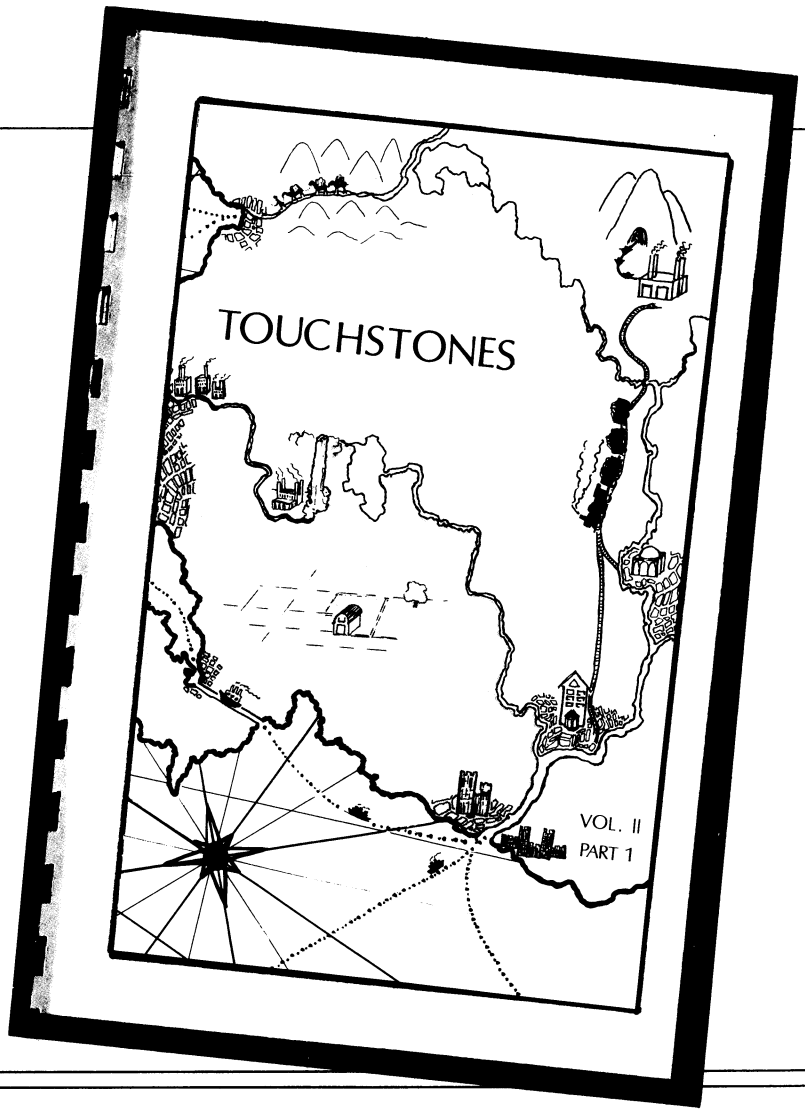
GEOFFREY COMBER, HOWARD ZEIDERMAN, AND NICHOLAS MAISTRELLIS

The Touchstones Project: Discussion Classes for Students of All Abilities

Through lively discussions of specially selected texts, students of diverse abilities often discover they can learn a lot from one another.



"Luke" is the star 7th grade student in an inner-city Hartford school. "Tom" is failing and hasn't participated in any class for over four months. On this day, a regular class period is being used for a session of Touchstones. The seats are arranged in a circle instead of in rows. The format is not lecture or recitation but a discussion of a short list of definitions from Euclid's *Elements*, a reading in *Touchstones, Volume I*. The teacher-leader asks what a straight line is, and Luke, as he always does, addresses his answer to the teacher: "A straight line is an infinite set of points with direction." A silence of almost 15 seconds greets his response.

Finally, Tom's voice enters the space the silence has opened. "Those aren't your words," he says, and after waiting a moment, asks his classmates what Euclid's definition of a straight line as *breadthless length* could mean. Luke, taken aback, remains quiet; other students enter the discussion. Eventually, Tom and Luke begin speaking with each other about whether one could ever see geometrical straight lines or only think about them.

This incident is typical of Touchstones discussions. In Northeast Middle School in Baltimore, Maryland, for example, where 400 students participate in weekly discussions, teachers report such dramatic role reversals. Each week at Northeast, the teachers meet with 20-30 students during a 45-minute advisory period

rather than a regular class session. During that period, teachers lead discussions on a *Touchstones* selection they have chosen together, with students they do not normally teach. After several sessions, they often report they cannot tell which students are from gifted and talented sections and which are from lower functioning groups.

Origin of the Concept

At St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, where we are faculty members, all classes are conducted by means of discussion rather than lecture. In 1981, we began to wonder whether the skills our students gain from participating in discussions could be developed in younger students. We imagined a discussion class that would meet once a week for about 40 minutes, unrelated to any subject area. We viewed the Touchstones class as a required complement to the regular curriculum.

