

“Gentlemen, this is a football”

The Advantages of a Basic Masonic Education

Vince Lombardi was the legendary coach for the Green Bay Packers from 1959-1968 and then coached the Washington Redskins for one year. His career stats included 96 wins to 34 losses, six Division championships, two conference championships, and winning the first two Super Bowls. He was named Coach of the Year in 1959, was inducted into the hall of fame in 1971, and is the namesake for the current Super Bowl trophy.

The financial viability and the very existence of the Green Bay Packers franchise were in jeopardy prior to Lombardi being selected as Head Coach and General Manager. The Packers had not enjoyed a winning season since 1944. Lombardi, after studying and assessing the problems and issues surrounding the team for years knew exactly how to craft a winning team - one that focused on the basic principles of the game and then capitalized on the talents of its players.

In a short, but powerful pre-season speech given to the players when he arrived for his first season, he set the tone for his tenure as head coach by holding up a football so that everyone in the room could see it and said, “Gentlemen, this is a football.”



Lombardi, to the surprise of the players, started from scratch. He made it clear that a fundamental understanding of the basics, starting with what a football looks like, followed by more detailed instructions about the basics of the game was essential for a team to play as a team. Following “Gentlemen, this is a football,” he took the team outside and showed them where the out-of-bounds lines and the end zones were. He then proceeded to present the basics of the game, explaining the rules and organization of players. Lombardi spent valuable time reminding and coaching the players on the fundamentals of the game and the importance of not only executing those fundamentals but understanding them.

There were few rookies on his first team in Green Bay. Many had successful college careers, and there were several future members of the Football Hall of Fame. The question is why did Lombardi spend so much time on the basics of the game when everyone supposedly knew them? Repetition is the reason; repetition and the necessity of football players genuinely understanding the game of football.

Max McGee, a veteran wide receiver for the Packers and the player who would later score the first touchdown in Super Bowl I, sat listening in the back of the room that day. When Lombardi said, “Gentlemen, this is a football,” McGee held up his hand to draw Lombardi’s attention and said, “Uh... Coach, you’re going a little too fast...” bringing the room and Lombardi to laughter.

Learning to Learn

Learning is often simply defined as the acquisition of knowledge or skills through experience, study, or by being taught. We like to think when we learn something it sticks with us, but that, of course, is not always the case. We also mistakenly assume people learn at the same pace. And, there's always an assumption that when we are formally taught about something, *that something* is accurate.

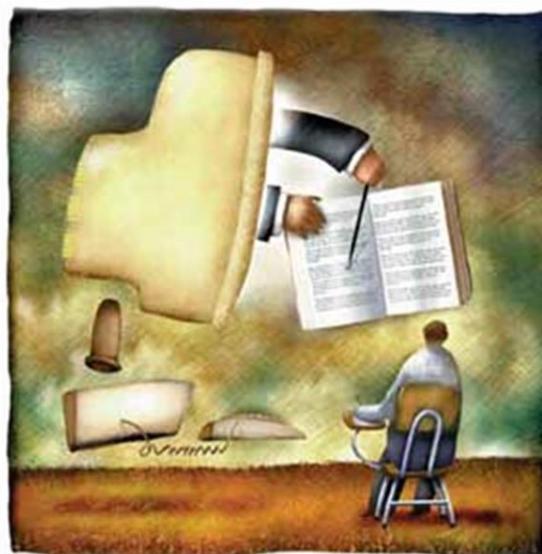
Our attitudes and expectations affect how we learn. If we believe that all we need to do is learn "just enough" to meet or reach our goals, then there's a tendency to drift because we believe that is all we needed to do. Success in any field and in our personal lives only survives by ongoing education, learning, and mind-stretching thoughts. Anything less, then we have short changed ourselves. In the end, what matters is the accuracy of what we know and how we apply it.

We don't become professional athletes by merely watching those who are. We don't learn to read or write well by osmosis. In fact, we don't learn to learn much at all without a grasp of the basics, and we don't master the basics of anything without practice.

Every time we learn something new, our brain changes in a pretty substantial way. In turn, this makes other parts of our life easier because the benefits of learning stretch further than just being good at something.¹ Learning a new skill has all kinds of unexpected benefits, including improving working memory, better verbal intelligence, and increased language skills.² Likewise, as you learn a new skill, the skill gets easier to do. In other words, science has confirmed what we have always found to be true through our anecdotal experience: *practice makes perfect*.

Of course, if we learn something incorrectly, or learn only certain parts of a system or process made up of several components required to make it work correctly, we'll still end up with a new skill or awareness and knowledge, but we won't have all the dots connected. If we learn to ride a bicycle and manage to keep our balance but receive no instruction about or learn the importance of how and when to apply the brakes, we are likely to find riding a bicycle not only difficult, but dangerous. If we learn to swim but fail to learn and appreciate the importance of treading water, the same consequence applies.

