How to Lead a Book Study
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So... What Does Everybody Think?
In the cinematic masterpiece Ferris Beuler’s Day Off, there is a slightly inane high school teacher who seems bent on killing off his students with boredom. After asking a reasonable question, he degenerates into a hypnotic, yet annoying, refrain of, “Anyone... Anyone... Anyone...,” while his students stare listlessly with drool gradually accumulating on the corner of their mouths. You may have even witnessed a small group equivalent of this scenario where the leader begins by saying, “So... What does everybody think?” (Anyone... Anyone... Anyone...) After some awkward silence, one person kindly offers, “It was pretty good.” (Anyone... Anyone... Anyone...) After some more silence, someone else notices that it has been quite hot (or cold) lately. Pretty soon the group is off and running to destinations unknown having left the book far behind.

Not to worry. This brief pamphlet is designed to help you as a leader/teacher avoid the type of dull, meandering discussion that can sometimes result from making a book the focus of your time together. Each section is designed to give you practical guidance and instruction, beginning with choosing the right material and approach for your group all the way to getting the most out of your time together. With a little time and practice, the rewards of reading and discussion can be enjoyed during your time together.

Choosing a Strategy
There are basically two strategies which work well when it comes to small groups and books. It is important to have both in mind as you begin to examine potential material for your group since not all books (and groups!) work equally well with each approach.

Content Orientation and the Teacher
In the content orientation approach, the book becomes the main resource for the teacher’s material. In this case, the objective is to communicate the content of the book as the author has presented it. There is no expectation that the audience has a copy of the book or has read any of it. It is the teacher’s responsibility to present the author’s thoughts and ideas to the group in a clear, understandable manner, as if they were the teacher’s own material. Books which focus on explaining biblical passages, are “argument heavy,” or present highly focused theological treatments of a specific topic tend to work best for this type of study.

In this setting, the leader is viewed more as a teacher than facilitator. Again, the main objective of this approach is to communicate accurately new or large amounts of information in such a way that will make it understandable to the audience.

On the positive side, this approach allows for easier control of the group learning process since it neither requires nor assumes that the audience has done any significant preparation. In many
contexts, this is an important consideration since “reading homework” often goes undone. It also allows the teacher to be sure that the important concepts have been accurately communicated and understood. If your group is unlikely to consistently read material on its own or wants the instruction of an expert in the field, this is a good approach. On the downside the time spent going over the book will look and feel more like a lecture than a discussion. Any discussion will probably focus on the audiences understanding of the material and not what they think about it.

Discussion Orientation and the Facilitator
In the discussion orientation approach, the audience discusses the book which becomes the main resource for the material. In this case, the objective is to allow the members of the group to interact with the content of the book, their own experience, and the other members of the group. There is the full expectation that the audience will have read the material and will come prepared to contribute to the meeting. It is the leader’s responsibility to guide and moderate the discussion as well as offer points of clarification regarding the material. Books which focus on lifestyle issues, analysis of doctrinal/cultural topics, histories, and biographies tend to work best in this setting.

In this setting, the leader is viewed more as a facilitator than a teacher. Again the main objective of this approach is to analyze, discuss and interact with the material and others in the group.

On the positive side, most small group audiences prefer this approach. It gives everyone a chance to participate by asking questions, responding to others, and formulating his or her own opinions. There is a sense that the participants are members of a group rather than pupils in a classroom which often evokes a sense of ownership in the material.

On the downside, it is almost impossible to conduct this type of discussion if there is not a significant level of commitment on each member’s part to fully read and digest the material before attending the discussion. The possibility of an intelligent, stimulating time of interaction decreases exponentially with each member who fails to complete his or her reading assignment.

Making the Call
Each group varies in size, composition, interests, and spiritual needs. Therefore, neither the content nor discussion orientation will work well all the time for any given group. However, as you make decisions about materials and approaches, you should keep in mind several key factors.

– How motivated is your group? To have a discussion orientation, your people must be willing to do the preparation work.
– What type of material is your group most interested in? Some books lend themselves to discussion but some don’t.
– How comfortable are you in the roles of teacher and/or facilitator? It takes less expertise to be a facilitator than a teacher; however, it can sometimes take longer to prepare to facilitate a discussion that teach certain material.
The most important element here is to make a decision as to which kind of study you would like to do, and then stick with it. You may want to outline these two approaches, their pros and cons and choose the material that you would like to use for your group; then, listen for feedback. The key to having a good discussion group starts here. You must make your expectations clear to those wishing to participate. You don’t need to “lay down the law,” but you need to gently, but firmly, remind them that if they chose a discussion oriented approach it will require their participation both prior to and during the meeting.

The majority of small group studies which falter do so because neither the leader nor the group has understood clearly which type of study is being done and what is expected respectively. Having chosen the material and the best approach for the situation, it is time to consider preparation.