We selected, edited, translated, and tried out various texts with widely differing groups of middle and high school students in a variety of circumstances. Then we designed *Touchstones, Volumes I, II* (Part 1 and Part 2), and *III* to meet the particular needs of classes at different stages of experience.

After several Touchstones sessions, teachers often report they cannot tell which students are from gifted and talented sections and which are from lower functioning groups.

Phase one, which we discuss here, is devoted to the creation of a true discussion group, that is, a group where the students listen to and speak with one another, where every utterance is not mediated by the teacher. The *Volume I* texts, selected to meet this goal, are primarily noncontemporary Western classics.

In the second phase, students undertake increasingly textual discussions. The works in *Volume II*, Parts 1 and 2, are also noncontemporary but are of a much more varied authorship.

In phase three, students with three or four years of experience in Touchstones discussions begin to discuss the tensions and conflicts that divide them from one another. At this stage, a variety of contemporary texts is used for discussion.

We first implemented the project in Hartford in 1984 with mainstream students at the Classical Magnet School. Some of these students have now advanced to the use of *Volume III*. Projects are now in various stages of implementation around the country.[1]

For middle and high school students who regularly participate in discussions, the major change occurs in their disposition to learn. Students become less passive; they begin to take responsibility for their own learning. They rethink their perceptions of their academic strengths and weaknesses. In particular, students' fears about all subject areas, including mathematics and science, often diminish. And, perhaps most important, the diversity of students' abilities, skills, and talents, which can lead to a dangerous hierarchization of the student population, leads instead to *respect* for differences.

The ways in which different student groups jointly participate in Touchstones discussions can be illustrated by examining the two crucial elements of such classes: the text and the teacher-leader.

The Discussion Texts

A number of the texts are selections from the classics, but the project does not seek traditional forms of intellectual enrichment, such as accumulated facts. Rather, the discussions develop particular skills that will enable all students to work more effectively in their regular classes; abilities, for example, to teach oneself, to cooperate with others of different backgrounds and abilities, and to feel comfortable and be able to think in situations of great uncertainty.

Phase one is devoted to the creation of a true discussion group, where the students listen to and speak with one another, where every utterance is not mediated by the teacher.

For the first phase, the texts must be short (one to one and one-half pages), must not require previous preparation, and must be characterized by a blend of familiarity and strangeness. These stipulations downplay the role of intellectual mastery, which is both the virtue and the vice of the higher functioning student, and make it possible for *all* students to begin the discussion on an equal footing.

Whether the text be from Homer's *Iliad*, or Bacon's essay "About Revenge," or Newton's *Principia*, all the works in *Volume I* defy the familiar classifications that the stronger students so easily grasp and so often use to advantage. The use of Euclid's definitions of geometry illustrates how the text can set the stage for true discussion. This selection is recognizably mathematical; thus, it invites participation from the more able mathematics students. Yet it is radically different

from textbook mathematics; thus, it affords room for the less skilled students to join in.

As the group begins its work, the text itself plays a subordinate role; it is applied in the service of evoking student responses. The classics contain concepts and structures that are embedded in many experiences we live through. Therefore, their use in Touchstones discussions enables lower functioning students to realize that their realm of expertise—their own experience—is appropriate in an academic setting. Higher performing students need encouragement and practice in situations where definite answers are not available and where candor, rather than subtlety of interpretation, is required. But should the text be given too much prominence in the beginning, the higher performing students will dominate the class as usual; and it will fail as a discussion group.

The opportunity to present their own experiences is not just an opportunity: it is a necessity for *all* students in the first year or so of the project, during which students learn how to cooperate with one another and become less dependent on the teacher as an authority. In Touchstones classes, in contrast to traditional classes, the emerging independence of the young people becomes a strength rather than a defect.

In Touchstones classes, in contrast to traditional classes, the emerging independence of the young people becomes a strength rather than a defect.

In order to reconnect lower performing students with academic enterprises later, their experiences must be depersonalized and shared with others who will comment on and analyze the presuppositions involved. For example, a selection in *Volume I* is an excerpt from Francis Bacon's essay "About Revenge." Students have no lack of experience with revenge. Generally, the less skilled students are much more forthcoming about their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and attitudes on this subject than the academically oriented students. However, Bacon's essay, while touching on an attitude *familiar* to our culture, does so with quite *unusual* forms of reasoning, partially because it is noncontemporary. It is this aspect of the work—the blend of the familiar and the strange—that invites the participation of the more skilled students, who push the discussion more toward the text.

In Touchstones discussions, high-performing students learn to be more reflective and less dependent on teacher approval. For these students, the result of discussing texts such as these is an increased thoughtfulness about and understanding of what they have previously taken for granted. Less skilled students, by experiencing the recognition of their classmates and teachers, gain confidence in their ability to contribute to and learn from academic activities.

