

The Touchstones Discussion Project: Learning to Teach Yourself

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This article presents the history and overview of the Touchstones Project. Three case studies are related to highlight different aspects of its operation: in Hartford, Connecticut among an inner city magnet school population; in Bucks County, Pennsylvania for gifted and talented; and in Annapolis, Maryland in a large racially and economically heterogeneous population.

Geoffrey Comber and Howard Zeiderman are two of the creators of the Touchstones Discussion Project. They have led many Touchstones Workshops throughout the country, including several sites in California. They are both senior members of the faculty of St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland where all classes, including science and mathematics, are required to be taught by means of discussions.

THE TOUCHSTONES Discussion Project makes it possible for middle schools to become true communities of learning by uniting teachers and students in a common endeavor. By focusing and building on the incipient independence of middle school students, the Project encourages active learning rather than the passive absorption of knowledge that often characterizes even the best middle school students. Through a format which makes it clear that *all students* have both strengths and weaknesses, the Project enables students to break the intellectual models that begin to harden in the middle school years. All too frequently these patterns have solidified by the ninth grade into the dogma that some students can achieve academically and others cannot.

HISTORY AND OVERVIEW

The Touchstones Discussion Project is the creation of three senior faculty mem-

bers of St. John's College, Annapolis, Maryland. Through a twenty-year investigation of the successes and failures of a discussion approach to all subject matters (the mode of instruction at St. John's), a systematic program has been developed in which the intellectual freedom and creativity of students and classroom management skills of teachers harmoniously reinforce each other. The Touchstones Discussion environment creates a vehicle through which students learn to question, to listen, to cooperate, to make decisions, to devise problem-solving strategies, and ultimately to teach themselves. More than 250,000 students of all backgrounds and skill levels participate nationally. They range from economically and socially advantaged middle school students at Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C. to seventh and eighth graders in Harlem to suburban sites like Harriet Eddy Middle School in the Elk Grove School District in California.

The program's optimum is one class period per week. Discussions focus on short, non-contemporary and multicultural texts found in Touchstones student volumes. However, students need not prepare for the class: the text for the day's lesson is read out loud in the first three minutes. Thus, students of all reading levels are equally able to

participate. In a typical class, the text might be an excerpt from Plutarch's "Life of Lycurgus," the story of how Lycurgus gave Sparta entirely new laws to cure it of its political and social ailments. The students form a circle and, after the teacher reads the text aloud, the students work on questions found on a handout from the student workpads. The handout is not an exercise in textual interpretation but asks for student choices and judgments. Each student first agrees or disagrees with Lycurgus' own ranking of the importance of his laws. Next, the students form small groups to compare their perspectives and attempt to reach consensus. Finally, they return to the large group to discuss their attitudes toward Lycurgus' effort and their suggestions about different approaches or different laws he might have used. In this discussion, the text does not supply a correct answer to a problem but displays the ideas of one thoughtful human being to which students compare their own. After this particular discussion, the students often use the occasion to discuss the rules required by the discussion format.

Effective discussion group sizes may range from the 10-15 found in private schools to the 30-35 students typical of public schools. Students may participate in heterogeneous or homogeneous groupings. Teachers conduct the classes guided by the highly detailed teachers' volumes which assist them in modifying their professional skills from a lecture or question-and-answer model to a discussion format. Because the guides are self-contained, workshop training, such as was offered in San Francisco, on April 15, 1994, under the aegis of Far West Laboratory, are helpful but not necessary. By focusing on cognitive and behavioral skills as opposed to textual mastery, the highly teacher-mediated exchanges characteristic of Junior Great Books approaches are avoided: students truly talk to each other. By recognizing that participation in discussions requires new sets of skills and expectations, the students are motivated to acquire the clarity of thought, self-discipline, and intellectual initiative necessary for discussions. They begin to monitor their own behavior and learn to share responsibil-

ity for the success of the activity. This disciplined discussion avoids the chaotic character and self-absorption of normal student-initiated discussions. All students must modify their intellectual and behavioral habits because all students learn that some questions do not have easy answers and that the teacher does not validate learning, while less motivated students begin to see school as an activity that involves them personally and that the teacher is not there to thwart them.

HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT: FORMING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

In the Touchstones Discussion Project, the teacher is the discussion leader. In this class, the teacher relinquishes the role of language arts, mathematics, or social science teacher. The purpose of the program is to build skills in the students, not to cover specific content. Since the topics are open-ended and touch on various subject matters, from folktales to mathematical subjects to portraits, and since the discussion format requires various teaching management skills, teachers are drawn together across departmental lines. Thus, they view themselves as an interdependent teaching community.

In Hartford, Connecticut, middle school students in an inner city magnet school are involved in the longest running project in the country. It began there in 1985. Teachers meet weekly with one another to share information on their students' progress and to consider how to capitalize on the opportunities and deal with the problems that are part of the fabric of a true discussion environment, since Touchstones students depart radically from the roles and habits they display in other classes, Touchstones teachers develop insights into student changes on which other teachers can capitalize. Often students who are disaffected in school will reengage with the regular curricular pursuits through Touchstones classes. Students who are behind in reading level frequently conquer their fear of the written word in the discussion classes. Students who are doing poorly in mathematics and science can develop

enthusiasm for such subjects through discussions in which they can see the human aspect of mathematical and scientific concepts. The insight that math and science are essentially human activities motivates them to master technical details. Thus, the weekly teacher sessions alert the entire teaching community to opportunities to respond to student changes.

The students themselves are the other component of this learning community. Touchstones classes encourage systematic and periodic reflection by the students on the group's progress. By observing one another participating in discussions, students provide both individuals and the group feedback on the manner of everyone's participation and on how they might improve.

In one case in Hartford, 7th grade students were observed in their second year of Touchstones. Typically, groups with this much experience will not permit dominance by any student. However, one student spoke for almost a third of the 45 minute period. As soon as the class ended the teacher walked out into the hall and met two other teachers who asked her how it went. "Extraordinary," she replied. "James hadn't spoken in any class in almost two months and he spoke today. The class gave him all the room he needed." The other teachers were pleased that the students had joined with their teachers in fostering educational goals. This inner city Hartford school has sent 90% of its alumni to four year colleges.

BUCKS COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA: WHAT THE BEST STUDENTS NEED

In the extensive gifted and talented program of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, high performing middle schoolers have been exposed to three years of Touchstones classes. The problems that gifted students faced were obscured by their obvious accomplishments on tests. But the teachers and coordinators had noticed that it was very difficult for even their best students to break the pattern of requiring teacher initiation to explore. These talented students had mastered responding to teachers' assignments, questions, and tasks, but had difficulty with

self-directed exploration. In addition, they felt great discomfort in intellectual activities of high uncertainty, where answers were better or worse rather than correct and incorrect. In short, they couldn't seem to take the step to learn to teach themselves. The teachers and supervisors of the gifted and talented students decided to incorporate Touchstones so that their students could advance to this next level of accomplishment.

As sixth graders using *Touchstones for Middle Schools: Volume A*, they learned to explore issues which required them to initiate and devise strategies both individually and cooperatively. They, therefore, learned how to utilize each other instead of official experts, and how to listen, another skill these students lacked. In the seventh grade, they began dealing with intellectual situations of high uncertainty. The discussion format and the student handouts accompanying the texts all involve students in decision making about the advantages and disadvantages of various approaches to problems. As eighth graders using *Touchstones: Volume I* they pursued systematic reflection on and experimentation with discussion approaches to a variety of subject matters. The teachers using the *Guide to Volume I* take the students through a year-long version of a teacher training workshop so that in the last quarter of the year, these 8th grade students are designing and conducting the Touchstones discussions themselves. In addition, some 8th graders assist teachers in conducting discussions for 6th graders. They, therefore, have taken that major step to teaching themselves and others, and have learned to explore on their own.

ANNAPOLIS MIDDLE SCHOOL: CHANGING STUDENT ROLES

Annapolis Middle School is an economically and racially diverse school of about 1400 students. Teachers and administrators confront all the problems of American education as broadcast by the media, from drugs and violence to single mothers. Diverse groups occupy the same building but not the same educational environment and display the extremes of intense parental involvement to complete indifference. Kevin

Dennehy, the principal, decided to implement Touchstones on a pilot basis for 8 heterogeneous groups. His initial aim was to create the formal occasion for students of diverse backgrounds, abilities, and grades to talk to one another and develop mutual respect. Previous attempts at achieving this goal had had little effect. Informal counseling and attempts to unite students in community activities had little permanent affect on the students because they had not learned how to cooperate with one another. In Touchstones he saw a program in which students could learn to model a school community in which education for all was a possibility. What appealed to him most was the fact that in Touchstones every student is seen to have strengths and weaknesses.

