

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to Interpretive Discussion

We must, in Empson's wonderful phrase, "taste each text with as clean a palate as we can. . . ." To do what Empson recommends mean[s] trying to appreciate each text's distinctive qualities, however strange or familiar.

—*Richard Strier*

INTERPRETIVE DISCUSSION is discussion about the meaning of texts. It aims to understand a text, to appreciate its features and meanings, whether one eventually judges them to be right or wrong. It grows from genuine questions that discussants have when they study the text, questions provoked by the desire to understand it. The "clean palate" that Strier, Empson, and others call for is what one might refer to as an open mind: a mind seeking to know the text on its own terms.

To have an open mind does not mean that one's understanding is unbiased or that the time, place, and sociocultural context of discussants can be set aside in interpreting the text. Indeed, in what follows, I argue to the contrary. Nevertheless, I begin by underscoring the central motive driving interpretive discussion. That motive is to understand the text as the expression of some idea or ideas that may or may not agree with the discussants' beliefs.

The chapter begins with a brief definition of interpretive discussion that is then elaborated. Next, I consider its three phases: preparation, leading the discussion, and reflection. In the course of describing the three phases, I relate interpretive discussion to traditions in philosophy, interpretive theory, literary theory and criticism, and learning. I thereby place in context the pedagogical approach as a whole, as well as a particular aspect of it, namely, forming or cultivating questions. I also begin to defend interpretive discussion as a way to go about teaching and learning. In conclusion, I outline the scope of the book and briefly introduce

the case study of two teacher candidates who led a series of interpretive discussions in fourth-grade classrooms.

DEFINITION OF INTERPRETIVE DISCUSSION

Interpretive discussion is conversation between people who together seek to understand the meaning of a text. Now, what is meant by “seek” and by “understand the meaning of a text”? Because there are long traditions of literature behind these terms, let me begin by clarifying the meanings that I intend.

Seeking

Interpretive discussion is carried on by a group of “seekers,” that is, a group of people who do not know something, who recognize that they do not know it, and who want to find out what they do not know. Generally speaking, the group numbers twelve to fifteen people, and there is a leader or pair of co-leaders who help the group proceed with the investigation. The conversation may take place in elementary, secondary, or college classroom settings or outside the classroom. Leaders as well as discussants believe themselves to be ignorant of the answer to the query that confronts the group. So leaders, as well as participants, are seekers.

I take Socrates and at least some of his interlocutors as paradigms of seekers. So, for example, in Plato’s *Meno*, Socrates and Meno try to discover whether virtue can be taught. Socrates begins by declaring that he cannot answer the question because he does not know what virtue is.¹ In the course of trying to learn from Meno the definition of virtue, both men find themselves in a state of *aporia*, or perplexity—a moment of recognizing that they do not know what virtue is and wish to find out.² In each case, the character admits his ignorance, thereby acknowledging that he believes, at least at that moment, that there is something about which he is in doubt.

Yet seekers do not merely acknowledge their ignorance. In addition, they must want to find out the answer and work to do so. In the dialogues of Plato the characters often work by questioning what they or others think they know in order to resolve the uncertainty. In trying to discover what virtue is, Socrates repeatedly asks Meno what he thinks it is, and the responses are then examined.³ Some responses are found to be sound, and others are not. Once some claims are accepted, the answer to the

query is constructed or created on the basis of what is said to be known.⁴ Seeking involves discovery of both what is not in doubt and what is. And it is motivated by the desire to distinguish the two in order to resolve a point of uncertainty.

Seeking has been of interest to many since the time of Plato, and his vision of it has proved robust. For example, the philosopher Martin Heidegger speaks of “gathering,” by which he means not merely amassing but garnering in relation what is needed, for example, what is needed to answer the question.⁵ Turning to modern theories of education, we find Beck,⁶ Bruer,⁷ Lampert and Ball,⁸ Palinscar and Brown,⁹ Palinscar and Ladewski,¹⁰ Pea,¹¹ Edelson and Reiser,¹² Resnick,¹³ Rogoff and Lave,¹⁴ and Schoenfeld,¹⁵ to name but a few who call for emphasis on seeking to discover what one does not know.

