

New York Council for the Humanities

# Reading Between the Lines



**The Art of Shapely Discussion:**

*A Guide to Scholar-Facilitation*

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## The Art of Shapely Discussion: A Guide to Scholar-Facilitation

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**T**here are few places better than a public reading and discussion group for people to come together and consider the diverse manifestations of the human in the humanities. We believe the guiding presence of a scholar to facilitate such discussions creates an even more illuminating experience.

To this end, you are being asked to lead a new model for reading and discussion groups, one that places the scholar in the role of facilitator, guiding a shapely conversation that flows from the participants themselves, the series theme, and the chosen readings.

*Let's start down our own path of learning by considering some of the whys and hows of discussion groups.*

### **What brings people to a reading and discussion group in a public setting?**

People come to public book discussions for different reasons. Some are interested in encountering new points of view, increasing their understanding through shared experiences, and broadening their horizons. Some join discussion groups preferring to listen and learn rather than share opinions and ideas. Some accompany friends and spouses who get courage from companionship. Some are interested in demonstrating their knowledge or “enlightening” the group through their own expertise. And still others view the group as a social experience.

These groups do not necessarily draw people with common bonds, backgrounds, or expectations. Such groups draw people from all walks of life, all educational levels, and all degrees of literary, cultural, and social sophistication. In one group you may have participants who are very experienced at group discussion, and some whose last “group discussion” took place years ago in school. Some participants will recognize that your role is to facilitate conversation, while others will look to you for answers, as if you are the group’s teacher.

A facilitator who is sensitive to the “who’s who” of the group can create an environment in which the members of the group appreciate differences—and even build off those differences to have great discussions.

### **How do scholar-led groups differ from other public discussion groups?**

Libraries, literary organizations, and humanities councils have been establishing or hosting various models of discussion groups facilitated by scholars for a number of years. In the most typical model, the scholar who is hired to lead the discussion begins with a lecture of approximately 20 to 30 minutes.

This model is closer to most people’s experience of the high school or college classroom than any other discussion model. And even if the scholarly lecture is intended to provide context only, the danger is that group members will revert to school habits and treat the scholar as a teacher, looking to her or him for answers rather than generating their own thoughts about the texts.

Developed in the early 20th century by Robert Maynard Hutchins, then University of Chicago President, and Prof. Mortimer Adler, Great Books trains facilitators in the “shared inquiry” method of discussion—a model based on the Socratic method. Simply stated, group facilitators ask questions that help group members come to an understanding of the meaning of a text.

*Our challenge has been to create a scholar-led model that leans less heavily on overt scholarship, and more on a combination of particular knowledge with good facilitating techniques—creating a discussion group that is more like a seminar than a class.*

*The model we have created takes its approach to group facilitation from the Great Books Foundation model, which rests on a basis of text-centered shared inquiry.*

*The scholar-facilitated, text-centered approach is profoundly appropriate for a humanities discussion group because instead of passively hearing a lecture, the participants are given the tools to enable their own discovery, understanding, and growth as critical readers and thinkers.*

## Why use a text-centered shared inquiry approach in a scholar-led group?

The text-centered shared inquiry approach works well for these groups because it brings the reader and the text together. It does not require knowledge outside of the assigned reading(s), such as historical context, biography, critical terminology, special vocabulary, or expertise. Instead, it allows group members with varied levels of sophistication and education to come to the discussion as equals. The text-centered shared inquiry method has proven to be one of the best facilitation models in use.

While some may feel that this approach is “anti-intellectual,” as it doesn’t permit participants to demonstrate their special knowledge, the idea of close reading and critical thinking based on the commonly read text is actually deeply intellectual and challenging. And it is egalitarian, as it must be for this type of discussion.

In the new hybrid scholar-facilitated humanities discussion model that the Council has developed, we have preserved the egalitarianism of the text-centered, shared inquiry approach, while finding new ways to use the expertise of scholars. These include using *informed questioning* to keep the focus on the series theme, and filling in the occasional gaps in discussion when the addition of some fact, definition, or context will break a roadblock to sharing ideas.

**T**he shared inquiry approach has only four basic rules. While the use of rules may seem to run counter to the idea of a relaxed environment, in fact it simply defines the terms under which the facilitator and the group members will direct their shared process of discovery. These guidelines help the facilitator to create an orderly and shapely discussion.

Let's look at the rules of shared inquiry and explore how you can adapt them to the scholar facilitated model.

