Raising the Bar of Critical Thinking; An Examination of Mortimer Adler’s Influence in Education

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Abstract

This essay will take you through the journey of Mortimer Adler’s life as he propelled himself into one of the most well know and influential educational reformers of the 20th century. It will commence with Adler’s humble beginnings as the son of Jewish immigrants, and move through the many events of his life that led him to be one of the most critically examined curriculum theorists of our time. This paper will also explore Adler’s foundation in Perennialism, and how that influenced his educational philosophy. It will critically examine the arguments both for and against implementation of Adler’s clearly outlined plan for education in our schools. The culmination of this essay will look at how Adler’s ideas of offering the same course of study to all, and raising up students to become independent thinkers and active citizens, are applied in today’s schools, including my own. **This will be especially enlightening as I am currently an educator in a district with two programs running side-by-side, both a traditional K-8 program and a GATE magnet program (ENRICH). I will also be looking at my own ties to Adler as a practitioner of the Junior Greatbooks program, which was founded in Adler and Hutchin’s Great Books Foundation.**

Raising the Bar of Critical Thinking; An Examination of Mortimer Adler’s Influence in Education

From high school dropout to one of the most influential educational philosophers of the 20th century, Mortimer Adler’s educational ideologies still resonate within our society today. Whether you agree with Adler’s approach to educational instruction or not, his proclamation that we are a politically classless society, and therefore, we should have a classless system of schooling, caused for much contemplation within the educational field. Adler clearly influenced many leaders in education, including Robert Maynard Hutchins, who was committed to the fundamental principle that, “’The best education for the best, is the best education for all’” (Adler, 1982, p. 6). Proposing the same course of study for all, and espousing that all students deserved the finest education not just the elite, shook the foundations of many in our country. In fact, *The Paideia Proposal, an Educational Manifesto*, sparked much discussion about the need for school reform, and elevated Adler into an educational superstar. Although no one can argue with the premise that all children deserve the best education possible, there are many that argue that the path set by Adler’s manifesto is not the best for all.

# A Philosopher is Born

Perhaps Mortimer Adler’s fate in education was sealed when he was born to a mother who was a teacher. Born in 1902, Adler was a first generation American, and the son of Jewish immigrants. One cannot overlook the irony that as one of our nation’s leading educational theorists, Adler was a high school drop-out. Adler’s education in New York City schools was unusual to say the least. At one point, due to the overcrowding of New York City schools in the early 1900s, students who showed proficiency in their subjects could advance in grade level. According to his own biography (1977), this was fortuitous for Adler, as he exercised this option three times, skipping three grade levels and landing himself in high school at the tender age of twelve. DeWitt Clinton High School was a liberal arts high school, and it was here that Adler found a penchant for writing. This passion soon found Adler focusing all of his efforts on writing for both the school newspaper and magazine, which eventually led him to the position of editor.

Absorbed in his beloved editorial position, and coupled with the pride in his publications, Adler ran into a battle of wills with his school principal. At one point, Adler refused to follow the principal’s order to suspend a student from the newspaper staff due to his poor grades. The reprimand he received caused disillusionment on Adler’s part, and this subsequently led to his decision to drop out of school and pursue his passion in journalism.

As a prior winner of a *NY Sun’s* essay competition, Adler was inspired to seek a position there. He was more than pleased when he found himself being offered an entry position in the Sun’s editorial department. His obsession with writing did not wane, and Adler spent his idle hours writing editorials with the hopes that one might find its way into publication. His dream was realized when he found one of his editorials on his boss’s desk, which had been approved for print.

This small success inspired Adler to begin taking night classes at the Extension Division of Columbia University in order to hone his writing skills. Ironically, this decision became the undoing of Adler’s journalistic direction. His literature teacher, Professor Frank Allen Patterson challenged him by assigning literature that he had never before encountered. Most assuredly, the text that transformed Adler was the autobiography of John Stuart Mill, a child prodigy in the area of Greek literature and philosophy. This subsequently sent Adler to seek the works of Socrates and Plato. Newly intrigued by the Socratic method of questioning, Adler began to verbally par with his friends as an intellectual form of entertainment. Adler’s passion for Plato could not be satiated, and eventually his focus on journalism gave way to a desire to complete his University studies. (Adler, 1977) This shift led to the birth of a profound and prolific educational philosopher.