Understanding the Meaning of a Text

The seekers in an interpretive discussion are searching to understand the meaning of some text. A text may be an oral statement or set of statements such as those offered by Meno. It may also be a set of data, a picture, an artifact of some sort, or a film, for example. How does one go about seeking an understanding of a text?

The pedagogical orientation of interpretive discussion falls within the tradition of the reader-response theory of interpretation.¹⁶ Many in that tradition would say, with Gadamer, that understanding the meaning of a text involves making an interpretation of it¹⁷ and that an interpretation is a “translation.”¹⁸ Interpreters, as translators, do not reproduce the original text but instead present it as they understand it to themselves and others. That is, they try to say, in their own words, what the text says.¹⁹ The interpretation will depend not only on what is given in the text but also on the terms and concepts that an interpreter uses in trying to say what it says.²⁰

Making an interpretation of a text is like playing a game, says Gadamer.²¹ The games that people play generally follow rules. In games such as chess players follow the rules for moving particular pieces. Following the rules involves repeating the actions dictated by the rules, and this keeps the game going.²² In an interpretive discussion this involves following rules by which an interpretation of the text is created. I will have more to say about the nature of the rules in what follows. Let me point

out, however, that in following the rules, one is not following a method or step-by-step procedure that renders an interpretation, for there are several activities involved in text interpretation, some of which are not amenable to strict procedure. For example, in order to make an interpretation, one sometimes needs to identify assumptions that are present in the text. How do the interpreters discover those assumptions and beliefs? Gadamer answers that the discovery begins when something in the text “addresses us,” or draws our attention.²³ When that happens, a question arises. Gadamer writes: “The recognition that an object is different and not as we first thought obviously involves the question of whether it is this or that. . . . This is the famous Socratic [ignorance] which opens the way . . . to the true superiority of questioning.”²⁴

In the passage quoted above, Gadamer aligns himself with Plato in maintaining that questioning is the route to understanding. Questioning begins with the recognition that something is not what we first thought, and we ask: Is it a case of X or of Y (or neither)? The seeker does not know and tries to determine the answer. Addressing the question takes the seeker back into the text to locate an answer, into further interpreting (or translating) the text. What part of the text receives further scrutiny? That depends on the question. What assumptions in the text are identified? That depends on the question. Heidegger makes a similar point.²⁵ With Gadamer and Heidegger, I argue that the questions arise from the particular circumstances of the interpreters. Hence, there can be no method or step-by-step procedure for detecting assumptions in the text, for there can be no method for generating questions.

THE THREE PHASES OF INTERPRETIVE DISCUSSION

An interpretive discussion is a conversation about the meaning of a text that takes place among participants and their leaders or co-leaders, all of whom have access to the text. I turn now to the three phases of the discussion. The first phase involves preparing for the discussion. Leaders as well as participants prepare for the discussion. If there is one leader, that person engages in preparation alone.²⁶ If there are co-leaders, they prepare for the discussion together. The goal of this phase is to develop questions about the meaning of the text. In Chapter 5 I give examples of questions prepared prior to discussion and describe the general orientation that the leaders adopt in developing them, as well as criteria used to

evaluate them. Here I introduce the concepts of a “discussable text” and a “cluster of questions.” In so doing, I show that questioning is the focus of interpretive discussion even in the preparation phase.

In the second phase, leading, participants and leaders work together to understand the meaning of a text. It may be described as a game that involves following the rules of textual interpretation and additional rules. The goals of the discussion include identifying a question that the members of the group wish to resolve (that is, a shared question), addressing it, and evaluating arguments for proposed resolutions. In what follows, I describe these goals. I also identify the goals and some of the practices of the discussion leaders.

The reflection phase involves assessing the accomplishments of the group conversation. Two categories of accomplishments are identified: those related to building a learning community via participation in the discussion and those related to identifying the content of the discussion, including the shared questions that were (or were not) formed and the answers that the conversation revealed. In the second category I take up a few issues related to interpretation, including the topic of correctness and the development of the ability to engage in interpretive discussion.