Some "rules of learning" require us to recognize certain limitations. For example, whether we like it or not, gravity will always override our interest, wishes, wants and dreams of flying by flapping our arms. If we don't understand or appreciate the inevitability of the laws of gravity, then there will be consistent consequences each time we take a step. The point is that gravity is part of the never



¹ The American Society of Neurorehabilitation, ASNR Journal of Neurorehabilitation and Neural Repair, Neurorehabilitation and Neural Repair (Vol. 27:3), <http://www.asnr.com/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3284>.

² *Ibid.*

changing law of nature and to use gravity to our advantage, not our detriment, necessitates awareness and a basic working knowledge of its existence.

The Craft's Achilles Heel

If there is an Achilles Heel in the structure of Freemasonry, or in the practice of the Craft, it lies in the failure of the lodge to hold the interest or to educate the newly raised candidate in the degrees of Freemasonry.³

One of the primary purposes of Freemasonry is the education of its members. Unfortunately, as the pressures of time and business conspire to constrain the intellectual activity of our lodges, real Masonic education and inquiry are among the first pursuits to be jettisoned from our regular agendas. Education and reflection on Masonic issues used to be much more of a central part of the business a Masonic lodge than it is today.⁴



As Masons of course, we'd like to think that the "basics" of Freemasonry are consistently and firmly embedded within all members of the fraternity. We would like to believe that Masons, once initiated, not only grasp the profundity of our ritual, but from that point forward enthusiastically pursue more Light. It's inspiring to accept as true that all brothers are provided the same instruction and with that are set on the course of their own respective journey toward applying and practicing the precepts of the basic teachings of the Craft. The very idea that all members have a sound foundation of Masonic education is as stirring as Freemasonry itself, but it is naïve to believe this is the case.

While there are as many interpretations of Freemasonry beyond our core ideologies as there are Masons, it is not the interpretations or the practice of speculative Masonry that is concerning. No, the concern is the many interpretations and practices of speculative Freemasonry do not all stem from the same basic understanding and awareness of the fundamental system of Freemasonry.

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While speculation is clearly an important component of the system of our Craft, we must still have a basic understanding about that which we are encouraged to speculate. If a member who has not received a sound basic instruction and passes on only what little he may have received, how are we to expect Masons to actually speculate on the depth and breadth of the genius of the entire system of Freemasonry?

Sure, a member can search on his own without basic instruction, but are all members going to do that? Are all members capable of doing that? We know the answer is, no.

³ Walter M. Callaway, Jr., the Nuts and Bolts of Freemasonry, an essay presented at the 44th Annual Meeting of the Blue Friars in Washington, D. C., on February 26, 1975.

⁴ Harvey L. Ward Jr., And Dedicated to the Holy Saints, Grand Lodge of Florida, <http://www.freemasons-freemasonry.com/ward.html>.

We don't learn to do much at all with success without understanding, being aware of and being taught the basics of anything. Why would we expect Freemasonry to be any different?

Chinese Whispers

Chinese Whispers is a party game in which one person whispers a message to the person next to them and the story is then passed progressively to several others, with inaccuracies accumulating as the game goes on. When the last person receives the message, it has been filtered through everyone in the room, so the final version typically bears little or no relation to the original message.

In a general sense, Chinese Whispers illustrate how the everyday "miss-telling" of stories passed on orally can easily end up distorted by misinterpretation, misperception, manner of expression and certainly by abbreviating the original message.

Freemasonry is, of course, nothing like a party game, but it should be evident that learning about Freemasonry - particularly the basics - should not take on the characteristics of this game either. The



best way to prevent that is to assure each person to whom the "message" is relayed is given the same basic and exact message. How they wish to individually interpret it once they pass on the same basic and exact message is their right of speculation as a Mason.

Regardless, we can see how the example of Chinese Whispers has indeed affected Masonic education. There are members who did not receive the basics. There are other reasons aside from the example of Chinese Whispers for this too, of course, but we cannot ignore the fact that Masonic education, or lack of it, for whatever the reason, is responsible for the breadth of the multiplicity we find in our basic understanding of Freemasonry around the nation.

Prescriptions and Nuts and Bolts

Many remedies have been suggested for what is perceived as the ills of Freemasonry, particularly since the 1960s. The most consistent "remedy," however, supported by studies, surveys, Masonic scholars, writers, and practitioners at all levels throughout the United States collectively points to one thing: the need to address the inconsistency or lack of basic Masonic education.

Whatever Freemasonry thinks it has done about this matter, the last two, possibly three generations of members have the influence and strong viewpoints of past leadership, local lodge subcultures and its demographics with which to contend. Changing attitudes and outlook about the need for basic Masonic education is a daunting challenge when within a core of the existing membership there stands firm a view that there is nothing wrong with whatever basic Masonic education they received in their day.



