

The Colloquium Environment

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For the past ten years, I have always held a regularly scheduled colloquium for my teenage children and a small group of their friends. Unlike the terms *literature class* or *book club*, *colloquium* carries no baggage, no connotations, few expectations. It doesn't imply that I will “teach” or that the students will do any particular type of “work”—a context that often attracts and rarely threatens.

In my early years I took some training in “Socratic” teaching, a methodology of focusing primarily on asking questions to help students discover answers for themselves (as opposed to the more common method of giving them answers to questions they would later be asked). Although this training occurred in the context of mathematics instruction, the basic approach carried over into all my teaching: math, music, writing, and especially literature.

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“ My role is that of facilitator, not instructor. ”

During our colloquium sessions (a term from the Latin, col- ‘together’ + loqui ‘to speak’), students meet and discuss great books. My role is that of facilitator, not instructor. To accomplish this, I must do a few things:

- 1) Set a projected schedule for readings and meetings.
- 2) Find the time to read the books I ask them to read.
- 3) Pencil out a few questions to start a discussion each week.
- 4) Discipline myself not to dominate the conversation, inadvertently changing the conversation into a lecture.

That’s about it. So why have I found this to be such a good investment of time and effort? Many reasons.




First, a colloquium allows students to practice—in a formal way—the first two of the four language arts: listening and speaking. Yes, young people are listening and speaking all day, but the colloquium environment requires they do so in a focused and purposeful manner. To meaningfully contribute to a conversation, students must listen carefully and consider whether what they intend to say makes sense in the context of what has already been said. They are encouraged to speak in complete, grammatically correct sentences. The formality refines conversational skills.

In addition, the structured environment promotes a positive social atmosphere and positive peer pressure. Often, an assertive student with a tendency to dominate conversations will be put in his place by his peers. Likewise, a quiet, reticent student will often be drawn out by peers or by a facilitator who asks him a direct question. My best groups have had a broad age range, from the sharp twelve-year-old, to the high school graduate who wants to sit in with a younger sibling, and even a few parents (as long as they agree not to dominate the conversation).

Discussion promotes thinking, for what is thinking other than having a conversation with yourself? Good thinking is being able to ask good questions and using wisdom to judge the appropriateness of the answers you give yourself. By practicing asking questions of others, we refine our ability to ask questions of ourselves, thereby improving our thinking skills.

“ Great books address moral quandaries. ”



Mostly, this type of conversation helps to make literature relevant to the students. Great books address moral quandaries. Life is a moral question. Discussion facilitates necessary moral contemplation. Every teenager out there has three burning questions constantly at the core of his thinking: Who am I? Why am I here? And what am I going to do with my life? Of course, these questions imply that there are true answers and therefore that truth exists. Sadly, this is the one thing most avoided in public schools—a discussion of truth; it’s practically illegal, which is the single greatest reason in my mind to avoid public schools. They are temples of the non-gospel of Relativism. Conversations about literature, however, require a context of truth, and consequently they become excellent opportunities to discuss worldviews, eternal realities, and what really matters.

Although I had a natural inclination towards this type of teaching, I found I was able to refine my approach over time with the help of a few aids. One breakthrough came when I attended Adam Andrews’ very helpful seminar *Teaching the Classics*, and because I personally did the video editing for that product, I listened to the whole course many times over—some portions as many as a dozen times. I learned two things from that experience: One, hearing the same thing several times doesn’t hurt me, and two, how to ask better questions—which is the whole purpose of the seminar. Additionally, I had my class as a laboratory wherein I could test various ideas.

However, one day after a class with a group of students, ages 14 to 17, about six weeks into the book *Jane Eyre*, I found myself a bit frustrated and tired, feeling as though I hadn't successfully engaged the students. Reflecting on the experience I wanted for them but had failed to create, an obvious but previously unnoticed circumstance hit me powerfully. The class dynamic was stagnant because of the format; I was asking all the questions, the students were individually offering an idea or opinion, and then the exchange stopped. I wasn't creating the right environment; I wasn't truly facilitating a conversation. If that was going to happen, I somehow needed to decrease so they could increase; the discussion couldn't depend on me asking questions—that role had to expand to include them as well.



So the next week, as we got settled and after we went over the vocabulary words that the students noticed during their reading for the week, I began the discussion differently by making this statement: “So, someone ask a question about *Jane Eyre*.” Silence. This was new territory for them. I remained silent. One asked, “What are you doing?” I responded, “Waiting for someone to ask a question about our book.” More silence. Finally I think one of them got my point and ventured a question. I prompted another student to answer the question, “Diane, what do you say to that?” And I will admit that it was slow going for a while, with more than one moment of uncomfortable silence, but I persisted, intuitively knowing I was on the right track.



After a few months the environment had entirely changed. I had little to do but the occasional prompting or redirecting to prevent the discussion from getting totally off track, but I must say it went places where my mind never could have taken it. I remember one class in particular. We were talking about the nature of love (So much of *Jane Eyre* is about different types of love.), and one young man mentioned that he had read *The Four Loves* by C. S. Lewis, so I invited him to explain those to us. This prompted the question from another student: “I wonder if there are four corresponding types of hate?” From there it was almost a free-for-all, and although not much specific to *Jane Eyre* was discussed, I believe it was one of the best—and possibly the most important—conversations we ever had.

But you don’t have to be an expert to get started. Dive in and try. Get a small group of kids, get a book worth reading, schedule a time, and start talking. You’ll be amazed at what the colloquium environment can do.