Preparation

Finding a Discussable Text

The leaders must first identify a discussable text. Although many kinds of objects could be texts, a suitable text is one about which leaders can raise questions. In trying to do so, leaders test whether those with whom the text will be discussed may also be able to question its meaning. Jauss,²⁷ Iser,²⁸ and Grondin²⁹ side with Gadamer and Heidegger in recognizing the centrality of the reader’s questions in textual interpretation.

In order to raise questions about the meaning of a text, leaders try to put the text in their own words. In so doing, they discover questions that they have about what it says. The questions are functions not only of what is in the text but also of the reader’s translation of it.

The questions that arise may fall into three categories, which, with the Great Books Foundation, I call “factual” questions, “interpretive” questions, and “evaluative” questions.³⁰ The questions of fact may be answered by pointing to a particular place in the text and resolving it definitively

(or recognizing that the question cannot be addressed by anything in the text). An interpretive question may be addressed by looking at places in the text, but the resolution seems to be in doubt. An evaluative question does not concern the meaning of the text but instead calls for judgment about whether what it says is right or wrong, good or bad, that is, whether the text or something therein meets the reader's criteria for evaluation. Here are some examples: Is the little girl who falls down the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland* named Alice? (factual question); Is *Alice in Wonderland* anyone's view of a mad world or a child's view of the adult world? (interpretive question); Is *Alice in Wonderland* a good story? (evaluative question). All three types of questions are good and useful in some situations, and all may be asked at some point during interpretive discussions.

In preparing for discussion, leaders write down questions that come to mind while reading without regard to type. When the first reading is complete, however, they read through their questions and put to one side those that are factual or evaluative. In perusing the questions that are left—those that are interpretive—they try to discover the question about the meaning of the text that they most wish to resolve. I call that question the deepest point of doubt (DPD).

Why should leaders focus on interpretive rather than evaluative or factual questions in preparing to lead discussion? Donoghue,³¹ another reader-response theorist, writes, "Interpretation is not the whole story but only the first part of it, a necessary labor of explication. Without such labor, we could hardly think ourselves engaged with the [text] at all."³²

Interpretation, or saying in one's own words what the text says, is necessary in order to relate to the text. The interpretive questions that leaders write while reading arise because of beliefs, concepts, and terms that are employed in the course of trying to interpret the text. And they are the questions that, if addressed, will take a leader back into the text in order to discover more meaning in it. Answering factual questions, though it can help one find new facts in the text, opens new possibilities for understanding meaning only if the answers are viewed in the context of some interpretive question, that is, some question about meaning. And answering evaluative questions, which ask for judgment about the position offered by the text or some aspect of it, takes readers away from exploring further meaning to focus instead on whether their criteria for evaluation have been met. Therefore, in preparing for discussion, leaders

focus on their interpretive questions in order to identify what they wish most to resolve with further study of the work.

Preparing a Cluster of Questions

Interpretive questions may or may not concern what the creators of the work intended.³³ They may or may not concern what the text, exclusive of the creator's intentions, intends to say.³⁴ Interpretive questions may be about any aspect of the text that leaders find puzzling. And what they find puzzling will depend not only on the content of the text but also on the beliefs, prejudices, concepts, and terms with which they try to understand it.³⁵

Wolfgang Iser, a reader-response theorist whose views parallel Gadamer's at many points, describes how questions arise as one reads.³⁶ In so doing, he helps explain how the reader's terms and concepts determine the questions that are raised by the text. Iser says that textual interpretation is a dialectic process: it moves back and forth between what one remembers, what one expects to see, and particular places in the text where memory and expectation are related to one another.³⁷ The goal of this movement is to build a consistent understanding of what is read.³⁸ And that goal creates questions when what is remembered or expected appears to be inconsistent with what is encountered as the reading proceeds. At such moments, the reader asks: Is my memory of X incorrect? Is my memory of X correct but my expectation of Y inaccurately inferred? Such are the questions that arise when inconsistency is detected.³⁹ And the nature of the inconsistency will depend on the terms and concepts into which the text has been translated.