### **RULE 1: Only those who have read the selection may take part in the discussion.**

This rule is based on the idea that without evidence from the text, one cannot support an opinion.

There's no question that in the ideal scenario everyone has read the entire selection, more than once, and taken notes! However, the reality is that people lead very busy lives. The discussion group is a desired extra, but still, an extra. Many of the readings assigned in the Council's scholar-facilitated groups are long; some are quite dense. It is likely that some participants will not have read or finished reading the material.

#### **Here's how to adapt this rule:**

- **Make it clear that group members who cannot finish the reading are still welcome to attend the discussion and take part as appropriate. Encourage participants to read each selection fully. Suggest that they read through once, skim a second time, take notes where they have questions, are uncertain of the meanings of terms, have encountered something of particular interest, etc.**
- **If you do not intend to discuss a book in its entirety, give the participants excerpts to read. This shows respect for their time and the value of their effort.**
- **Before starting the discussion, ask if everyone has had a chance to finish the reading selection. Ideally, you will always be able to solicit a quick summary from a group member, but always be prepared to give one yourself.**
- **Acknowledge with a spirit of generosity and appreciation the work the group members are doing to make the discussion a success. Praise them for their preparation and participation.**

## **RULE 2: Discussion is restricted to the text that everyone has read.**

Encourage the group members to find support for their opinions within the shared reading only. Limiting discussion to the assigned text allows all group members to come to the discussion as equals.

There will be members of the group who are interested in exploring your theme more broadly. They may already have read or studied extensively in this area. Politely but firmly directing members to stick to the shared text may require special skill and tact. But if such individuals bring in too much material from readings not common to the group, others may tune out or become resentful.

We'll talk more about facilitating difficult situations later in this guide.

## **RULE 3: The opinions of “outside authorities” may only be introduced when they can be restated in the participant’s own words, and supported by evidence from the text.**

This encourages close reading and careful thought.

This rule actually gives you the flexibility to deal with the situation described under Rule Two. Some group members will have knowledge or expertise that others don't share. Encourage such individuals to express opinions derived from outside authorities in their own words, and ask them to support their points by referring to the assigned text.

### *A special case:*

While we're talking about outside authorities, let's talk about one we call “Uncle Eddy.” Uncle Eddy may be a group member, or a group member's family member or friend, who has direct experience with the subject under discussion; his experience is a story unto itself.

In a more casual discussion group, relating personal anecdotes or family history may be fine. But in a humanities-based reading group, the facilitator must curb people's tendencies to associate what they read with what they've experienced. Do this with kindness and respect for the group member's life experience. More to come on this!

## RULE 4: Group facilitators may only ask questions—they may not answer them.

This rule discourages the “classroom approach” in both the facilitator and the group members, and encourages participants to give answers based on their own ideas rather than the facilitator’s thinking.

Your scholarly experience is crucial to developing those questions. Having read the texts from your own uniquely informed perspective, you will use your specialized knowledge of the series theme to develop the questions that will inspire group members to participate. However, **you are not the teacher. You are the facilitator.** There is a world of difference between these roles. Your ability to make this distinction, while still carrying out the role of *scholar-facilitator*, may be the determining factor in creating a good group dynamic, one that enables a lively discussion to develop.

### Here’s how to get the most out of this rule:

- Before discussions begin, you may give a limited amount of appropriate background to kick-start the conversation and focus it onto the theme of the series. This may be the time you—or a member of the group—summarizes the reading for those who haven’t completed it.
- This background information might include a definition, a simple statistic, and a quote from the reading, or occasionally a brief item related to the series theme for the group to read to themselves (or for someone to read aloud) during the meeting.
- As you regularly bring the discussion back to the theme, you can use the same summary technique, or add a relevant note from your own close reading or related knowledge.
- As you answer a relevant question or clarify a point that cannot be answered from the text, you can bring your particular understanding to the discussion. But don’t take this as an opportunity to jump into teacher mode; once the series is under way, it is key to avoid the “schoolroom” dynamic and allow the group to experience the leisurely discovery of ideas and the joy of discussion.

*Your scholarship is not evidenced by your delivering a lecture to the group, asking leading questions, or answering the questions you pose. You are using your knowledge to facilitate rather than lead or drive the discussion.*

*Prepare as a scholar—but relax into facilitation!*

## TOOL 1: Reading for facilitating a discussion

We hope that everyone will do a close reading of the text. But *your* close reading is most important to the success of the discussion. The text provides the raw materials for the questions you will develop for group discussion.