The strengths of each group—the experiential and the intellectual—are equally necessary for true discussion; and the skills of each group enable the other to overcome its characteristic weakness and lack of skill. But for this to occur, the texts must eventually be employed as texts. If they are used as examples of problems, as cultural enrichment, or merely as ways to explore a concept or a theme, then, although certain gains will occur, they will not be the skills that a discussion format can develop.

High-performing students learn to be more reflective and less dependent on teacher approval.

The Teacher-Leader

What is the role of the teacher-leader? In Touchstones discussions, the teacher is neither a source of information nor a source of clarification. On the other hand, the teacher never becomes merely a passive observer. Teacher-leaders must constantly make decisions about whether or not to intervene, whether to move the discussion closer to or further away from the text, how to encourage silent students to speak, and how to get talkative students to listen.

Ultimately, as students become more skilled, they will assume most of these tasks themselves. In fact, the long-range goals of the project are to motivate students to take responsibility for their education and to encourage them to cooperate with others during learning.

The main barriers to achieving these goals are the habits and expectations that have been continually built up in school: that teachers are the only source of knowledge and that students are passive recipients. Students respond in one of two ways to this traditional incidental training. They either accept it and become "good" students whose learning is mediated by, and dependent on, the teacher; or

they reject it and become "unmotivated" students or "behavioral problems." In Touchstones classes, students are able to modify these role extremes; they find they need one another's strengths to do so.

In phase one, "good" students often encounter difficulty. They may speak and listen well to teachers but have little skill in speaking and listening to other students. They feel uncomfortable that their comments are not being approved by the traditional authority.

For poorer performing students, once they realize that the teacher's role has changed, quite the opposite is the result. Some of their defects as students—their inability or unwillingness to depend on the teacher—now become strengths. They often feel comfortable addressing remarks to other students and listening to them; in fact, their speaking and listening skills are frequently remarkable. Indeed, the class usually begins to become a discussion group *because* the "problem" students possess these skills.

However, the content of their comments is usually bereft of application to subject matter. This is not to say that they talk about trivial issues; in fact, much of what they talk about is thoughtful and serious. Rather, they concentrate on the concerns of the streets and playgrounds—power, honor, friendship, love, and desire.

Once the discussion group is beginning to take form, the task of the teacher-leader is to re-engage the generally high-performing students in the discussion. One way to do this is by deliberately moving away from reports of direct experience and back toward the text. Better students respect what is written in texts. At this stage a teacher can re-engage them with references to the text, questions about meaning, or remarks suggesting a connection between a student's experience and something in the text that everyone has read.

This action is a strategic move to widen participation in the discussion group. In making this move toward the text, the teacher must not allow the better students to direct their remarks to the teacher or to dominate the discussion. Once these students are re-engaged, other goals will give the group the latitude to depart from the text again.

Less-skilled students, by experiencing the recognition of their classmates and teachers, gain confidence in their ability to contribute to and learn from academic activities.

Toward a Community of Learners

As *all* the students in class begin to listen to and speak with one another, the distinction between textual and nontextual discussions starts to atrophy. Discussions center on matters of real concern to all students, and yet these discussions are increasingly mediated by a text. For lower performing students, this means that a text and a formal classroom activity become less alien to their interests. The barrier between in-school and outside-of-school begins to break down, and frequently their experiences in the Touchstones classes act as a bridge for their re-entry into their regular classes as more motivated members. For the better performing students, participation in Touchstones discussions often leads to greater thoughtfulness about what they are learning and less reticence to acknowledge mistakes and confusions. Both sets of students become less adversarial toward teachers and each other; they also ask more relevant questions in regular classes. In addition, and perhaps most important, all students learn how to become active listeners, more sensitive to the spoken and written word.

Thus, for all students in Touchstones classes the gains are both intellectual and social. And these outcomes are increasingly important in a society where the scars of racial and sexual discrimination may be replaced by the equally insidious wounds of discrimination based on educational achievement.□

1. In Pittsburgh, the *Touchstones Volumes* are used by students throughout the system. Large projects are also under way in Baltimore and Philadelphia. In Prince George's County (Maryland), students in gifted and talented and mainstream groups as well as students in Project SUCCESS are involved. Pilot projects have begun in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, Sante Fe, and Seattle, and in private and parochial schools throughout the country. In a rural project involving more than 30 high schools in Western Alabama, student discussions are occasionally supplemented by extracurricular discussions with parents. Cross-cultural projects have been started on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona and among a consortium of schools in India. *Volume I* has recently been translated into Spanish. In April 1989, a teacher's guide for leading discussions using *Touchstones Volume I* will be published.

Geoffrey Comber, Howard Zeiderman, and **Nicholas Maistrellis** are senior faculty members at St. John's College in Annapolis, Md.