The presence of inconsistency may drive the reader to seek the cause and in so doing to discover a point of ambiguity in the text. Empson defines an ambiguity as "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language."⁴⁰ He identifies seven types of ambiguity,⁴¹ any of which may arise as one reads and may provoke questioning. The situation in which two conflicting meanings are possible, given the context (Empson's Type 7), is particularly provocative. One may understand either one of two things, and the two cannot both be the case. Until such ambiguity is resolved, it prevents the reader from making a consistent interpretation.

In preparing to lead an interpretive discussion, leaders develop a set

of questions that identifies the deepest point of doubt about the meaning of a text.⁴² That question is likely to rest on a point of ambiguity.⁴³ The question set also includes at least eight interpretive questions that, if addressed in at least one way, imply some resolution of the DPD. The set is called the Basic Question (BQ) set. Generally speaking, those eight questions focus on eight different places in the text.

Why is it important to write eight follow-up questions? Though the number eight is arbitrarily chosen, there are good reasons to adopt it, for by definition, a follow-up question concerns some particular place in the text whose interpretation suggests ideas about the resolution of the BQ. If the deepest point of doubt about *Alice in Wonderland* is: Is *Alice in Wonderland* a child's view of the adult world or anyone's view of a mad world? then one might also ask: If the story is anyone's view of a mad world, does the Queen of Hearts insist, "Sentence first, verdict later," because normal cause-and-effect relations are reversed in the story? If one answers that question in the affirmative, the Queen's declaration may be taken as evidence for the "mad world" view. So, if leaders can write eight follow-up questions, then it is clear that the BQ can be addressed by studying at least eight places in the text. It is likewise clear that the DPD can sustain discussion of the text for forty-five minutes and probably more, if it is so desired. In Chapter 5 I consider examples of clusters of questions made up of BQs with eight follow-up questions. I also present criteria that clusters of questions need to meet before the leaders are ready to begin the discussion with a group of participants.

Leading the Discussion

The Language Game of Interpretive Discussion

An interpretive discussion is what the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein would call a "language game."⁴⁴ That is, it is language and actions woven together, and playing the game involves following rules, or practices, that are defined by the particular game. Gadamer concurs that textual interpretation is a kind of language game.⁴⁵ Wittgenstein and Gadamer agree that one who "knows" the game is one who knows how to follow the rules and play, who knows how to go on acting in the context of the game.⁴⁶

The language game of interpretive discussion is played by engaging in rule-governed behaviors that bring about three outcomes. First,

the players, or discussants, having read or otherwise gained access to a discussable text, try to find a point of doubt about its meaning that is of interest to many if not all of them. That question may or may not be the point of doubt identified by the leader(s) in preparing for the discussion. Addressing the question will open the text to further interpretation. By following certain rules,⁴⁷ participants in a discussion come to a question about the meaning of the text that they care to resolve. This is the first outcome.

Second, again by following rules, discussants seek evidence in the text to build an argument about its meaning and thereby answer the question.⁴⁸ They seek to resolve their shared point of doubt by looking for evidence in the text and building arguments using the evidence. The construction of arguments to resolve the shared point of doubt is the second outcome of the leading phase.

Third, the participants evaluate the strength of the arguments about textual evidence that are put forth, again by following rules. For example, they look at evidence in the text that supports their arguments and counterarguments; they weigh the value of various pieces of evidence because not all are of equal value; they modify their arguments in light of the evidence and counterevidence. In so doing, they interpret and judge the value of the textual evidence that they find with respect to a proposed interpretation. Argument evaluation and modification make up the third outcome of the leading phase.

Two points are in order. To begin with, the rules that participants follow in working toward these three outcomes are complex and numerous and come in several forms. Some are practices that are followed routinely, as when a competent English speaker decodes the word “rule” in a written sentence. Some are practices that are followed intentionally by executing routines, as when one turns to a page that contains endnotes and looks for the desired note. And some are intentional practices that are not routine, such as searching for confirming evidence.