Before Your Guests Arrive
The single most significant factor in having a productive learning time is leader preparation. Even with highly motivated group members, strong material and an eagerness to learn, the lesson will lose the potential for a truly deep and meaningful discussion without some basic preparation on the part of the leader.

However (this is very important), it does not take a great deal of time or effort to become a well prepared teacher/facilitator if you know what you need to do ahead of time. The emphasis here isn’t so much adding more work to your schedule, although that may be required, but rather changing the way you prepare to maximize its usefulness.

If you keep this process in mind as you chose the material, read it for yourself, and think about how to best present it to your group you will find that the bulk of your preparation is already done. With a little practice and intentionality, these steps will become habits which will seem just as natural as reading.

Coming Attractions
As a leader, you need to feel comfortable with the material. Different people have their own style, but at the very least, this means you have read the entire book, cover to cover, before the group gets together, and then again a section at a time as you prepare to teach or discuss the material.

It is absolutely essential that you prepare two lessons in advance. The first lesson is the one you present at your next meeting. The second lesson is necessary for you as the leader to know what is going to be happening at the next meeting so that you can make appropriate “assignments” to the group. This preparation is more important for those using a discussion orientation.
Perhaps you are thinking, “What do you mean by ‘assignments,’ and isn’t homework a little demanding for the students? After all, they voluntarily get together to study and we don’t want to push them too hard, do we?”

The idea isn’t to make more work for your group but to transform the way that they do the reading that they would be doing anyway. Your assignments should be in the form of three or four key questions based on the book that the audience should try to answer as they read the next section. They can be simple, “What is the author’s position/main point on pages XX-XX?” or more complex, “What are some of the author’s presuppositions which come to the surface in this section?” Maybe you would like include some discussion starter type instructions such as, “Come prepared next time with an illustration from your own life which ties in to our reading,” or “As you read, try to think of two or three questions that you would ask the author if he or she was here.”

The main point is to provide the students with something which will focus their attention on the text and plant the seeds of enthusiasm for your next discussion. You want to change their focus from just trying to make time to read the book to anticipating reading the material, thirsting to find out what happens next in the story.

**Making Them Feel the Pinch**

One of the best ways to ensure a good group discussion is to make your participants feel the difficulty of the issue. If you can make them try to find their own solution to a thorny issue before looking at what the author says, you will often lay the foundation for a great discussion and build interest in the material. This activity should be done normally at the beginning of the discussion time, although it could be adapted to be an assignment. In either case, it will require forethought and time on your part but will often pay big dividends.

The way to get started doing this is by asking yourself the following types of questions as you are reading:

- What is the author really trying to get me to understand or do?
- What holds me back from understanding and applying this lesson to my life?
- What would ______ (a neighbor, co-worker, family member) think of what the author is saying?

I find that if I have these questions in mind as I am reading I will automatically think of a situation that is relevant to the issue the author is addressing.

Some of the best sources for this type of material come from your own experiences, things that have happened to friends, common story lines that happen within your church community or small group, movies and TV shows that raise similar issues, current events, and pop culture. When you hit on something, adapt it to your group the best that you can. You may want to tape the TV show or rent the video as a discussion starter or illustration of something from the book.
You could also change some names and circumstances (or better yet, make some up as well) to provide a mini-case study where the group has to give advice to someone in the study about how to react. You could simply photocopy a newspaper or magazine editorial and hand it out as a way of looking at what society thinks about your topic. My personal favorite is the directed discussion exercise. I usually take a fictional case study and then assume the role of the moderator/main character. Then, I assign roles to others on the spur of the moment and make them converse with my and other characters.

None of this has to be long and complicated. The main point is to get your group thinking about application right from the start. They will gain a new level of respect for the problems which the author addresses as well as increased interest in reading, analyzing and discussing the book when they see some sort of real world value in it right from the start.

*Thou Shall Not Wander: Getting Started On the Right Foot*

Under no circumstances short of nuclear war should you begin your actual discussion with a question such as, “What did you think of the chapter?” This takes the conversational initiative out of your hands too quickly and without establishing specific direction. Although you want to know what your participants think about the book and will give them a chance to state their opinion, this just isn’t the best way to do it.

A great way to start is with one of the “pinch” exercises described above if you have not already used it as an assignment. You can build interest, energy, and focus quickly and easily. However, this may not always be a possibility. Therefore, another good way to get the discussion started is by taking a few minutes as a summation time to recap the previous lesson. You may want to make this part of your regular schedule of events as well.

You can use the summation time as an opportunity to focus the group’s attention on the high points of the reading assignment. There are two basic rules for this type of activity. First, it must take no more than 10% of your total discussion time. If it takes longer than this, it is probably making the group lose rather than gain interest. Second, it should be exceedingly simple. There should be a one sentence summary of the author’s main point for the material. There may be additional one sentence summaries of each major subsections of the material, but there should not be much more than this. The goal is simply to refresh your students’ memory concisely and help them relocate where each section is in the material.

