

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" (208). 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 adamant 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 egos 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 despaired 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 notion that edu-

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phoric. Many better students often find themselves at sea when they discover that playing to the teacher is actually discouraged, that correctness is no longer a real goal (nor is it even possible), that nothing translates directly into a grade and that the parameters of the exercise seem so amorphous. They, for a while, often drop out of discussion. The so-called "poorer" students are not won over immediately either. If they customarily have viewed responding positively in class as a sacrifice of personal integrity or "kissing up," they are not going to relinquish such a view overnight. Sometimes they will say outrageous things to test the teacher's integrity or will converse a bit with a neighbor. Other times, they will not say a word, but sit sullenly by. But, and this is crucial, every student is *interested* in the proceedings because of their novelty. Moreover, as I will elaborate on later, because the discussions are peer-run, such negative behaviors seem to evaporate much more quickly than anyone has a right to expect them to.

The teacher's guide is remarkably candid and thorough about all these reactions and others. It explains the purpose behind each choice of text and offers suggestions for how to conduct the discussions as well as proposes what kinds of expectations one might have for student behavior to date. Changing long-established ideas about "learning," "education," "reflection," etc., is not easily effected, as we all recognize, and *The Touchstones Project* makes no claims of being the balm of Gilead. What it *does* offer is incremental improvement for the class as a whole. For example, Zeiderman comments in the guide that "the principal accomplishment of the first six classes [six weeks of Touchstones discussions] was to get students to speak to one another and not to you [the teacher]" (46). The guide goes on to address the problems that a teacher has probably noted to date, among them, silences, side conversations, dominance by a small group of students, dismissive behavior using body language, long personal anecdotes, and so on—pretty much the whole panoply of undesired behaviors as far as productive, inclusive, and efficient discussion is concerned. Consequently, the next seven discussions are organized around helping students "become more aware of how their behaviors play a role in creating a successful discussion" (Zeiderman 48). In these

later discussions students may be involved in having discussions about discussions, or work from more formal seating arrangements, or both. Throughout all these variations, though, the basic format of reading a classic passage and discussing it remains consistent.

This unwillingness on the part of the program to move too quickly instills in almost all students the basic notion that *everyone* is capable of thinking and learning on his or her own. But what it has done for some in a very short time, I think, has been nothing short of phenomenal. I recall a discussion very early on in my experience with the program in which the students were given a selection from *Continuity and Irrational Numbers* by Richard Dedekind. When I first looked at it, I groaned, "My God, it's about math!" Four of the five previous discussions had involved small stories or myths from which the students were invited to draw inferences—in short, to do something not unlike something they were *supposed* to do in English class. The teacher's guide had predicted that students' previous attitudes toward math were likely to color their attitudes toward the text and the discussion. At the outset that is exactly what happened: after the initial complaints about the subject matter had been addressed, there ensued long periods of silence (these are, by the way, initially rather awkward and

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 teenage 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 complacent 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 eu-

...to their periods; they are also, however, bound to occur in Touchstones classes and are useful in encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning and in providing them a quiet moment in which to reflect). In this case, though, one or two students in each class "discovered" the text and generated a discussion in which members of the class addressed insightfully the relative truth of "mathematical" reality versus the illusory nature of the experiential "reality" most of them unquestioningly had accepted. In each of the three subsequent times this passage has come up for discussion in my classes, the results have been the same—students have left the classroom with a new appreciation for the subtleties of their experience in the world and have, for all practical purposes, begun to understand what it means to be a thinking person in the truest sense of the world. In short, most students left discussing the discussion. I would hasten to add one additional, but most salient point. This discussion in particular, involved almost *all* students, especially those who were not under normal circumstances willing participants in classroom work. In this context, at least, they took charge of their own learning.

The texts in Touchstones classes are never to be seen merely as springboards for discussions of certain issues, though the texts are emphasized less strongly in early segments. In order that students learn *how* to learn in these discussions, the emphasis must remain on coming to some understanding of what was read, or as Comber, Zeiderman, and Maistrellis have said, "...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 theme, then, though certain gains will occur, they will not be the skills that a discussion format can develop" (41).

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.

In John Henry, Cardinal Newman's "The Idea of a University," he remarks that school should be a place "in which the intellect may safely range and speculate, sure to find its equal in some antagonistic activity, and its judge in the tribunal of truth" (38). Though such sentiment doesn't conform to the standard rhetoric of contemporary pedagogy, it does conform to the standards I have aspired to. And in fifteen years in public education teaching juniors and seniors of all sorts of ability levels, I have never seen anything work anywhere near as well as The Touchstones Project in the formation of Newman's ideal forum and in actually conveying to *all* students that knowledge and inquiry can be pursued without a teacher and as its own end.