## A Battle of Wits

Adler’s university studies were spent theorizing and arguing about education; however, as he reflected “It is only since the early fifties, when I prepared an elaborate series of papers for a three-day conference held under the auspices of the Ford Foundation, that I have fully appreciated how novel and difficult is the problem of educating a whole people, not just an upper crust of ten percent” (Adler, 1977, p. 7-8). Jumping ahead, Adler attended the conferences in the summers of 1973-1974 at the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies. It was here Adler was to debate the question of “Whether there are absolute and universal principles on which education should be founded” (Adler, 1988, p. 54). During this well prepared debate with Lord Bertrand Russell, Adler, wielding many pages of notes and an armor of confidence, was unseated by Russell’s witticisms and demand of the podium. Adler was both shocked and disappointed in Russell’s nonchalant approach to what, for him, was a serious question. “I did not win that debate, but Lord Russell certainly lost it in the estimation of every critical member of that audience, whose intelligence he insulted…” (Adler, 1988, p. 53). Reasserting his position following the debate Adler stated, “If we conceive the educated person as any human being who, having acquired the tools of learning in school, goes on in the rest of life to use them for the fullest possible development of his or her capacities, then the ideal is realizable, at least to some degree, by every member of the population” (Adler, 1977. p. 9).

Adler’s Ties to Perennialism

It is well documented that Adler was a proponent of Perennialism, as one of his main focuses was the importance of students acquiring a true understanding of the ideas of Western civilization. These ideas are touted to have the capacity to be used in problem solving regardless of the era in which they are used; they are universal and rooted in tradition and Realism. The main question Perennialists are looking to answer is, “What is human nature?” (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1988). For followers of Perennialism, human nature is unchanging and universal in that all humans can reason and understand. Therefore, “The goal of education is to develop the rational person and to uncover universal truths by carefully training the intellect” (Ornstein & Hunking, 1988). Clearly, Perennialism is deeply tied to the works of Plato and Aristotle, and Adler’s passion for Western philosophy is supported by this theory.

Adler’s philosophy has clearly woven in the Perennial thread, with his ultimate goal being to train students to critically think for themselves and embrace the lifelong pursuit of education; to engage in Socratic questioning. As an activist to this end, Adler “Aspired to be a five-star general leading the American public into a happy and productive attack on venality and sloth in education” (Gregory, 1984).

The Paideia Program

Adler’s *Paideia Proposal, An Educational Manifesto* was met with mixed reviews. His premise was that “Every child is educable up to his or her capacity. Educable – not just trainable for jobs!” (Adler, 1982, p. 7) was something to consider during a time of much needed educational reform. The objectives of Adler’s philosophy are clearly outlined in his manifesto. According to Adler, schooling is only one part of education, and not even the best schools can completely educate students. In fact, the very nature of youth prevents that complete education; immaturity of thought is the obstacle. It is the individual’s encounters with life’s trials and tribulations that truly complete the cycle of education. As Adler puts it, “Education is a lifelong process” (Adler, 1982, p. 10), and formal schooling is a small but necessary part of that. In fact, “Schooling is a preparatory stage; it forms the habit of learning and provides the means for continuing to learn after all schooling is completed” (Adler, 1982, p.10).

The Greek word, Paideia, means to nurture the whole child. Adler’s manifesto “Argued that American classrooms could be made both more student-centered and more rigorous – thereby providing a quality education for all students” (Roberts and Billings, 2006). According to Adler, three major components must be met to inspire students to pursue knowledge over a lifetime. The first is in the area of personal growth or self-improvement. This encompasses the mental, moral, and spiritual self. One should seek to take advantage of as much personal development as possible. This component, like the other two, are definitely focused on creating the most successful adult life possible.

The second component is an individual’s role as a working member within our government – their citizenship. As the caretakers of our society, we need to be prepared for the duties and responsibilities of that citizenship, which include civic virtues, understanding of our government’s framework, and the underlying principles that are the foundation of that framework. The final component is the basic need to earn a living to sustain oneself; however, this is not by means of training for a particular job or trade, but rather by giving that individual basic skills that are universal to successfully maneuver employment within our society. The bottom line is that these three goals should inspire a curriculum that “Must be general and liberal” (Adler, 1982, p. 18), and must have the ability to adjust to a constantly evolving society. Per Adler, this type of learning is completely aligned with our inherent human nature, meaning that we are naturally flexible and able to adjust to varying environments and circumstances.