Second, the language game of interpretive discussion, though it is a pedagogical orientation or approach, cannot be described as a pedagogical method. This is true in part because interpretation is not pursued by following a fixed step-by-step procedure, as argued above. In addition, the activities of the group—identifying a shared point of doubt, building arguments to resolve the question, and evaluating those arguments—

cannot themselves be turned into such procedures. The evidence for the latter claim becomes clearer as we identify some of the practices followed in leading the discussion.

The Practices of Leaders

Leaders of an interpretive discussion function as does the teacher described by Socrates in Book 7 of Plato's *Republic*:

Education is not what the professions of certain men assert it to be. They presumably assert that they put into the soul knowledge that isn't in it, as though they were putting sight into blind eyes . . . but the present argument . . . indicates that this power is in the soul of each, and that the instrument with which each learns . . . must be turned around. . . . There [is] an art to this turning around, concerned with the way in which this power can most easily and efficiently be turned around. . . . This art takes as given that sight is there, but not rightly turned nor looking at what it ought to look at, and accomplishes this object.⁴⁹

Socrates indicates that the goal of the educator is not to put knowledge into a soul but to “turn” the student's gaze to the proper place, for by looking there, the student draws out or comes to realize what he or she knows and does not know. Hence, teaching is an art—the art of turning the student's attention to the proper point. There is no fixed procedure—no method—for doing so.

The first goal of interpretive discussion leaders, according to Socrates, is to direct the attention of the students and thereby help them identify what they think they do not know and want to find out. Accordingly, leaders question the participants in order to help them form and clarify their questions and identify the deepest point of doubt, their ideas, and their arguments for or against resolution of the point of doubt and other queries.

There is no method for such questioning because what is asked depends on what participants say. Thus it is that Socrates speaks of the “art” of turning the soul. Likewise, learning to lead interpretive discussion is, indeed, learning the art of turning the soul. What each person says is unique, so the dialogue that transpires in an interpretive discussion is also unique.

Socrates was skilled in helping others draw out their beliefs and questions, and of necessity, he proceeded differently in each case. For example, when he holds a discourse with a young mathematician named Theaetetus⁵⁰ he asks Theaetetus to answer the questions as best he can and then examines whether the beliefs Theaetetus offers seem to be true. In the dialogue, Socrates uses the interests, assumptions, and, indeed, the personal history of Theaetetus to pursue resolution of the query that they choose to address.⁵¹ What he says to Theaetetus depends on what Theaetetus says and hence on listening carefully to his remarks.

Because the first aim of discussion leaders is to help the group identify a question it wishes to resolve, they query the participants about the meaning of what they say. Hence, they try to unearth vagueness and inconsistency, as well as connections and implications, in the discussants' thinking. They also question discussants about the terms they use to interpret the text. Are those terms justified, given textual evidence? Is the term "mad world" suitable in reference to *Alice in Wonderland*? Is "child's view of the adult world" a better phrase? Through the questioning, leaders hope to arouse perplexity about what the text says. Again, there can be no method to follow. Rather, the leader must listen to individuals and query them so as to understand their meaning.

If the shared point of doubt that the group identifies and works to resolve is a genuine question, it will be addressed by the text, for it is the text that the group is trying to understand. Furthermore, it will be a question that can be explored by looking at different places in the text. Because leaders prepare a cluster of questions consisting of a BQ and follow-up questions, all of which are interpretive questions, they know that there is at least one question (the BQ) that can be addressed by sustained study of the text. There may be others that the participants identify and pursue.