### How to get the most out of this tool:

- Read each session's material at least twice.
- Examine how the ideas you've noted in your first and second readings relate to one another.
- Write down questions as they occur to you without much thought for format or length.
- Begin to consider what the flow of discussion might be, and which of your questions might be most useful for facilitating a meaningful discussion.
- Consider places in the text that didn't stand out in the first reading but which, on reflection, add significantly to an understanding of the meaning of the text and of the theme as a whole.
- Make note of passages that may have multiple meanings or implications. Make note of passages with which readers might strongly agree or disagree. Note places in the text that go to the heart of your discussion series theme. As you read, think of particular ways in which you want to tie all the texts in your series together.
- Individuals have different approaches to reading. For some, the first reading must be the close reading; others like to read through more casually the first time and more closely the second time. Use the approach with which you are most comfortable and which yields the greatest meaning.

*Your scholarship is invaluable in setting the stage—before the discussions begin, as you regularly bring the discussion back to the theme, and as you answer a relevant question from the group that cannot be answered from the text.*

*When you enter the room to meet your group, bring your knowledge with you, modestly worn. Leave your mortarboard outside.*

## TOOL 2: Discussion questions

Discussion questions are your most important tool. The Great Books model of shared inquiry describes three kinds of questions:

**QUESTIONS OF INTERPRETATION** that ask group members to explain possible meanings of the ideas or situations presented in the reading in their own words.

**QUESTIONS OF EVALUATION** that require group members to make judgments about the truth or application of ideas from the reading. Because such questions call upon knowledge, experiences, and values, they can easily lead to a discussion of likes and dislikes or life stories, and to judgments based on gut instincts rather than text-based evidence. The facilitator must be prepared to follow up carefully to keep the discussion on track. It is best not to open with a question of evaluation.

**QUESTIONS OF FACT** that ask group members to recall something in the text. Such questions are used to establish accurate recollection of the text or correct an argument that is not supported sufficiently by the text. Questions of fact are composed either by using the author's words (referring to the page so that all can examine together), or by restating the facts in one's own words.

**Keep this taxonomy of questions in mind as we explore how to create and use questions to spur lively and insightful group discussions.**

### **So, where do you begin the discussion?**

Begin with a basic question of interpretation that facilitates expression and examination of the author's ideas, and leads to a discussion of one of the main ideas in the reading. This might be a question that generates different or opposing opinions, which can help to develop and clarify the main ideas or situations in the reading.

### **How and when may the leader use auxiliary materials to stimulate discussion?**

Some facilitators use ancillary materials or readings to jumpstart discussions. For example, a facilitator of the "Religion in American Life" series brought copies of a number of New Age magazines to the session that dealt with this topic. Other facilitators have brought short passages related to the theme of the session for everyone to read together and comment on in relation to the book under discussion. This is a fine approach, but it shouldn't be relied upon too much or used to substitute for good discussion questions. After all, the point of the series is to have a close discussion of the assigned texts. *In general, films, lectures and other types of presentations are not appropriate for Reading Between the Lines.*

If you have any questions about this, contact the Council.

*Remember to give the group time to consider the reading in terms of your question. If the question is clearly phrased, discussion will probably begin quickly.*

A question of interpretation is also used when the discussion goes off-track, becomes needlessly repetitive, or if the subject at hand has been exhausted and it is time to move on. If participants are avoiding answering the question because it is difficult and probing, or giving superficial responses, don't abandon the discussion generated by the original question. Use re-phrasing, redirection, and follow-up to develop a discussion of substance.

**We'll follow up on the matter of following up!**

## **Guidelines for developing clear and effective opening and follow-up questions**

*Start by forgetting most of the questions you were asked, or are asking, on school exams:*

- Don't ask people to "compare and contrast," "explain," "comment on," "define" or "list."
- Keep the structure of the question short, simple, and direct. Always remember that people are listening to your question, not reading it. If a question is too long or convoluted, they will forget the beginning by the time you get to the end.
- Don't ask leading questions, questions that begin, "don't you think...?" Your question should not contain any part of the answer. Remember, you are the facilitator, not a member of the group. If you want to discuss, join a discussion group!

### **When reading to develop questions:**

- Write the questions down as they occur to you; refine them later on.
- Keep track of what page or passage in the text inspired the question so that, if you lose track of the meaning of your question when you return to it, you can go back to the source.