Like the clearly outlined components of learning as a lifelong process, Adler has also clearly outlined three levels of learning that he believes will optimize a student’s educational achievement within the classroom. These levels of learning are listed in his manifesto as a composition of goals, means, and areas of operations and activities. The first level is the acquisition of knowledge, which is acquired through didactic means or “teaching by telling” (Adler, 1982, p. 24). The basic courses of study are consistent and include language, literature, and fine arts; mathematics and natural sciences; history, geography, and social studies.

The second level of learning is the development of skills which concentrate on the goal of continuing the learning process. The teaching strategy in this stage is more aligned with the thought that teachers would function as a coach or an aid in learning. At this stage, didactic learning is no longer sufficient, and the student is prepared to spread his/her wings as a participant in the learning process. Adler sees this level as the “Backbone of basic schooling” (Adler, 1982, p. 28)

Lastly, the third level of learning is an expansion of one’s understanding, and a reinforcement of the initial learning in the first two stages. Virtually all of this level is dedicated to innovation and engagement of the mind through the Socratic method of teaching, which is often referred to as maieutic, as it gives birth to new ideas. It is Adler’s proclamation that through this course of study, students should be able to read and discuss the timeless documents that our society is based upon: The Declaration of Independence, The Constitution, the Federalist Papers, and the Gettysburg Address. The foundation of a solid understanding of these, and other fundamental principles of our government and society, are crucial for one to fully understand and actively participate as a citizen.

Although these three stages are clearly outlined, according to Adler, they are offered as a model, and the “Recommendation is not a monolithic program to be adopted uniformly everywhere” (Adler, 1982, p. 34). In fact, he states the way in which it is accomplished should be determined by the individual schools, their administrators, and school boards.

**Two sides to the story**

There is no doubt that Adler’s approach to learning and his *Paideia Proposal* created quite a stir in the academic community. There are many who felt that to implement Adler’s approach would do so at the expense of a lucrative financial society. In Gregory Marshall’s response to Adler’s Proposal, he acknowledges that “When it comes right down to it, Americans still hold firmly to a utilitarian notion of education” (Gregory, 1984). Getting citizens to buy into changing that perspective is an uphill battle. Americans view education as an ends to a means, and that means is a financial one by way of a solid paying job that may lead to further advancement. Additionally, many theorists and citizens believe that our schools are powerless to make a change in our society, since the institution of school in essence is a perpetuation of that same system.

Another argument against Adler’s proposal encompasses the idea that all students have the same ability to access the sophisticated material. According to Adler, individual differences are those of degree only. His support comes from the premise that humans are from the stable foundation of human biology, and therefore human nature will not be that highly differentiated. However, as Karen Spear points out, “Those differences in degree are so broad and so numerous that when exposed to a common curriculum, the weak students flounder while the good ones, not sufficiently challenged, tend to invest their energies in finding ways to circumvent the system” (Spear, 1984). Nel Noddings would second that argument, in that “Giving all of our children the same education, especially when that ‘sameness’ is defined in a model of intellectual excellence, cannot equalize the quality of education” (Noddings, 1983). In fact, students who are unable to maneuver successfully within the traditional classroom may experience such profound failure, that they would be unable to recover any further educational motivation. It is Adler’s response to these claims that some students will opt for the path of least resistance if not fully challenged and given the opportunity to excel. Even Adler admits that schools are stuck in the first level of his educational pathway, the didactic phase, “Almost to the exclusion of development of intellectual skills and improved understanding of ideas and values” (Arnold, 1988). Adler understood this to be the fault of the educational system, not the teachers who have classes with upwards of thirty-five or more students. Because of this, they do not have the time to devote to the individual attention that is needed to move into level two of his pathway, the coaching stage.

