see how they are related to the reading. Giving a few minutes at the start to write down insights and questions, and gently interrupting to ask people to relate what they are saying back to the text, can help.

Do not be afraid of having your ideas challenged or of challenging someone else's ideas. Remember also to leave room to understand or contextualize someone's comment. Questions such as, "Can you say more about that?" or "Can you give an example of that?" may help the speaker to explain their reasoning without feeling unduly challenged.