## When reviewing your list of questions, ask yourself the following:

- Do I care about this question? Does it interest me?
- Do I already know “the answer” or does it make me think?
- Is the question specific—or at least pertinent—to the reading?
- Is the question’s meaning clear?
- Is this a question that can be answered from different points of view?
- Will this question encourage lively discussion?

## Guidelines for developing the discussion: open- vs. closed-ended questions

Open-ended questions require participants in a discussion to think analytically and critically. They begin with words such as *what*, *why* or *how* rather than *did*, *is* or *are*.

Consider the question “Did X influence Y?” The answer: yes or no.

Open-ended versions of this question are “How did X influence Y?” and “Why was X influenced by Y?”

Open-ended questions tend to create more discussion. That said, when you are honing your questions, consider whether asking the *yes-or-no* version *followed* by *how* or *why* might yield a better result than just asking the open-ended question.

Hairsplitting? Maybe. But there is a reason why sales organizations train people to ask open-ended questions: they gently but firmly guide and control the sales conversation.

As you compose your questions, experiment by rephrasing them as open- and closed-ended. Consider how each version will affect the group discussion. There are times when asking *yes-or-no* questions allows a moment for the expression of opposing viewpoints. These moments can help you identify which group members you can call on to start the discussion.

## How will you know if your question is a good one?

*While you can't and shouldn't try to predict or direct the conversation along predetermined lines, you can do a bit of prognostication after composing a question. Ask yourself the following about your questions:*

- **What answers would you like to elicit? Work backwards to create questions that generate these insights.**
- **Does the direction of your ideal discussion flow from the question?**
- **Does it go directly to the point of the issue you'd like the group to discuss?**
- **Have you removed jargon, literary terms, (metaphor, simile, symbol, etc.), difficult vocabulary, and your own opinions from the question?**
- **Picture yourself as a member of the group, listening to the question. Is it clear and concise? Is it really the question you want to ask?**

**All of these guidelines hold true for follow-up questions as well. More on that later in this guide.**

*Groups tend to have their own personalities. A good question for one group may not be a good question for another; a good question at one moment may not be a good question at another.*

### THE BIG SILENCE: What if you ask a question and nobody answers?

In a perfect world you would always ask the ideal question, and the discussion would roll along in a shapely way to its conclusion. In the real world, people often have to hear your question— and hear it again. They need to take it in and relate it to their thoughts about the reading. Prepare yourself for the moment when you ask a question and are met with what seems like an endless silence.

If a reasonable amount of time goes by with no one has speaking up, and everyone is looking at you (or worse, not looking at you), it is probably time to consider whether your question was clear, direct, concise, and stripped of jargon. If a group member asks, “what do you mean by X,” you'll have a clue as to what you need to define or clarify.

## TOOL 3: Attentive listening that helps you follow up

Just as you've done a close reading of your material to find the subject matter for your perfect opening questions, you'll need to do a "close hearing" of the group's answers to find the subject matter for follow-up questions.

You may have anticipated many of these subjects as you read your material. If so, you'll hear a point made and examined fully by the group, and you'll have the perfect question to spur more discussion.

**But following up can also be a seat-of-the-pants operation.**

### How to listen and when to follow up:

#### **Pay attention to responses conveyed in body language.**

Before you ask a follow-up question, scan the group to make sure that everyone who has something to say has said it. There are group members who will shake their heads to indicate agreement or disagreement, raise their eyebrows, shift in their seats, cross their arms, gestures that tell you in their own way that a participant may have something to say. Take a chance and call on them. You might say, "Mary, you look like you have something to add," or "John, you look like you don't agree with Mary."

If your opening question of interpretation was composed well, try rephrasing it. Resist the temptation to include information as you rephrase. And do not rephrase the question into a leading one. If rephrasing does not end The Big Silence, go on to another basic question. If the unanswered question addressed an important point, you will want to revisit it when the discussion of the "answerable" question is spent.

Even questions that the group members approve of may not be the questions that yield answers. Sometimes the group will say "what a good question." This could mean it interests them; it's elegant; it's clever. But there may be silence because the subject matter is difficult to approach, or your clever question actually sounds better than it is,

*So remember: rephrase, or move on to another question.*

## Use a follow-up question when following up is called for.

When a follow-up question is called for, think back to the three basic types of questions and use them to help you continue the discussion.

### Use **questions of fact** to:

- Elicit more information. This question for this might begin with “tell us more about...”
- Clarify a point. This question might begin, “what do you mean by,” or “where in the text...?” Try restating the point as you understand it, starting with “do I understand you to mean that...” or “are you saying that...?”

