Connected Learning

Youth and Age

July 6, 2020
This anthology has been prepared in draft form for use in a special seminar curriculum and are provided for private, non-commercial use in extraordinary times. Additional information about the seminar and this volume is available from The Aspen Institute, 2300 N Street NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20037.

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Connected Learning

Other resources, including daily meditations, periodic podcasts, on-line seminars and discussions, and occasional on-line conversations about this week’s curriculum, are available at:

aspeninstitute.org/programs/executive-leadership-development/resources-for-living-and-leading/

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How to Use this Curriculum

Connected Learning in Times of Confinement is designed to support people and their families, neighborhoods, organizations, and networks by building upon the Aspen Institute’s unique expertise in facilitating meaningful conversations in a seminar setting.

We envisage a weekly curriculum that can be used in pieces, or all at once, or in various combinations. Our hope is that these readings and guidance will allow you and others to reflect on fundamental human questions in ways that nourish our hearts, minds, and fellowship in a time of confinement. A curriculum (from the Latin currere, to run) is a path, an exploration, not something to be mastered but an invitation to discovery and wonder. These materials are curated to intrigue and delight you, and we invite you to reflect upon them on your own, and to share them—with family, friends, neighbors, teams, networks. In this, the journey itself is the destination, a call to thought, dialogue, and action.

In a journey it is often helpful to have a guide, and in this curriculum you will find three guides:

First, the authors themselves—we do not need to follow the authors, but we do well to understand what they are saying;

Second, guiding questions—for each reading, there is a set of guiding questions designed for individual and collective reflection; they are not the only (or even most important) questions, but a way of getting started; these may be found at the back of the packet and are best read after you have read the texts;

Third, general guidance—for each discussion, participants and discussion leaders may want to remind themselves of some best practices; these may be found at the back of this packet.

We invite you to share these readings widely and encourage others to engage in conversation. As you do so, know that fellow seminar graduates and their families, friends, and colleagues are doing the same. We all contribute to a global chorus of conversation about ideas worth sharing and acting upon.

—Todd Breyfogle, PhD
Managing Director, Aspen Executive Leadership Seminars

About Aspen Institute Seminars

The Aspen Institute Executive Leadership Seminars Department drives change through reflection, dialogue, and action in service of a more free, just, and equitable society. We do this by: curating brave spaces of shared meaning which help people become more self-aware, more self-correcting, and more self-fulfilling; deepening participants’ humane sensibilities and capacities for moral judgment through an examination of the humanistic traditions; establishing meaningful connections among diverse people and organizations in service of a better society.

For more information, including information about customized programs for companies and other organizations, please contact Kalissa Hendrickson, PhD, Director, at Kalissa.Hendrickson@aspeninst.org or 202-736-3586. Learn more.
The Aspen Institute starts from an act of faith in the humanistic tradition: one must be reflective in order to insure that all human activity—political, scientific, economic, intellectual or artistic—will serve the needs of human beings and enrich and deepen their lives.

The Institute believes in the value both of the “Great Ideas” of the past as well as the importance of the sometimes inelegant and highly controversial ideas of the present.

The Institute is dedicated to the fundamental educational value of dialogue for mature men and women from different nations and cultures -- intercommunications between people of comparable competence from various backgrounds and specialized fields of experience.

The Aspen idea recognizes that the processes by which persons learn and develop or change their ideas are not mechanical or even purely rational. As there is a mystery at the edge of human thought, so there is a magic about human relationships, and the magic we attempt to invoke in Aspen is that of the sheer beauty of this area of the Rocky Mountains.

With Erasmus, we hold that “nothing human is alien” to the inquiring purposes of the Aspen Institute. The Institute intends to be, in sum, a place of excellence and excitement where men and women of the finest qualities of mind and spirit from all walks of life in the United States and abroad can meet to learn from one another through serious discussion of and work on significant problems facing society and the greatest ideas which have been expressed throughout history and today concerning these problems.

—J. E. Slater, President, The Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, 1972
Readings

5  Anne Frank, *Diary of a Young Girl*

7  Rupi Kaur, “a child and an elder”
Dearest Kitty,

We’ve received a book from the library with the challenging title *What Do You Think of the Modern Young Girl?* I’d like to discuss this subject today.

The writer criticizes “today’s youth” from head to toe, though without dismissing them all as “hopeless cases.” On the contrary, she believes they have it within their power to build a bigger, better and more beautiful world, but that they occupy themselves with superficial things, without giving a thought to true beauty. In some passages I had the strong feeling that the writer was directing her disapproval at me, which is why I finally want to bare my soul to you and defend myself against this attack.

I have one outstanding character trait that must be obvious to anyone who’s known me for any length of time: I have a great deal of self-knowledge. In everything I do, I can watch myself as if I were a stranger. I can stand across from the everyday Anne and, without being biased or making excuses, watch what she’s doing, both the good and the bad. This self-awareness never leaves me, and every time I open my mouth, I think, “You should have said that differently” or “That’s fine the way it is.” I condemn myself in so many ways that I’m beginning to realize the truth of Father’s adage: “Every child has to raise itself.” Parents can only advise their children or point them in the right direction. Ultimately, people shape their own characters. In addition, I face life with an extraordinary amount of courage. I feel so strong and capable of bearing burdens, so young and free! When I first realized this, I was glad, because it means I can more easily withstand the blows life has in store.