Some positive effects were immediate, others happened gradually over the course of the first year. Even from the first lesson teachers reported encouraging differences in behavior. Students who were often suspicious or hostile in school took the lead in the discussion classes, which surprised teachers and students alike, though this is found to be a typical result of the discussion format. When the teacher is not the sole source of information and legitimacy of speech does not depend on his or her approval, students, especially uncooperative students, feel encouraged to participate and address other students directly. Cooperative students, whose classroom behavior was built around teacher acknowledgment, hesitated. The result was that a new pool of students became involved in educational activity.

The second result was that the ratio of teacher talk to student talk changed dramatically. In regular classes, the teacher typically speaks 80-85% of the time. In early Touchstones classes teachers were reported as speaking approximately 50% of the time, but within five or six meetings, the initial percentages reversed: teachers spoke only about 20% of the time. This gradual shift is another positive feature of Touchstones discussions. The goal is to have students speak without raising hands. In early sessions, a great deal of simultaneous speech occurs. Teachers must intervene frequently

to help students speak in proper sequence; the task is a variant of directing traffic. However, by the tenth session, students had learned to anticipate who would speak next and to make room for one another. Eventually students speak most of the time.

The pool of potential speakers also increased through the sessions. Touchstones discussions are neither purely textual expositions nor mere elaborations of student experience. Rather, texts help students focus on and explore issues and concepts embedded in everyone's experience. However, in the very early stages, student experience plays the principle role. This emphasis on student experience and the restrained role of the teacher results in increased participation of students who have not done well in school.

Every Touchstones discussion is built around a short unfamiliar text, for example, a selection from an African folktale or from Aristotle; there is always a text to be dealt with. By the fourth session, the discussion leader begins to ask more textual questions. This enables those students who feel secure with teacher-initiated questions on texts to participate. The overall purpose of these interventions is not to readopt a teacher-centered format. Rather, their purpose is to increase the pool of potential speakers and also to reveal to the participants that the concerns which consume them are also explored in texts. They begin to understand that texts and textbooks may have an important role to play in their lives.

The number of speakers in discussions at Annapolis Middle School reached 60-70% of the students by the fifth meeting. Thus, of approximately 30 students in each class, about 20 spoke in each session. However, through the year the pool of speakers increased from 60% to 100%. In other words, though in any particular meeting $\frac{2}{3}$ of the students spoke, the speakers constituted a shifting pool. All students became actual participants. Therefore, the labels of active, indifferent, or hostile students no longer applied.

Finally, the classes were observed in order to detect whether the quality of stu-

dent participation could have been predicted from their previous academic performance. Observers reported that previous successes did not at all predict the level of accomplishment in Touchstones. The quality of participation, as gauged by clarity and succinctness of articulation, content of remarks, focus on task, presentation of evidence for opinions, and willingness to consider opposing perspectives, was equal among students previously classified as high achieving, low achieving, or middle range. As the students began to own this activity, discussions continued beyond the ringing of the bell and often formed the topic of exchanges in hallways and cafeterias with members of other classes. Because of the demonstrable increase of mutual respect and academic motivation, the program has been expanded to include almost half of the school population this year.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Touchstones Project is a highly flexible complement to the regular curriculum. It can be implemented in language arts class, long advisory periods, or school-wide in various ways. Touchstones makes practicable and concrete the rhetoric of school as a learning community. It also fosters the cognitive and behavioral skills that enable students to succeed in regular classes. Motivation, self-respect, and mutual respect increase. The students even learn how to participate in discussions in subject area classes, where closure is essential.

The program is rarely offered on a voluntary basis for students except in very early piloting because the student volunteers invariably come from the same pool of candidates. One would simply once again round up the usual suspects. However, in its first stage, the program is generally implemented by teachers who are enthusiastic and committed to carrying it through, teachers who volunteer. Progress in the project is gradual. Patience is required to see the long-range goals emerge through the sincere struggle of students who are taking their first halting steps at learning to teach themselves.