### Use **questions of evaluation** to:

- Highlight differing viewpoints. This question might begin, “does everyone agree with...” or (restating) “does everyone agree that...?”

### Use **questions of interpretation** to:

- Extract what you believe to be the most important part (idea) in an extended response. A question for this might begin, “What you said about X is interesting. Could you (or anyone else in the group) comment further on (specify the subject)...?”
- Encourage further reflection on that idea by the participant who offers it or other members of the group. This question is similar to our previous question. However, you want to ask the participant to “comment further (specifically) on what you just said” or, directed to the group, “let’s think more deeply about what X just said,” and then pose a specific follow-up question based on what X just said.

**I**t is up to you, the scholar-facilitator, to create an environment that will be a safe place for group members to express ideas about the reading. A number of steps, small and large, will set the tone for group members, conveying that you value their time and participation, and can be trusted. These actions begin even before the first session takes place.

*Throughout all your sessions, be leisurely, inclusive, good-humored and kind. Be aware of your own tone of voice and your body language.*

### **Before the first session:**

- Get in touch with your host site liaison to discuss logistics. Also, be sure to visit the space where you'll be facilitating your group and discuss room set-up with your host site liaison.
- Learn ahead of time if your site has devices for the hearing impaired, and whether any person in your group will need this or other special equipment.

**Likewise, it is important to set the tone for a good group dynamic at the very beginning of the series.**

### **At the first session:**

- Come early and introduce yourself to group members as they arrive.
- When everyone is assembled, briefly give some information about your background, expertises and interests. Take the opportunity to make yourself human and begin to distinguish yourself from the role of teacher—make yourself a co-conspirator in the shared effort to read, think, probe, learn, and grow.
- Have everyone introduce themselves to one another and to you. (It may be helpful to make a chart of where everyone is sitting so that you can call on them by name from the start.)
- Introduce the basic parameters of the discussion series: length of each discussion, dates, etc.
- In your own words, describe the basic rules of shared inquiry and guidelines for good group discussions.
- Tell participants that it is fine to attend sessions if they haven't finished the reading. Convey that their regular attendance is important to the group.
- Ask if they have any questions for you.

If you have a good group dynamics the participants will be kind and generous and inclusive. They will respect one another's rights as group members, listen attentively, respond politely, ask questions of one another, and have a good time together. The way to develop this kind of group dynamic is to understand your role, communicate it clearly, and follow the "rules" of group facilitation. That's it!

## The rules of group discussion etiquette, or, where's Miss Manners when you need her?

There's a basic etiquette for participating in group discussions. If you let your group members in on what this entails and encourage them to participate with these norms in mind, your life as a facilitator will be so much better—and so will the discussion.

### In practicing good group discussion etiquette, members should:

- **Direct their comments to one another, not to the facilitator.** There's no need to look to the facilitator for approval (or disapproval, which of course you won't show anyway). This isn't school! It's a conversation in which all present (except the facilitator) take part. Members in turn build their cases on (or in polite disagreement to) the previous comment. The facilitator should be considered more or less invisible when not facilitating or offering clarification.
- **Listen to one another's point of view with an open mind and heart, trying to understand the other person's point of view.** If members don't agree, they must present the basis for *their own* opinions. Often, a question will have many sound answers. And it's fine for a second member of the group to speak in confirmation of the previously stated opinion, perhaps building upon it. Sometimes a second person's statement of agreement contains nuances that bring something fresh to the conversation.
- **Disagree with the idea rather than the person expressing it.** When in disagreement, phrases like "Are you crazy?" are not acceptable prefaces to expressing a contrasting opinion.
- **Focus on answering only the question at hand. Answer thoughtfully but briefly, in order to give others a chance to participate.**

### To review:

- At the first session, let people know the basic parameters for discussion—length of time, meeting dates, etc.
- Convey that your role is as facilitator, not a teacher.
- Be clear that there are some rules, and that they exist for the benefit of the group. This will allow individuals feel comfortable and safe in expressing their opinions, give everyone a chance to speak, and importantly, since this is a text-based model, allow everyone to come to the discussion as equals.
- You should develop and state these rules in your own language, based on the information in this guide.

You may want to restate the rules at subsequent sessions, particularly if there are group members who are not at the first session.

**N**ow that you've gotten your group off to a successful start, you need to continue to be attentive to the dynamics of scholar-facilitated discussion, pay attention to group etiquette, and keep the group focused on the series theme. Although these are interrelated tasks, let's start by considering how to maintain thematic focus over the course of a series.