... 

“Deep down, the young are lonelier than the old.” I read this in a book somewhere and it’s stuck in my mind. As far as I can tell, it’s true.

So, if you’re wondering whether it’s harder for the adults here than for the children, the answer is no, it’s certainly not. Older people have an opinion about everything and are sure of themselves and their actions. It’s twice as hard for us

young people to hold on to our opinions at a time when ideals are being shattered and destroyed, when the worst side of human nature predominates, when everyone has come to doubt truth, justice and God.

Anyone who claims that the older folks have a more difficult time in the Annex doesn’t realize that the problems have a far greater impact on us. We’re much too young to deal with these problems, but they keep thrusting themselves on us until, finally, we’re forced to think up a solution, though most of the time our solutions crumble when faced with the facts. It’s difficult in times like these: ideals, dreams and cherished hopes rise within us, only to be crushed by grim reality. It’s a wonder I haven’t abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart. It’s utterly impossible for me to build my life on a foundation of chaos, suffering and death. I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness, I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too, I feel the suffering of millions.

And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more. In the meantime, I must hold on to my ideals. Perhaps the day will come when I’ll be able to realize them!

Yours,

Anne M. Frank
a child and an elder
by Rupi Kaur
(1992–)

a child and an elder sat across from each other at a table
a cup of milk and tea before them
the elder asked the child
if she was enjoying her life
the child answered yes
life was good but
she couldn’t wait to grow up
and do grown-up things
then the child asked the elder the same question
he too said life was good
but he’d give anything to go back to an age
where moving and dreaming were still possibilities
they both took a sip from their cups
but the child’s milk had curdled
the elder’s tea had grown bitter
there were tears running from their eyes

Guiding Questions

The best questions arise from careful listening (to the author, oneself, and others), and from the spontaneity of wonder

Anne Frank, The Diary of a Young Girl
• What criticism is Frank trying to counter?
• Do you agree with her assessment of how character is formed?
• How different are the young and the old in their self-knowledge?
• How hopeful are you about the generation that comes after you?
• How do you assess the generation that came before?

Rupi Kaur, “a child and an elder”
• Read the poem aloud: What words, images, and/or feelings does the poem evoke in you?
• What picture does the poem paint about the relationship between youth and age?
• Are you an elder or a child?

Jacob Folkema, Telemachus Kneels Before Mentor (1715)
• Set a timer and look at the image for 3 minutes: What do you see? What feelings does the image evoke?
• How do you interpret Telemachus’ gesture? Mentor’s?
• How are we to understand the reactions of the other figures in the image?
• Is this an image of submission? Deference? Respect?
• Telemachus grows up during the long absence of his father, Odysseus. What is the role of non-biological parents in raising the young?
• What is a mentor?

General questions for the week
• What conversations are the young and old having?
• What conversations do we need to be having across generations?
• What are the limitations and strengths of youth? Of age?
• How have the younger and older people in your life shaped your understanding of self and the world?
General Principles for Participants

• Read the text(s) to be discussed in their entirety (ideally twice)
• Make notes about what you understand, don’t understand, agree or disagree with
• Focus comments and conversation on the ideas expressed in the shared text(s), not on outside knowledge
• Seek to understand your fellow participants, not to persuade them
• Be freely authentic and morally present
• Listen to the text, to others, and to yourself

General principles for discussion leaders:

• Hold the space for honesty and vulnerability: be honest and vulnerable yourself
• Ask questions, don’t teach: the aim is shared understanding and meaning, not agreement
• Be attached to the conversation: avoid rigidly following your planned order of questions
• Make sure every voice is heard: don’t move too quickly to fill the silence
• Start and end on time: end not with conclusions but with questions you’re taking away

Format:

• Match the texts to the time allotted (Each text can productively stimulate 20-40 minutes of discussion, and can be read discussed individually or together in one sitting, depending on the time available; it is better to end with more to be said, rather than straining to fill the time)
• Begin with introductions:
  • name (if not everyone is well known to one another)
  • what is on your heart and mind?
  • the person speaking chooses the next person
• Set the frame:
  • remind participants to enjoy the gift of time and conversation by avoiding other distractions
  • revisit the key general principles above
• It always helps to read a passage aloud
• Layer your questions: be patient, each layer builds upon the next
  • What does the text say? (sometimes we read the same thing different ways)
  • What does the text mean? (sometimes we interpret the text differently)
  • What does the text mean to me? (sometimes we apply the texts to ourselves differently)
  • What does the text mean for us? (we may have different understandings of what the text means for living in community)
  • What does the text mean for society? (we may have different approaches to what the text implies for action in society)

Some helpful tips to keep the conversation going (for discussion leaders and participants):

• “say more about that”
• “where do you see that in the text?”
• “how is that related to what N said earlier?”
• “do you think that’s true?”
• “do others see it the same way?”
• “what did you see in the text that we haven’t addressed?”