

Discussions as part of Lodge Education

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There are various methods often employed for providing education to members of our Masonic fraternity. Many people prefer reading the works of great minds that have gone before us delving into the writings of Masonic scholars and philosophers. This is generally an independent and solitary pursuit that requires initiative on the part of that brother. There may be places where a Masonic book club exists to provide support and encouragement for this pursuit as well. Those who have such an opportunity available are, in the opinion of this author, fortunate.

Others prefer to listen to essays and presentations in some form or another to learn what the author has assembled for them. This is often embodied in the brief programs read or presented in Lodge by Lodge education officers. Although materials such as the short talk bulletins from the Masonic Service Association provide wonderful information, the Lodge education officer may have difficulty being able to synthesize and present this information in a manner that is engaging to the brothers. As a result, Masonic education often deteriorates into five minutes three or four times a year where a dull and boring presenter reads yet another pamphlet of some sort to the craft.

Another method of Masonic education is the more academic model of "study and quiz" whereby questions are posed and answers researched. This is best exemplified in the Masonic code courses put forth by the Grand Lodge of Ohio. This program involves five lessons of 25 multiple choice questions to be answered with all answers being found in the Constitution, Code of Bylaws, and other publications of the Grand Lodge of Ohio covering the governance and operations of lodges. This specific program is designed to assist officers in learning these valuable documents.

An ancient and well respected method of learning is the Socratic method whereby a facilitator poses questions on a particular topic to those within the group and each member of the group contributes their own thoughts, questions, and gems of information on this subject to the overall discussion. For some individuals, this method can be very engaging and enlightening because the point of view of many individuals can be brought forward often raising questions that had escaped one particular individual or point of view.

This particular model of Lodge education can be difficult to implement given the fact that few opportunities exist in modern society for people to experience this method of learning. Therefore, guidelines, suggestions, and methods of improving the success of these discussions are offered here.

Successful Lodge discussions such as these require several elements. First, a topic should be chosen that is somewhat familiar to the majority of participants. This topic needs to be chosen in advance and offered to the participants for thought, contemplation, and study. It

should be noted that topics should be broad enough and ambiguous enough to afford room for new information from various sources as well as divergent opinions.

Topics of discussion that have yielded good results in various lodges and include "so you're a master Mason, what now", "the most inspiring element of the entered apprentice charge", "what are the wages of a master Mason?", "what is morality has taught by the square?", "what does Freemasonry teaches us about our roles as fathers?", "what are the benefits and burdens of the progressive line?", and "why are we received upon the square?" The list is actually endless as the meaning, symbolism, and elements included in various Masonic lectures are all appropriate topics for discussion.

Announcing a topic in advance gives all involved an opportunity to prepare for the discussion. The topic can be announced by e-mail, newsletter, or at a meeting preceding the discussion meeting. Participants should be encouraged to read what others have already written on this subject matter and to ask themselves questions about how this topic may relate to their responsibilities as Freemasons and the way they conduct themselves.

A technique that can be valuable to assist in getting the conversation started is to approach two or three particularly skilled and articulate brothers to have them prepare a paragraph or two to present at the beginning of the discussion get the conversation started. These brief presentations that reflect those brothers reading, thoughts, and associated questions are likely to aid the others who may be more hesitant to speak up to get involved.

Second, there must be an atmosphere where freedom of expression, within bounds of civility, is encouraged and tolerated must be provided. The atmosphere is influenced by many factors.

First element of an appropriate atmosphere is the physical space. A large Lodge room with fixed chairs where 20 or 30 people may be spread across 50 or more chairs results in the physical distance between people being great and discourages comfortable, personal discussions. If contact is difficult, a louder speaking voice is required, in the sense of a comfortable, personal conversation can be lost. An alternative would be to use a space with movable chairs so that all can be in close proximity to another to increase the likelihood of candid engagement.

The second element of an appropriate atmosphere involves the protocol often associated with Masonic meetings. Typically there are rules and expectations about who can talk, when they talk, and the manner of conversation with nearly all formal Masonic meetings requiring that speakers addressed the East with the appropriate use of titles and prohibits or discourages direct discussion between brothers. As respectful as this may be, such formality can easily inhibit a free-flowing and open discussion.

It is important that we view this on the most basic level remembering we are truly all brothers with none above the rest other than through the temporary fortune of our election

or appointment to a particular office. Having the Lodge meet in refreshment so that many of these formalities can be relaxed can add to an atmosphere where discussions can be more productive.

A third important element to the success of a discussion is the characteristics of the facilitator. The facilitator must be available to avoid allowing particular individuals from becoming dominant in the conversation or disrespectful to those who may disagree or fail to fully understand. Each of us knows someone who can go on for extended periods of time having little or nothing to say and can easily that dominate the conversation. The facilitator needs to be willing and able to bring such discourses to a close and ask questions of others in the room about their thoughts, opinions, and observations on the subject to encourage opportunity. This will let everyone know their comments are valued and that all will have a reasonable opportunity to have their say.

In addition, the facilitator needs to be able to use questions to keep the discussion focused on the primary topic rather than allowing the discussion to move to other unrelated topics. The facilitator is generally not an active participant in the discussion offering his own thoughts, feelings, and opinions but is generally encouraging a civil exchange between those involved. Using questions rather than statements can move the conversation along particularly when using open ended questions that do not have simple answers. Examples of open ended questions are "how does that relate to.....", "what does our ritual say about ...", "what do the ancient charges tell us about", "what does that teach us about.....", or "how does that affect the way we behave on a day-to-day basis?"

As you can see, the choice of facilitator is very important as a good facilitator can create and sustain an environment where discussions can be pursued at length to the benefit of all. In contrast, a poor facilitator can either dominate the conversation with his own thoughts and pontifications limiting discussion, or passively allow an uncontrolled atmosphere to prevail resulting in confusion.

The final element of a successful discussion is the offering of a summary at the end of the discussion. A summary can prove quite helpful at reviewing the many interesting, divergent, and instructive jams of alignment offered during the discussion. And enlightening discussion generally involves a simple, clear statement at the beginning that becomes increasingly confusing as it is discussed. To put closure on the discussion, the facilitator should be keeping notes about the essential points brought up during the discussion and those notes reviewed in the form of a brief summary of what was discussed point it out and brought up during the discussion.

Although implementing such discussions can be challenging, the rewards can be immense. By reading one particular author of great expertise, you learn about that particular person's insights, thoughts, opinions, and beliefs on that particular subject matter. However, by engaging a group in a discussion of that topic, new and often surprising points of view can be raised creating "spontaneous enlightenment" to all present.