The final argument against Adler’s proposal is that his pathway is in fact, not based in democracy as he claims. Others claim that it is Eurocentric and excludes the cultural influences, which are inherent in our culturally diverse democracy. Although Adler’s point of view is that, by simply offering the highest level of education to everyone, the essence of his proposal is purely democratic. For many, however, Adler’s single course of study, by its very nature, compromises the fundamental principle of democracy: freedom. With the premise of democracy being that which is based in freedom, Adler’s pathway completely limits choice during the first ten years. A student’s personal interest and selection in areas of study are taken out of the equation. With no electives offered until the last two years of schooling, there is no chance for students to develop their own autonomous interests until they are in the advanced stage of study.

Nevertheless, even those who are critical of Adler’s proposal can find valuable aspects within it. We see some evidence of this in Marshall Gregory’s response to Adler’s proposal, “Whether or not we agree with all of Adler’s opinions about education, we can agree, I think, that he deserves respect for applying himself to the second of Socrates’ objectives with devotion and energy” (Gregory, 1984). This second objective is that society has an obligation to provide the highest quality of education to its citizens. In fact, Adler’s devotion to responsible citizenship is one of the baseline motivations for his educational philosophy, and his dedication to educational reform. It is definitely a point of view that motivated many Americans, whether they were educators themselves, or those being educated. Even Noddings, one of Adler’s most vocal critics, agrees that Adler’s three tiered pathway to knowledge acquisition is valuable in many ways, such that, “All three methods, properly implemented, are sound and useful, and education would take a giant step forward if teachers were skilled in each of them” (Noddings, 1983).

Adler’s passion to increase literacy in the major Western canon, and to produce citizens who are enthusiastic, not apathetic, about education is an admirable one. At a time when little was being done to reform education, Adler took the proverbial bull by the horns and set a specific pathway to increasing the literacy of our nation. As Adler himself expressed, “Earning a living is important, but so is living well. We are concerned that schools do both, not one” (Davis, 1982).

**In the Classroom**

Today, perhaps the most common academic area in which to view Adler’s vision in action is through the Paideia Seminar, which is a teaching and learning strategy “Intended to be used as part of a systemic, transformational program that would eventually affect all aspects of a school community” (Billings & Roberts, 2006). As a leading advocate of reading and critically examining the “Great Books” in our society, the Paideia Seminar is focused on the discussion and critical interpretation of text. Adler’s passion for the Socratic method of questioning is clearly seen in this classroom environment. Also integral to this program is Adler’s philosophy that the teacher during this stage is not in the traditional role of the deliverer of information, but rather teachers take on the role of dialogic instruction; they become initiates and observers rather than active facilitators of the discussion.

The Paideia Seminar has three very distinct differences from the traditional classroom discussion. The first is that the students are the ones who ultimately decide on the important ideas and values that are discussed. That which piques their interest is what drives the discussion. Second, it is through the exchange of ideas that the actual understanding of ideas is created. This shifts the understanding from being given to the student by the teacher, or being found independently by the student, to being revealed to the group as a critical thinking process. Third, because this becomes a construction of the synthesized ideas of the whole group, the teacher does give up his/her direction of the discussion.

It is also important to clarify that this seminar structure does involve the teacher working with the students in pre-reading activities, which enhance student connections during and after reading, as well as post-seminar activities that culminate the process. After one year-long study of a classroom that consistently facilitated the program, the most significant finding was that “The seminars began to improve only when she (the teacher) focused considerable post-seminar time and energy on assessing what happened during the dialogue and then used the data gleaned from that assessment to deliberately plan the next seminar” (Billlings & Roberts, 2006). By this observation, it is safe to say that practice makes perfect.

In Genevieve Arnold’s article, the seminar experience was brought to light through the Junior Great Books series, which is sponsored by the Great Books Foundation, initiated by both Adler and Hutchins in the 1980s. In 1988, a North Carolina district committed to two and a half hours a week toward Adler’s Socratic seminars. They referred to these sessions as the “Wednesday Revolution.” These seminars, like the one discussed in Billings & Roberts article, highlighted the students’ questioning and discussions. They were the active participants with the teachers taking a secondary role. Teachers reported that the students were “Gaining deeper understanding of the literature and heightened interest in reading and writing. They are learning to think critically and to respect opinions of their peers” (Arnold, 1988). The teachers also reported that the students across all reading levels were developing higher-level, critical thinking and reasoning skills (Arnold, 1988).