The cold, hard, fact is that there is no central university of Freemasonry; no uniform basic Masonic education that all members are provided, and certainly no process of unvarying instruction. There never has been. Some say this is the key to the problems surrounding Masonic education and why there is a multiplex of understanding about the Craft, within the Craft. Others say that is the beauty of the Craft: all members are free to embrace and pursue their own interpretation. That said, what happens when interpretations are based on weak foundations? What happens when the manner of instruction and what we pass on in our practices is in error because of that weak foundation?

Regardless of our respective viewpoint, we still can't get around the fact that Freemasonry is a *system* – a system designed to be most successful when operated as such. Part of this system *is* wholesome instruction and education: the literal nuts and bolts of the Craft.

If there is a solution that works broadly for the Craft when it comes to the issue of basic Masonic education, we must still first define it if Masonry at the lodge level.

Some argue that ritual alone is enough education for Masons. Others firmly disagree, seeing that with nothing more than ritual, Masonry is not much different (aside from the regalia) than Elks, Lions, Kiwanis, the Rotary Club - another civic or social club with a different name.

The complexity in addressing the topical issue of basic Masonic education is multiplied by many factors today. The problems surrounding inconsistency or lack of basic Masonic education did not spring up overnight – it began to saturate the fraternity over a period of decades, so it is understandable that effectively addressing the matter will also likely take considerable time and concerted effort.

Depending on the jurisdiction, some solutions may be found at the grand lodge level where uniformity on the basics may be organized and coordinated. Much more likely, this issue is best addressed at the lodge level where members who want and seek the basics can indeed find an effective way of providing it.

Materials Available for Basic Masonic Education

Numerous grand lodges have printed materials to use for basic Masonic education along with specific guides for instructors. Connecticut, Iowa, Florida, and Maine are among those jurisdictions.

The Grand Lodge of New York offers a basic course for candidates to help them advance through the degrees that have evolved from informative text to DVDs and short videos.

The Institute for Masonic Studies was founded in 1997 to foster Masonic knowledge and understanding among the Masons of California and the larger world of Freemasonry.⁵ The Institute collects, preserves, and disseminates Masonic information for use by members, candidates, and the general public. It promotes Masonic scholarship by offering state-of-the-art research facilities and tools and provides qualified speakers on all aspects of Freemasonry and develops and distributes programs. In addition, it houses and maintains the library and museum collections of the grand lodge. The Institute also offers booklets for all California lodges titled, “Basic Education for Candidates,” -

⁵ Masons of California, Masonic Education, <http://www.freemason.org/memberCenter/public/masonicEducation.htm>

one of the more concise and contemporary one-stop-shopping product for basic Masonic education available.

These offerings, especially the California booklets for each degree, do not impede any lodge from choosing what parts of the system of Freemasonry they may choose to cherry-pick in the administration of their lodge, if that is what they wish to do. What it does offer, however, is a level playing field for candidates to assure they are provided the basics about Freemasonry. The material does not disclose any of the esoteric portions of the ritual and Masonic organizations are invited to download, reproduce, extract, copy or reprint the contents and pages of the Basic Masonic Education Course.⁶

Testing a Basic Education Program

In 2011 the Education Committee at Lexington Lodge No. 1, in Lexington, Kentucky was charged with the responsibility of examining issues surrounding basic Masonic education and recommending a method that would offer more than mouth-to-ear memorization of the ritual for all three degrees. Underwriting the process was the belief that ritual was the passport to knowledge in each degree, but ritual by itself did not embody the basic Masonic education considered essential for new members.

The committee examined the need for continuity in the basics and lessons that could be offered and how to assure that it was delivered uniformly to all new brothers as they advanced through the degrees.

The program that was piloted and ultimately adopted, first defined basic Masonic education from the learner's perspective. This information was assembled by asking other Masons in the lodge what they believed to be essential parts of basic Masonic education. Recently raised brothers were asked about their experiences and identical questions.

These preliminary discussions identified ten specific areas, in addition to the required memory work, most believed essential for a basic Masonic education. Those areas are:

1. More in-depth instruction about the origins and history of the fraternity and its evolution.
2. More instruction on Masonic protocol and etiquette.
3. More opportunity for discussions about Masonic principles and core ideologies.
4. More explanation of the duties of lodge officers.
5. More explanation of the grand lodge system.
6. More instruction on the Constitution and By-Laws.
7. More breadth and discussion about interpretations of symbols and allegories.
8. More discussion and overview of the practical aspects of Masonry.
9. Recommendations on suitable reading and references.
10. More exposure to opportunities to participate in fellowship, lodge services and other events while advancing through the degrees.