In addition to assisting in the formation of the question, leaders also try to help the participants resolve it. This requires relating different perspectives to one another, or achieving a "fus[ing] of horizons," in Gadamer's words. A "horizon" includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point.⁵² The "fusion" must occur between what can be seen by the interpreters and what can be seen by the text. How is the perspective of the text identified? The discussion creates a set of terms that mean the same to the interpreters and the text. In other words, they are terms that "fit" the text and are understood by the discussants. A group

that is discussing *Alice in Wonderland* might, for example, try to determine whether the phrase “mad world” fits that text. Gadamer writes:

Texts are “permanently fixed expressions of life” which have to be understood, and that means one partner in the . . . conversation, the text, is expressed only through the other partner, the interpreter. Only through him are the written marks changed back into meaning. . . . By being changed back into intelligible terms, the object of which the text speaks itself finds expression. . . . It is the common object that unifies the two partners, the text and the interpreter. . . . [They] find a common language [which] coincides with the very act of understanding.⁵³

The common “object” is an idea that the text and the interpreters come to share via the activity of textual interpretation and interpretive discussion. That idea—the “object”—which the text conveys must be translated into terms that the discussants use to interpret it. When they question the meaning of the text and try to express that meaning in their own words, they are working to create a set of terms that, they agree, expresses its meaning: a “common language.” If the discussants fail to identify a suitable set of terms for understanding the text, they will not be able to grasp its meaning. Hence, the object of the text will be undisclosed to that group of discussants. In Chapter 6 I look carefully at some patterns of discussion leading that can help groups find terms that express the ideas found in texts.

Reflection

The third phase of interpretive discussion, reflection, takes place after the group discussion has ended. It may occur with or without the discussants. The goal of the reflection phase is to assess the accomplishments of the discussion. The reader will find references to this phase throughout the chapters because reflection occurred during the case study and after it was completed.

Let me now identify more specifically the accomplishments with which the reflection phase may be concerned. They fall into two categories: the accomplishments of the discussion with respect to building a community of learners and the accomplishments of the discussion with respect to the content of the discussion.

Building a Community of Learners

As indicated in the preface, one of the most exciting moments in the project occurred when, after several interpretive discussions, students from the urban and the suburban groups came together to talk about the meaning of a text. In Chapter 4 in which we read excerpts from one of these mixed discussions, we see a community of learners take form in a most remarkable way. What is meant by “community of learners”?

Interpretive discussion can be described as an example of what Jean Lave calls “situated social practice.”⁵⁴ According to Lave, “learning,” “thinking,” and “knowing” do not refer to mental events that take place in the minds of individuals, as Piaget,⁵⁵ Fodor,⁵⁶ and others have maintained. Rather, they are words that refer to relations. As argued above, interpretive discussion engages leaders and participants in sets of practices that weave language and activities together in particular situations, according to rules. The rules are agreed on in the sense that they are conventions.⁵⁷ The conventions are defined by particular social and cultural traditions. Thus our “knowledge” is related to—indeed, depends on—the social and cultural traditions in which the text was written and in which the discussion occurs.⁵⁸

As we will observe, those who participated in the case study come to follow the rules of interpretive discussion by engaging in discussions: over time, with the help of the co-leaders, they become more competent in following its practices. Likewise, the co-leaders come to follow more effective practices of discussion leading as they work with me to clarify their preparations and engage the students in textual analysis. Lave and Wenger would say that discussants and leaders learn by “legitimate peripheral access,” that is, by participating in the practices to a greater extent and with greater expertise over time.⁵⁹ The vision of learning as engaging in rule-governed practices with more experienced players may be likened to Lev Vygotsky’s idea of the zone of proximal development, particularly as understood by Lave and Wenger: participant practices as well as the rules of the game undergo transformation as the game of interpretive discussion is played.⁶⁰ One might say, with Lave, that interpretive discussion is situated in “historical development of on-going activity.”⁶¹

Hence reflection on an interpretive discussion can help leaders identify growth in their and the discussants’ ability to play the game, that is, engage in its rule-governed practices. An interpreter, like a historian or

a social scientist, understands that his or her interpretation is a function of the situation, including the moment in time when it occurs—a point with which Gadamer would agree.⁶² Reflection on discussion enables participants to identify changes in the way people participate in discussion because they can compare new patterns with those seen on previous occasions. They can also try to view the changes in terms of the conditions under which they occurred.