**Personal Practice of Junior Greatbooks**

As a practitioner of Junior Greatbooks, I can attest to the progress I have seen in my own students. I began teaching this Socratic seminar several years ago, and from the very first session, I saw a marked improvement in the understanding of text and the ability of students to verbalize their ideas and arguments in a healthy exchange. The method I follow was initially taught to me through a Junior Greatbooks training seminar in 2004; however, I have added additional elements to enhance both discussion and the written response. My practice involves asking students pre-reading questions that are connected to the major themes or conflicts within the text, but are not based on the text itself. I encourage students to both discuss and write about the questions prior to our reading. The seconds step is to read the text aloud to the students. This gives all students access to the text, and exposes them to new words in context. It is also helpful to those students whose reading fluency may be at a lower level. The read-aloud is followed by a second, independent reading that is accompanied with a directed question. This question is one that asks students to interpret text, and can be answered from multiple perspectives.

The first seminar discussion is based on the directed question during the second, independent reading. It is here that the students get their first initiation into the world of Socratic discussion. As the teacher, I must only ask the students to share what they discovered in their reading. The first time I introduce students to this type of discussion, I do call on those who have marked the same text excerpt to share why they agree or disagree with one another. Allowing for a safe environment for students to share their opinions, has yielded more success in other forums as well.

Our second seminar discussion is done as a modified “fish bowl” that I call the “hot seat.” In this discussion, half of the students are those who verbally respond to a thought-provoking question based on one of the major themes or conflicts within the story. Like the pre-reading question, these questions are designed to be answered and interpreted in multiple ways. The students on the outside of the circle are also allowed to answer the question, but this is done in writing. These students are tasked as active observers of the exchange. They are monitoring the discussion and answering questions about it as it unfolds. These students are also allowed to join the “hot seat” to ask a question or make a comment only, but do not become permanent members of the group. The benefits of this close observation is to engage active listening and support one’s observations with evidence. My practice is to perform two of these Socratic sessions per trimester, allowing those on the inside and outside of the circle to trade places.

The final piece to my Socratic seminar is the written response. By the time the students have read the selection twice, and responded to it in two types of discussion, they are ready to tackle the writing process. The students are given a choice of questions to respond to. I encourage students to choose the question that they most relate to in terms of both emotional connection and text interpretation. It is here that I have found the most growth in both the organization and critical thought within my students’ writing.

My ultimate goal as the year progresses is to turn the questioning over to the students. I begin to ask them to note critical questions that they have regarding the reading, and submit them on notecards. These I categorize and use as the discussion questions. This both encourages students to look for those critical questions, and gives them confidence as critical thinkers and owners of their own education. Although Adler’s first order of business when developing and implementing the seminar as a teaching strategy was to promote higher-order thinking, I would agree with the staff of the National Paideia Center that the “Seminar practice has two interrelated goals: social and intellectual” (Roberts and Billings, 2006).

**Bringing Adler Home**

As Marshall Gregory so poignantly put it, the task before us is not merely to find those passages in which Adler affirms our opinions about education” (Gregory, 1984). I feel my task is to examine Adler’s opinion and approach to education, and critically examine to what level, if any, it is in play in my district, my middle school, and in my classroom. As a teacher in a charter school, which houses both a traditional K-8 and a magnet GATE program (ENRICH), I found this to be quite intriguing and worth investigating. Are both programs teaching “the best” to all of our students?

I felt the best place to begin my investigation was at the top with my Superintendent, who is also the curriculum coordinator for our district. In order to understand her approach to education, which filters down to the teaching body, I asked her, “What do we want to send our

students away knowing when they leave our school, and what in general are the most important things for our students to know as they venture out into the world?” Her reply was that, “Probably all schools want to say that we want to turn out the best adults, so we are giving them skills possible to achieve that.” Digging a little deeper, I also asked her how she felt about challenging students who are at a lower level than the group; what is the best course of action to address their needs? Should we meet them where they are even if it is below grade level, or should we be offering the higher level of academic content? Her immediate response was to offer them the higher level, even if that is a beginning exposure to the content, “It’s got to be monitored so they are not drowning of course….that’s what I love about the new intervention programs,” which continually allow students to raise their level of comprehension, while continuing to expose them to grade level materials. It is also her view that those who are supported with an IEP, should have some goals that are grade appropriate, even if the students are not operating at that grade level. By incorporating these higher level goals, the students are motivated to aim for some achievements that are lofty.

