

# The Great Books Foundation's Professional Development, Part 1 – Piaget's Principles

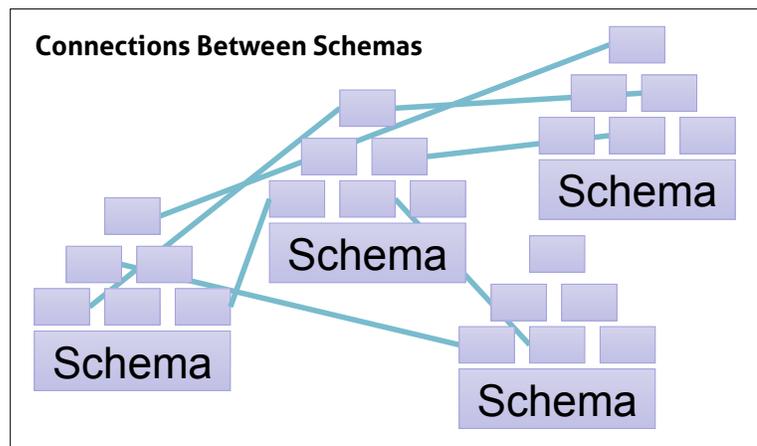
The professional development delivered by authorized Great Books trainers has been carefully designed with the needs of adult learners at the forefront of development, design, and delivery. This series of articles will explore how different adult learning principles are addressed in the professional development offered by the Great Books Foundation. In this article, we will introduce the principles described by Jean Piaget: Schema Theory, assimilation and accommodation, and equilibrium and disequilibrium.

Learning Forward, the association that develops standards for professional learning, states that effective professional learning should “integrate theories, research, and models of human learning to achieve its intended outcomes.”<sup>1</sup> The professional development offered by the Great Books Foundation incorporates the theories and research explained in this article into the design, development, and delivery of its offerings.

Because the Foundation utilizes many theories of how adults best learn, educators are provided with learning opportunities that meet professional development standards. This in turn can help educators design learning that engages standards that their students must meet.<sup>2</sup>

## Schema Theory

Teachers know that children learn by creating schemas to organize knowledge that passes from working memory into long-term memory. Adult learning professionals know that for adults to learn, they need to link new knowledge to an existing schema. Adult learning happens when adult educators help them to create links between and among schemas. By encouraging and providing moments of reflection—both oral and written—training in the Shared Inquiry™ method allows adults to compare Shared Inquiry to other methodologies and strategies employed in the classroom. In discussions with the trainer and other learners, teachers link the new concepts experienced in training to practices already utilized in their classrooms. This allows for teachers to integrate Shared Inquiry seamlessly with what they already do, rather than adding a separate practice for teachers to additionally implement.



1. Learning Forward. “Standards for Professional Learning: Quick reference guide.” <https://learningforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/standards-reference-guide.pdf>
2. “Learning Designs.” <https://learningforward.org/standards/learning-designs/>

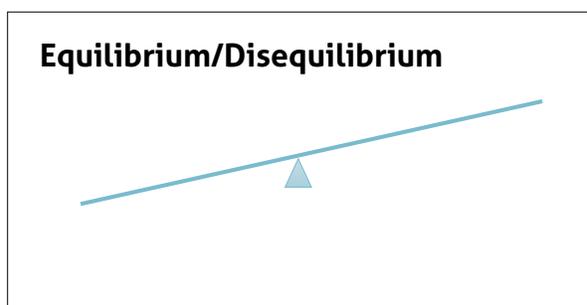
## Assimilation/Accommodation

Adults assimilate when they learn something new and place it on an existing schema, but learners must work to accommodate new knowledge. The Foundation acknowledges and understands adults' cognitive load when accommodating new information in Shared Inquiry training. Ensuring that adult learners have time and space while learning to make accommodations is at the core of Great Books professional development design. The Foundation has intentionally created courses that allow learners to experience, learn, and practice new skills.

When schools and districts also opt for consultation days, teachers can receive support throughout the school year. A professional learning consultant will be able to demonstrate Shared Inquiry practices in the classroom, co-lead Shared Inquiry activities with teachers in their classrooms, and provide coaching that benefits teachers' learning and implementations. Providing teachers with experiences in new methodologies and practices creates more opportunities to integrate Shared Inquiry with their teaching styles and expand their ability to provide inquiry-based learning opportunities to their students.

## Equilibrium/Disequilibrium

Adults also seek a state of equilibrium in their knowledge. This occurs when they are aware of what they know and are comfortable with that knowledge. Adults seek to be comfortable in understanding a subject or practicing skills. When working towards accommodating new information, learners are pushed into a state of disequilibrium, which can make many adults uncomfortable. Additionally, when adults are presented with something that counters or challenges their current understanding, this can also move them into a state of disequilibrium. With this in mind, the trainers at the Great Books Foundation are practiced in and committed to creating a safe space for all learners. They also work to create a brave space in professional development to allow learners to try new skills and articulate how new practices align with existing schemas.



For example, in Shared Inquiry the leader refrains from praise during the discussion. For many teachers, praise is a meaningful way to recognize and encourage students, and the idea of refraining from praising students may be uncomfortable at first. However, teachers first experience this idea during a discussion at the beginning of the professional development course. The trainer then explains the rationale behind this decision—to allow all learners to feel comfortable contributing ideas and to give all students' contributions equal weight. Allowing learners to experience what this practice brings to Shared Inquiry before explaining it helps to make the disequilibrium more meaningful.

In all of its educational practices, both for teachers and students, the Great Books Foundation presents learning opportunities that challenge thinking, promote intellectual rigor, and provide an opportunity for growth.

## How the Great Books Foundation’s Professional Development Employs Piaget’s Principles

Great Books Professional Development	Jean Piaget	Standards (not an exclusive list)
<p>In training, teachers are encouraged to identify areas in their instruction where</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student questions are encouraged</li> <li>• The teacher acts as a coach and student ideas and curiosity are fostered</li> <li>• Ideas are explored collaboratively</li> </ul>	<p><b>Schema Theory</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraging teachers to link new knowledge to existing ideas and practices helps teachers to assimilate it and easily incorporate it into their instruction repertoire.</li> </ul>	<p>Learning Forward</p> <p>New York DOE Professional Development Standards</p> <p>New Jersey DOE Professional Learning Standards</p>
<p>Teachers work in small groups to assimilate and accommodate new knowledge and practices.</p>	<p><b>Assimilation/ Accommodation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working collaboratively with peers helps teachers work with existing schemas to create new ones.</li> </ul>	<p>Texas Administrative Code Ch. 149 Standard 6</p> <p>Illinois DOE Professional Development Standards</p>
<p>Great Books professional development creates a safe space for teachers to experience disequilibrium. The workshop provides opportunities for teachers to assess their own knowledge and readies them to learn new methodologies and techniques.</p>	<p><b>Equilibrium/Disequilibrium</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allowing teachers the time and space to feel comfortable in recognizing that they do not know something is key to engaging adult learners.</li> </ul>	<p>Learning Forward</p> <p>International Accreditors for Continuing Education and Training</p> <p>Montana DOE Standards for Professional Development</p>