### Introducing and maintaining the series theme

A great deal of thought has gone into developing the theme for discussion and selecting the text to read for each session. It is this thematic focus, developed by a humanities scholar and vetted by the Council, that in large part distinguishes this type of discussion group from others the participants may have experienced in the past. To make sure the theme stays front and center in your discussions:

- **Introduce the theme at the first session, and, if you like, give a small amount of background to set the context for the series. You should not deliver a lecture. Consider using a short anecdote, a statistics or some other brief method for reminding the group that there is an overarching theme linking all of the readings and discussions.**
- **Restate the theme at the beginning of each session, and use it to bring people back when they wander from the point at hand.**
- **Let the group know, as often as needed, that the in-depth discussion of this theme will come during your conversations as a group, not via a lecture from the facilitator. Consider using the theme to wrap up your sessions—to bring the group and the readings full circle.**

Bringing the discussion back to the text or overarching theme, along with the other techniques for following up, can make the difference between a shapely and a runaway discussion.

#### **You have a runaway discussion if you:**

- Ask an opening question, and one of your quicker or more verbal group members answers and goes on from there to speak to every other issue raised by the reading.
- Ask a question and a respondent goes off on a tangent from which other respondents proceed.
- Find that the discussion keeps veering from one point to another without ever fully mining any important issue.

#### **You have a shapely discussion if you:**

- Open with a good question.
- Keep the discussion of your question on target with follow-up questions and techniques until everyone has had their say and the issue has been probed in a critical manner worthy of a scholar-facilitated humanities discussion.
- Table important issues raised but “out of place” by making note of them, saying, “That’s a good point; let’s get back to it later,” and getting back to it.
- Only move on to the next topic or issue when you’ve accomplished the above;
- Facilitate a discussion that connects as a whole to the series theme.
- End at the appropriate moment, whether a few minutes early or a few minutes before conversation on the reading has run out.

## When is a discussion over?

We have taken a close look at how to get discussion going, and how to break the spell of The Big Silence. But when to end the session's discussion, or a phase of a longer discussion, is just as important to maintaining a vibrant group dynamic. And it can be as much an art as a science.

- **As noted earlier, if the discussion goes off-track, becomes needlessly repetitive, or if the subject at hand has been exhausted, it is time to move on. Use a question of interpretation to shift the group into a new phase of discussion.**
- **However, if participants are giving superficial responses, or avoiding answering the question because it is difficult and probing, use rephrasing, redirection, and follow-up to reignite discussion. If nothing works, end this phase of discussion by moving into a new set of ideas or interpretations — but keep in mind that the group may be more prepared to work with the difficult question later on in this session, or the series.**

You will have approximately an hour and a half for each of your sessions. There will be times when the discussion runs its course in an hour or an hour and a quarter. There will be other times when you'll reach the end of the allotted time and without having covered even a fraction your carefully developed and wonderful questions. The group will still be bubbling with things to say, and you'll be willing to remain and continue.

It can be fine to end the session when the discussion has reached its early but definite conclusion. But if you are consistently ending early, consider whether you are reading closely enough, developing a good list of questions, and challenging group members for deep and thoughtful answers.

In the happy event that the session ends with the group still game for discussion, it is fine — and maybe even preferable — for people to leave the room still thinking about the reading, still conversing with one another, and excited to return for the next installment of your series.

There are classic issues that arise in group leadership even under a new model of discussion in the form of certain member personalities.

### How to encourage the quiet (or silent) group member

Despite all of your best efforts, there will be group members who rarely or never speak up. They may well have something to say, but can't work up the nerve or find the right moment to get a word in.

Your skills as an observer may reveal that the quiet people are speaking to you through body language. Even if you think there's a slim chance that someone has given you a signal that they wish to speak, say something that gives them permission:

- **Be good-natured about it.** Say, "Louise, do I see a reaction to that last comment?" or "Bart, I have the feeling you're trying to get a word in edgewise here!"
- **Think of ways to offer them a chance to hear themselves, to break silence and discover they survived.** Sometimes you just have to give a quiet person the chance to say, "I agree with what Jim just said."
- **Try chatting with the shy person** before the group assembles for discussion.
- If it seems appropriate, **ask if there is anything you can do to draw them into the discussion without making them uncomfortable.** Your concern may make a difference.

