TOUCHSTONES
Free Inquiry in the Secondary Classroom

By Bruce Kelly
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(The following excerpts from Mr. Kelly's article, which appeared in the Fall 1992 issue of the Washington English Journal, are reprinted with his permission. His story describes the Touchstones Project, a reading and discussion program developed for elementary, middle, and secondary school students, by tutors Geoffrey Comber, Nicholas Maistrellis, and Howard Zeiderman.)

A very long time ago I read an essay of Sir Francis Bacon in which he remarks, "Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man" (2:8). Reading and writing we emphasize, but "conference" in the sense Bacon describes is almost impossible to achieve as most classes are presently constituted. Each of us can remember the times we might have told students whose talents augur well for success in college that one of its greatest benefits is not necessarily what information a person learns in classes, but what he or she accrues merely as a function of being in a place where intellectual exercise is at a premium.

Sadly, only rarely have I witnessed animated discussions in the classroom. Usually, what passes for discussion even in the best of situations is carefully orchestrated ritual directed by the teacher to achieve a certain specific end, and whose rules, though rarely overtly expressed, are implied and easily internalized by the better students. When students do become actively involved, the discussion usually has turned upon some topical issue, e.g., abortion, capital punishment, animal experimentation, etc., in which opinions were adh-\-\-\-tained even prior to the exercise, and during which most responses are parroted phrases or hastily erected rebuttals. In such contexts the issue becomes far less important than the ego involved. Though many teachers think such exchanges are wonderful, I believe they rarely do much good in truly changing opinions or opening up new vistas of inquiry. Most often the result is either anger or a sullen silence on the part of the most brow-beaten party and a black eye for the notion of classroom discussion.

Having despairing of ever finding a satisfactory method of implementing functional discussion short of supernaturally changing the entire tax structure of the state and mandating class sizes of twelve, I was one day asked by my vice principal to look over The Touchstones Project, a booklet describing a curriculum developed by Geoffrey Comber, Howard Zeiderman, and Nicholas Maistrellis, three senior tutors at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland. I took it and gave her the obligatory and perfunctory "Thank you" with every intention of sending it the way of most other unsolicited "revolutionary" programs whose hype far exceeds their promise. I'm glad I didn't. It is a discussion-based program, but its discussions are decidedly not of the sort characterized above. Nor do the authors of this program betray in their promotional material any of that commonplace educational hucksterism that profits from the latest reductive and philosophically or experimentally untenable notions that abound.

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abilities,” “learning styles,” or my favorite because it rings with such irony, “critical thinking skills,” for example). Instead, their goals are much more straightforward, simple, and in some ways, far more subversive and potentially more threatening to the status quo in some classrooms. According to the authors, in their curriculum, “The highest value is placed on the courage to explore one’s own beliefs. Exploring one’s own beliefs is where one most requires the cooperation of others. To be able to cooperate involves speaking our opinions clearly for all to hear, listening, analyzing, and thinking about problems that do not have complete and simple solutions.”

Described simply (and therefore, inadequately), the Touchstones Project is organized around readings, mostly very short and edited to bring the language closer to the teenager vernacular. Each is selected because it carries in it some essential observation about the world we live in. Because, however, it makes this observation in general terms and without the ready reference to the world the students inhabit, in the early going students search for and despair of finding the kind of immediate topical relevance that other programs strive to provide and that would allow students to feel comfortable and compliant in their interpretations.

Weekly, preferably on a previously designated day, students arrive in class, arrange their desks in a circle (though this is varied somewhat on occasion), and are given a text with a one or two-page reading and plenty of space for notes. Students do not know what the reading is ahead of time, nor are they encouraged to find out. After the instructor reads the passage, the students read the passage again silently to formulate questions they may have about its meaning, its implications, even its purpose. Usually, these questions are shared and the discussion commences after an opening question has been ventured by the teacher or a student.

The first discussion of the year establishes the simple and straightforward ground rules and goals for all subsequent discussions. Students are first asked to discuss which Ground Rules will be hardest for the group to obey (in my experience, “Giving others your respect” wins hands down), and which goals they would like most for themselves. Here students are usually quite frank. These rules and goals are reiterated as part of subsequent discussions.

As you might suspect, not all student responses to the initial discussions are cu-

The Touchstones Discussion Project

The Touchstones Discussion Project presently involves approximately 150,000 students of all backgrounds and skill levels in grades 4-12. There are project sites in most states including Alaska and Hawaii. This year presentations have been made to students and faculty on both campuses. Summer workshops for teachers will be held on the Annapolis campus June 4 and in Santa Fe July 2. At the Board of Visitors and Governors meeting in Annapolis in April, the founders of the project described its goals and methods to the Extended Programs Committee.

The developers of the Touchstones Project are currently working on restructuring and reconfiguration of the Middle School mathematics and science curriculum. In addition, this summer a collection of math texts will be published for use in a discussion format by mainstream and talented high school students.