Now, one of the greatest sources of power in an interpretive discussion is its potential for building a community, that is, for helping people work together to achieve a common goal. John Dewey, perhaps the most influential educational thinker of the twentieth century, helps us understand what a community is and why it is important: “The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of . . . barriers of class, race, and national territory.”⁶³

When Dewey writes of “individuals who participate in an interest,” he refers to those working together to achieve goals that the group has agreed to pursue. The group members use the actions of one another to define their next steps, if not their long-term courses of action. Where members relate their actions to those of others in this way, they are not separated by geographical, racial, or social class differences because their actions are regulated with respect to the common goal. Hence, their differences are broken down.

In reflecting on an interpretive discussion that has taken place, one might ask: Did the discussants have a shared point of doubt that they wished to resolve? Did they use the comments of others to determine their own so that they worked together to resolve the shared point of doubt? Did the differences between people serve as resources for addressing the question of concern or did they divide the participants?

We know that working cooperatively to achieve shared goals as Dewey describes is not easy in our complex society.⁶⁴ Austin Sarat puts it well:

To be an American is to live with an ambivalent relationship to difference: it is to be a neighbor to difference and at the same time harbor suspicions that difference may be our national undoing, that differences can never be bridged, and that without

assimilation disorder lurks just below the surface of our national life. Yet . . . difference is an integral part of American culture; America is a hybrid nation. Difference . . . has been a part of the cultural life of Americans since the nation's founding.⁶⁵

I take Sarat to mean that Americans are surrounded by yet fearful of those who come from different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups: Americans fear that the interests of groups other than their own will diminish their power to get what they want. Hence, unless the other groups become assimilated, that is, their goals become consistent with the national goals, they may undermine others, and disorder may follow.

In interpretive discussion, people work together to identify both a question about the meaning of a text and its resolution. In doing so, they develop something that is needed in order to navigate the tension between the desire to pursue one's own interests and the fear that others doing likewise will limit one's success, namely, what Shweder, speaking about immigration, calls "tolerance": "Tolerance means setting aside readily aroused and powerfully negative feelings about the practices of immigrant minority groups long enough to get the facts straight and engage the 'other' in a serious moral dialogue."⁶⁶

Here, Shweder is saying that tolerance involves reserving judgment about the ideas or practices of others that strike one as negative long enough to find points people agree on, or the "facts." It may involve coming to understand the point of view of the other so that ideas and practices are seen in that context rather than from one's own vantage point—a difficult goal to achieve, at times. When one begins to grasp the perspective of another, one is able to think about ideas or practices in a different way than is possible if that perspective remains unknown. One may ask: Are the ideas or practices fair? Are they legitimate? Should they be modified? Are they ones to which the other might contribute, given his or her talents, skills, and resources? Such questioning permits a moral dialogue, that is, a dialogue about what those concerned believe to be good and bad, desirable and undesirable.

So in reflecting on an interpretive discussion, the leaders and participants might ask: Were group members tolerant of one another? Did they listen so as to clarify facts or points of agreement about the meaning

of a text? Did they listen so as to understand the perspectives of one another, even where these differed from their own? Such tolerance is useful not only for understanding others but for studying the value of one's own ideas. And it is critical in a community of learners. Without tolerance, horizons cannot be fused; perspectives cannot be related to one another.

The Accomplishments of the Discussion with Respect to Content

In reflecting on the discussion, one may pose several questions about its content and about the ability of the group to engage in conversation concerning the meaning of the text. The leaders and participants may ask: What was the shared concern for the group, the question it wished most to resolve? At what idea did the group arrive in answer to the question? Was that idea what Gadamer calls the "object" of the conversation? If so, the discussion reaches a "truth":

Understanding . . . is a genuine experience, i.e., an encounter with something that asserts itself as truth. . . . What we mean by truth here can [be understood] in terms of our concept of play. . . . Language games are where we, as learners—and when do we cease to be that?—rise to the understanding of the world. . . . [In playing language games], the play of language itself, which addresses us, proposes and withdraws, asks and fulfills itself in the answer.⁶⁷