Your kindness costs nothing, but can have a great effect. While you may never know what that effect is, the person on the receiving end will remember your efforts on their behalf.

Also, some people get a great deal out of just *listening* to a group discussion. If you've tried several strategies and someone is still silent, it may be because that's how they learn best.

### How to quiet the monopolizer

At the other end of the spectrum is an individual who commandeers the group's time with their own contributions. Sometimes the group leader or facilitator is complicit in allowing this monopolizer to operate. It's easy to let this happen because when we ask a question of the group, we're anxious to hear the sound of a voice. And someone who fills the void, even too often or for too long, may seem useful.

At some point, though, the other group members, *whether they have something to say on a particular issue or not*, will become and remain annoyed with this monopolizer. As facilitator, you will have to step in and find an effective way to handle this:

- After giving the monopolizer the chance to answer a question **it's fine to say, "let's hear from someone else."** This is a not-so-subtle way of saying, "we've heard enough from you," while being polite and generous.
- You need to be prepared to **interrupt, politely**, to get the discussion back on track and redirect the discussion to one of the other participants waiting to speak.
- If these techniques do not work, **find a way to make the monopolizer your ally in creating a good group dynamic.** Speak to the individual at the conclusion of the session. Tell her that you really appreciate having her in your group, enjoy hearing her ideas, and that the group benefits from her presence. Tell her that you've noticed there are people in the group who are hesitant to speak up and defer to her because of this knowledge and articulateness. Ask her to help you to get those people to participate more by sometimes holding back on being the first to answer, and by giving briefer answers.

**Make the monopolizer part of the solution, rather than part of the problem.**

## How to handle the "expert" or the expert

You may have a group member who has genuine expertise in the theme of your discussion series. Or, you may have a group member who believes they have such expertise. This expert may be so enraptured with their special understanding of the theme, or so excited about the subject, that they may fail to realize that this knowledge is beyond the scope of the common reading, or pick up on cues that other participants feel intimidated or resentful at seeming less informed.

If you lay down the rules at the outset about having a text-centered discussion, you will have gone a long way toward curbing the expert's ability, desire, or tendency to contribute material other than that shared by the group. In all kinds of management situations (and group facilitation is one such) it is very important for the manager to give a good reason for having a particular rule. By referring back to this rule over the course of the series, you put the expert at a disadvantage should they begin to lecture or pontificate.

**If this is not enough to spur better group discussion etiquette in the expert, further steps may be called for:**

This is the time to apply one of the basic rules of shared inquiry. Ask the expert to consider what they are presenting in terms of their own thinking, ideas and opinions, and to restate the salient point in a way that goes back to the question and text under consideration.

Let's say the individual will not be deterred. Give them a moment to talk, during which you determine that they *are* quoting from or making reference to books and resources other than that which the group has shared. Politely interrupt with a reminder that it's necessary to stay with what the group has in common: the text they've read for this day's session or for one of the earlier sessions. As with the monopolizer, it may be necessary to have a conversation before or after the session to enlist the expert's aid in making the discussion a true group effort in which all members are equal. Remember: with the expert, flattery will get you everywhere!

### **And, back to “Uncle Eddy”**

If you recall, “Uncle Eddy” is another form of expert, though one whose expertise is based on his life experience or that of someone he knows. When a group member begins to recount a personal experience or story that is in some way related to the reading but disruptive to the thematic and textual focus, do the following:

- **Allow the participant to speak for a moment to see where the anecdote is going.**
- **Then ask a follow-up question based on the experience that brings the individual back to the text.**
- **This could be as simple as saying, “Could you tell us how this relates to the book?”**

### **What if the problem is more serious?**

Infrequently, you will have a group member who will not be deterred from rudeness, hostility, or some other socially unacceptable behavior that threatens you, individuals, or the group.

When this happens, you must consult with the person in charge at your host organization. They may have experience and training in dealing with this type of situation — or even this particular individual.

If you believe that this group member represents a serious problem you should also alert your contact person at the New York Council for the Humanities.

## 7. CONCLUSION

As a humanities scholar, you know how crucial it is to be able to read and think critically. As a scholar-facilitator you will see how rewarding it can be to help members of the public develop and exercise these skills. The New York Council for the Humanities' scholar-facilitated book discussions are wonderful opportunities for participants to gain experience examining the world around them in an informed, thoughtful, and engaged manner. This is a gift that they can take with them into their daily lives; as they read the newspaper, have discussions with friends and family, and continue or begin studies in a boundless array of subject areas.