If they haven’t read the material on their own, you cannot help them that much. A more detailed summary will likely bore those who have read it and not give enough information to those you haven’t. This is also a great opportunity to get your audience involved by asking others to prepare the summation for next time or asking everyone to come prepared to give one and comparing his or her responses.

*Making the Transition*

After the initial “pinch” and/or summation exercises, it is time to get the group headed toward
our ultimate goal: meaningful, interesting discussion, capable of changing people’s minds and lives. It is important to not make too great a jump at this point. Plan to spend about 10% of your total discussion time here in the transition questions phase. The goal is to ask questions which elicit a heavy content answer from the book. All together, you should spend around 20% of your time in the summation and transition stages.

Basically, you are trying to be sure that everyone has understood correctly what the author is saying. After all, the reason why you have chosen a particular book is to find out what is in it, so don’t be in a rush here. Make sure that everybody understands the author’s position: how he or she has laid out and developed the material and most importantly, if everyone has understood the material correctly. You may need to offer explanations or clarifications of certain points if needed.

The types of questions you should be looking for here are along the lines of:

- Tell me in your own words what the author is saying here.
- The author gives us three reasons to support his or her argument. What are they?
- Where does the author talk about ________ and what does he or she say?
- How would you characterize the author’s position on this issue?
- Why did the author address this topic at this point rather than earlier or later in the book?
- Did you have any trouble understanding some words or concepts?
- Was there anyplace where the author gets a bit sidetracked and we have to look harder to see his/her larger development?

This is also the place where many teachers/facilitators get into the most trouble. Remember that this is a transition time from the initial “pinch” or summation activity into the meaningful discussion phase. The purpose of doing this is to get people participating, looking at the text, and recalling their earlier thoughts about the material. If done properly, the group should be chomping at the bit to get away from the “What does the author think?” type questions into the “What do I think about what the author thinks?” type questions.

The two fatal flaws here are turning this time into an extended summation where only the leader speaks or letting the group loose too early without having built up enough anticipation and/or familiarity with the text. Resist both temptations by first making your group tell you what is in the material. As you are doing this, keep them from jumping ahead to areas of personal interest before you have systematically worked your way through. If necessary, use a phrase like, “I’m so glad that you want to discuss that. If you can just give us a few more minutes to be sure that we’re all on the same page, we will make your question the starting place of our discussion.”

Destination: The Land of Meaningful Discussion

Now, after the focusing “pinch” or summation event, asking questions which lead the group through the content of the material, and offering clarifications of areas that were still fuzzy, now
is the time when we get to the main event: What do your people think about the work? It is best to have at least several thought-provoking questions in mind so that you are not left floundering. These can simply be guidepost questions to help move things along if the conversation loses steam. However, most of the time the discussion will begin to take on a life of its own.

Here are a few tips which will help you set the right tone and direction:

1. **First, avoid “autholotry.”** No one writer gets everything right (or wrong!), so set a tone where your group can freely express agreements/disagreements with the author. Not doing so will only harm things in the long run since your members will still hold to their agreements/disagreements but feel like an outcast for doing so.

2. **Second, be willing to both protect and provoke.** A good discussion is focused on the issues, not the people involved. Don’t let anyone with a strong personality roll over someone who is quieter and dominate the discussion entirely. Sometimes you will need to play the devil’s advocate if the group is too complacent or take up the author’s cause if everyone seems to disagree with him/her.

3. **Third, give the group encouraging discussion nudges.** Ask them what the author’s assumptions are and if they agree with him/her. Ask them if there are any new ideas being presented or have they heard something similar before? Find out how they think the author’s views stack up against scripture. In general, you want everyone in your group to feel comfortable expressing what they really think about each other, the author, and you. This is when the best discussion happens.

4. **Fourth, push the “So what?” angle.** Always challenge your group to ask the question, “So what?” with regard to the reading. Find out how they think this applies to their lives (or doesn’t!) and be prepared to offer suggestions of your own.

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**Unlocking the Treasure Chest**

Hopefully this will give you some of the basic tools in feeling comfortable using a book as the basis of your discussion time. Don’t feel overwhelmed. Like any skill, it takes a little while to pick up. Think about how difficult it is to learn how to drive a stick shift car, play the piano, or learn to type. Each of these things requires a bit of effort but eventually was transformed into something you could do naturally without much thought.

I firmly believe that if you begin to intentionally make decisions about the material, get into the habit of keeping your preparation needs in mind as you read, and spend a few minutes collecting your thoughts before the group meets, both you and your group will reap great rewards. We want to transform the way we do things, not add more to our busy schedules. With only a little time and effort invested, you can maximize your results.
Discussions have the power to change people's lives when they are focused around significant issues. Honest and lively discussions about significant, eternal issues are one of the greatest treasures of the church. They have the power to heal, to change, to educate, and to stimulate in a way that few other media can. So take some time, expend a little effort, and enjoy one of the greatest gifts that we have: genuine contact with other people and their ideas.

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