In addition to these inquiries, further research was conducted on how other lodges across the nation address basic Masonic education through a structured program format. As a result, an organized

⁶ *Ibid*

program, suitable for Lexington Lodge No. 1 was developed, recommended, and piloted, incorporating all findings.⁷

Guide Books for and each degree were written, published, and provided for use by each candidate. Instructors receive and work from an Instructor's Manual. The books contained the basics of each degree, an overview of the lessons but, of course; do not disclose any of the esoteric portions of the ritual. Handouts to supplement the books were created for each degree as well as recommended reading lists. In some classes, some of the books appearing on the reading lists were provided.

Accompanying these important materials was a syllabus provided for each instructor who also received specific training from more experienced instructors in how to conduct the classes for each degree. They were also were introduced to a special style of instruction: facilitation – and how to blend it with lecture style.

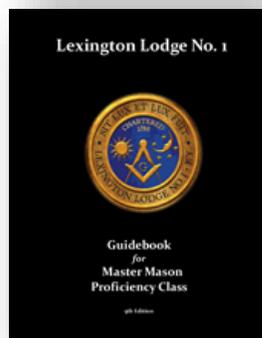
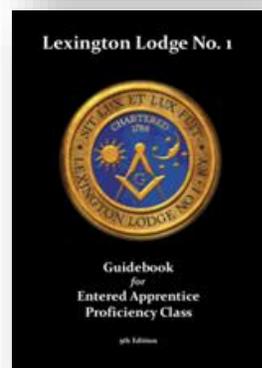
Facilitation style teaching is not new, but it is different from the traditional lecture style, where instructors lecture more than they involve classes in their own learning. The facilitation style allows candidates to become more involved and engaged in classes, thus resulting in participants experiencing more interaction with other members of the classes, expands discussions and directly involves each class member in the learning process.

To develop an instructor corps, a lead instructor and second chair system were adopted. The second chair assisted the lead instructor in each degree class, to gain experience with the facilitation style and particulars of the degree. The second chair would later become a lead instructor for future classes. This progressive process ultimately established a ten-man instructor corps for the lodge, where at one time there had been only two or three men available or relied upon to instruct all degree classes.

Classes meet at least once a week. The required memory work in preparation for proficiency was integrated into the new approach, and all practices were held in the lodge room. No degree class was rushed from one degree to the next. In fact, instead of the typical month between degrees, the average time today for a member to move through all degrees is nearly a year – in some cases, longer.

The pilot and the entire program is closely tracked. All class members participate in surveys as they advanced through the degrees. These surveys capture attitudinal and empirical data related to all aspects of the degree classes and the overall experience itself. In addition, what might be thought of as “exit interviews” are conducted once proficiencies are returned on the Master Mason degree. During these interviews, more information is gathered on what might be done to further improve the *basic* Masonic education experience and overall program content.

The brothers who have moved through the Structured Degree and Proficiency Program credit the experience as providing them an incentive to continue a daily advancement of their Masonic knowledge on their own and motivated them to



⁷ NOTE: The program was approved by Cameron Poe, PM, and has since undergone five editions of each booklet provided to those who are initiated, passed and raised.

find ways to become engaged in the activities of Lexington Lodge No. 1. Today, the majority of the officer corps are alumnus of this process and includes members who designed it.

Will such an approach work in other lodges? Perhaps, it would work as it has for Lexington Lodge No. 1, but not without explicit commitments, such as:

1. the commitment from the leadership of the lodge to support such a program; and, then immediately begin to engage the men in lodge service;
2. a commitment of time by men serving as instructors; and,
3. accommodating the costs associated in producing essential educational materials.

Borrowing Coach Lombardi's unique strategy by returning to the basics of first instructing each new initiate, "Gentleman, this is Freemasonry" has proven constructive for Lexington Lodge No. 1.

While the labor to do so with consistency has served the lodge well, it is not promoted or suggested as a panacea for all. The approach does, however, offer a practical blueprint with real-world solutions to retention issues along with a concrete way to assure men receive an essential basic Masonic education as their journey begins. It also demonstrates how solutions may be best found at the individual lodge level.

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Post Script

Basic and uniform Masonic education is not the only education initiative undertaken at Lexington Lodge No. 1. Recognizing the need for on-going Masonic education once a member is raised, the lodge supplements the Structured Degree and Proficiency Classes for all members. This corresponding emphasis is placed on education, discussion, and presentations at all Stated Communications when ritual is not scheduled. In addition, presentations, and discussions are made at the Rubicon Masonic Society monthly meetings, all Festive Boards, symposiums, and conferences co-sponsored by and attended by members of No.1.

A compilation of the Masonic education presentations and commentaries at such events and meetings in 2017-2018 will be published by the lodge and available in 2019. The publication contains thirty-five such presentations made by well-known Masonic scholars from around the nation, members of and visitor to Lexington Lodge No. 1.