### INTRODUCTION

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- The Council’s scholar-led book discussion model puts the scholar in the role of facilitator rather than teacher.
- People come to discussions held in public settings with a wide range of motivations and experiences. A good facilitator can use these differences to help build great discussions.
- The Council’s model is based loosely on a text-centered shared inquiry approach, which asks all members of the discussion group to focus their conversation exclusively on the text itself.
- In the Council’s model, the scholar’s expertise is used to develop informed questions that focus on the series theme, and to contribute facts, definitions, or context when necessary to keep the discussion flowing.

### FROM SCHOLAR-LED TO SCHOLAR-FACILITATED: USING A TEXT-CENTERED SHARED INQUIRY APPROACH

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The shared inquiry approach has four basic rules, which, with slight adaptations, form the basis for the scholar-facilitation model:

- **RULE 1:** Only those who have read the selection may take part in the discussion. You may modify this rule by summarizing the reading before starting the discussion, and by giving the group selections to read from long or difficult texts.
- **RULE 2** Discussion is restricted to the text that everyone has read. This allows all participants to come to the discussion as equals.
- **RULE 3:** The opinions of “outside authorities” may only be introduced when they can be restated in the participant’s own words, and supported by evidence from the text. This will help you deal with group members who have special expertise or knowledge. It’s also good to remember this for yourself!
- **RULE 4:** Group facilitators may only ask questions, not answer them. This discourages a classroom dynamic and encourages group members to offer their own thoughts, rather than what they think you want to hear.

## YOUR TOOLKIT:

### THE ESSENTIAL TOOLS FOR SCHOLAR-FACILITATED BOOK DISCUSSIONS

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- **TOOL 1:** *Reading for facilitating a discussion*

- Close reading of each text (several times) is your most important preparation.
- As you read, write down questions as they occur to you—you can edit them later.
- Also make note of passages that may spark discussion.
- As you read, think about the series theme and how it ties into the text you're reading and into the other texts in the series.

- **TOOL 2:** *Discussion questions*

- Prior to each session, come up with three different types of questions: questions of interpretation, questions of evaluation, and questions of fact
- It's generally best to open with a basic question of interpretation. Also use this type of question to refocus the discussion if it goes off track.

- **TOOL 3:** *Attentive listening that helps you follow u*

- Attentive listening allows you to develop follow-up questions as the discussion unfolds.
- Be sure to “listen” to the body language of participants.
- Keep discussion going by using the three essential types of questions.

## STARTING OUT RIGHT

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- Contact your host site ahead of time to discuss logistics and details of the series.
- Set the tone for the series at the first session by introducing yourself in an informal manner, and having others in the group do the same.
- In your own words, introduce the rules of shared inquiry and mention the basic parameters of the series (number of sessions, meeting dates, etc.).
- Review the basic rules of all good discussions with your group: direct comments to each other, not the facilitator listen to each other with open minds and try to understand differing points

of view; disagree with an idea rather than the person expressing it; focus on answering only the question at hand; be brief so that others can have the chance to talk.

## KEEPING IT GOING

### INTRODUCING AND MAINTAINING THE SERIES THEME:

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- The series theme is the “glue” that will make your discussion series hang together.
- Briefly introduce the theme at the beginning of the first session—you should not deliver a lecture—and restate it at the beginning of each session.
- You can also use the series theme to bring people back when the discussion wanders, and you can consider using it to wrap up your sessions.

#### *Ending a discussion:*

- During a discussion session, use a question of interpretation to move to a new topic if the one at hand has been exhausted.
- Each session should last roughly an hour and a half, but if the discussion has run its course before this time, feel free to wrap up a bit early. If this happens repeatedly, consider that you may need to be developing better questions or working harder to follow up.

## NEW MODEL, CLASSIC ISSUES

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- Encourage silent participants to join the discussion in a good natured, relaxed manner, but never force someone who isn't ready to talk.
- If you have a monopolizer in your group, feel free to politely encourage others to speak; even gently interrupt to re-direct the conversation. You might also want to enlist the monopolizer as a co-conspirator to help you get others to speak more.
- Make sure the group understands the rules of shared inquiry; this should go a long way to curbing those with special expertise from dominating. But if they persist, even under a new model of discussion you may need to remind them of the rules and refocus them on the text itself. You may need to do the same with those who routinely add personal anecdotes to the discussion.
- If you have a more serious problem with a participant, immediately speak with your host site liaison and your contact at the New York Council for the Humanities.