They’re going to achieve some of these higher level things even if they have to use their fingers or calculators because, for whatever reason, they don’t memorize their multiplication tables well…That would be very difficult for some special education teachers if we did not offer them an intervention program to support this process.

This mirror’s Adler’s claim that it is natural for children to strive for higher expectations that are set before them, as long as they are presented in a reasonable and attractive manner (Adler, 1982). She followed by saying that, “Some kids are able retain (information), but they need the repetition of material and sometimes presented in a different way” for them to be able to readily access the information.

The next question posed to my Superintendent dealt with the two programs running side-by-side, the traditional K-8 program, and the ENRICH program. I asked her if she felt that the content curriculum that we implement for both programs is the same. Her response was a resounding

Yes! Although some parents in ENRICH assume the level will be higher, but I always point to the API, and say to people if you were looking at a traditional program in another school as compared to our ENRICH program, you would probably see a big difference. Most of our kids are pretty high performing; our teachers in both programs work together as a grade level team, which I ask for.

She wants both programs to be quick-paced and stresses the highest of expectations.

Although the interview I conducted with my Superintendent shed some light on the directives of our school, I was inspired to delve a bit deeper. I decided to pose one major question to all of my co-workers: “What do you think are the most important things that students should know when they complete their K-12 schooling experience?” I had several responses from teachers in both programs. Many of my colleagues spoke of knowing “life skills,” which would prepare them to be functional adults. However, the one over-arching theme in nearly every response was the importance of interpersonal skills, how to communicate, collaborate, and maneuver through life’s obstacles. As one colleague put it, “they need to know how to think critically and have the skills to find answers to the questions presented. This of course involves using various resources and incorporating various abilities.”

The final piece of the puzzle for me was to pose the same question to my twenty-five, eighth grade students. Not only was I impressed with their answers, but I was also amazed at how parallel the results were to my colleagues. Of the responses returned, eleven of the students felt the most important thing was to be able to “communicate, and communicate well.” To be able to reason with others and “figure things out” was critical; problem solving was high on the list. The idea of successful communication extended to job interviewing, parenting, being a college student, being a boss, or being an employee. As one student expressed, “You could be the smartest person in the world, but if you can’t go into a job interview and communicate why you would be a great candidate for the job, you won’t get the job.” Seven students felt that academic skills were the most important, but also followed with some mention of how to work well with others.

Through these interviews, I can see some clear evidence and support for Adler’s same course of study for all, and the commitment to higher level critical thinking, at play in our school. Although many of Adler’s ideas in strategic questioning and communication are reflected, there is still the underlying idea that one needs to be able to financially and physically support themselves. I will also attest to the fact that we do offer various electives in both of our programs, including music, technology, and Spanish. I know that Adler would not argue the acquisition of a second language, but would he agree with the other two? Additionally, our ENRICH students attend school for an extra hour a day in order to pursue various extracurricular interests such as fine art, poetry, culinary art, digital art, glee club, dance, and more. I can’t help but wonder, what would Adler think of that?

**Final Thoughts**

I firmly believe that Mortimer Adler was a passionate advocate for the most rigorous and meaningful education for all students. His vision is inspiring to me, and elements are mirrored in my own educational philosophy. His tri-fold approach is lofty, but worth consideration. The first level gives students a solid educational foundation, coupled with a focus in academic rigor and citizenship. The second level is one of coaching and guidance in order to allow students to find their own strength and confidence. Finally, through critical thinking and questioning strategies, the student is able to formulate ideas that are applicable to multiple facets of continued education and life skills. I believe many who examine Adler’s philosophy stall out at the first phase, meaning they initially see only the idea that our students must have a singular base of knowledge. What many fail to follow to its fruition is Adler’s loftier idea that this base of knowledge should be fostered to the end goal of a society whose members are able to reason and think critically for themselves. His observation that we have become a society of apathetic followers rather than innovative leaders could also be linked to the pendulum swing of the new Common Core State Standards, which is currently sweeping our nation. Giving Adler the final word, “It is important that we all make as much of ourselves as we can, fulfill our potentialities, realize our gifts, and lead as deeply human lives as we can lead” (Davis, 1982)

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