In an interpretive discussion, the experience of understanding occurs in the context of a question, for the question presents terms in which the answer may be given. The relations exist between the interpreters and the text, and the nature of the relations will be defined by the social and cultural traditions to which the text and interpreters belong, as well as the point in time when the discussion occurs. The question "Is *Alice in Wonderland* a child's view of the adult world or anyone's view of a mad world?" may arise because of things that one reads in the story (for example, people drinking potions and changing size or a queen insisting, "sentence first, verdict later"). But it is also not likely to be asked by very young children, who would lack the necessary perspective, or by adults unaccustomed to thinking in terms of cause-and-effect relations.⁶⁸ Hence the truth that emerges from an interpretive discussion is a necessary

truth—necessary given the terms of the question and the evidence in the text as it is understood by the interpreters at that time.⁶⁹

One might also ask another question in reflecting on an interpretive discussion: How is the group progressing in terms of its ability to question the meaning of a text? Indeed, this very question is addressed in the chapters that follow with respect to the two groups of students who participated in a series of interpretive discussions.

OVERVIEW OF THE ART OF TURNING THE SOUL

As indicated in the preface, the centerpiece of the book is a case study of two teacher candidates who were learning to lead interpretive discussion with two groups of fourth-grade students. We will see how these groups and their discussion leaders developed the capacity to engage in textual interpretation. I show that at first both groups had difficulty. Participants did not clearly distinguish between trying to grasp what the text was saying and judging it using particular criteria. Instead, they veered back and forth between these two poles, mixing evaluation with interpretation while seemingly unaware that they were doing so. Their co-leaders, who were completing the Master of Science in Education program at Northwestern University and preparing to teach in elementary school, did likewise at first. As the project progressed, all became more focused on textual interpretation, that is, on forming questions they wished to resolve about the meaning of the text, interpreting it using the evidence therein so as to address the questions, and evaluating the strength of their arguments and interpretations. Over time, they began to work together to identify and address questions, study the texts, and develop their positions.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 present excerpts from interpretive discussions that took place in two schools, one urban and one suburban. In Chapter 2, I introduce the case study in detail and present excerpts from the first discussions that were held in the two classrooms. I also look closely at several of the participants who responded in interesting ways to the opportunity for discussion.

Chapter 3 offers excerpts from some additional discussions that took place. We see that the groups of students begin to understand how to question the text, to locate convincing evidence therein, and to build arguments for their views. We continue focused study of a few of the discussants.

In Chapter 4 we explore excerpts from the last discussion that was held in the project, one in which students from both classes came together to talk about a story that was new to all of them. That discussion was in some ways the highlight of the project, for students worked together to develop understanding of the story. Furthermore, the differences between them served as resources for the conversation rather than barriers to it. Once again, I examine changes in the discussion participation patterns of a few students.

In Chapters 5 and 6 I focus on development of the novice teachers as discussion leaders in order to understand why the group discussions changed as they did over time. Chapter 5 presents the clusters of questions that the co-leaders developed before leading the discussions about each text. I argue that progress in the classroom conversations is related to the progress in the development of the clusters of questions.

Chapter 6 explores the patterns of discussion leading that the co-leaders gradually developed over the course of the project. I argue that the patterns are related both to changes in the preparations and to events that occurred in the classroom conversations. I show that less productive patterns were replaced with ones that facilitated the development of questions among the students and the pursuit of resolution.

Finally, in Chapter 7 I examine implications of the case study for the preparation of leaders of interpretive discussion. I argue that they need opportunities to lead, to select discussable texts, to prepare clusters of questions, and to participate in interpretive discussions themselves. I provide ways in which these goals may be realized in practice by offering insights gleaned from work on interpretive discussion with teacher candidates at Northwestern University.

Thus, in the chapters that follow, we watch as the two groups of students and their co-leaders learn to develop interpretations of texts, and so build arguments together in order to learn.⁷⁰ Eventually, we will see the partners in the conversation “come under the influence of the truth of the object and [be] thus bound to one another in a new community.”⁷¹