

The Proof Is in the Discussion

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In the Touchstones Discussion Project, teachers say less, students participate more, and values are clarified.

Student 1: *It all depends on why a person steals. To steal for fun or just to see if you can get away with it is worse than stealing because you need it.*

Student 2: *Augustine stole the fruit because he just wanted to steal. Maybe he liked the thrill and excitement of sneaking in and out and not getting caught. If he stole the pears because he was hungry, that would be different.*

Student 3: *So it's okay to steal if you use what you've stolen? That doesn't sound right to me.*

Student 4: *I agree. It's not okay. Look what it says about a thief not letting someone steal from him. When a thief doesn't want to get ripped off, that says something about how bad stealing is.*

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A buzzer signals the end of the class period but not the end of the discussion. Students gather their books and walk out of the classroom still talking about stealing.

Since 1993, visitors to Rice High School in Harlem, New York, have been surprised as they observed ninth and 10th graders participating in and leading sustained discussion classes on complex texts and sensitive issues, as demonstrated in the above discussion of St. Augustine's *The Confessions*.

The implementation of the Touchstones Discussion Project has significantly affected both faculty and students. Even traditional teachers have come to feel comfortable involving students in the project's cooperative approaches.

The high level of discussion skills developed in students has opened exciting possibilities throughout the curriculum and has expanded students' leadership roles. Increasingly, students share responsibility for their educations.

The Touchstones Project was created at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, where three faculty members designed a structured discussion format to enable students to master complex material. The success of this technique with a wide variety of student populations encouraged the development of a similar project for high schools and middle and elementary grades.

The key to the process is a carefully designed discussion centered around a core collection of short excerpts from multicultural classics of literature, philosophy, theology, and the sciences. Through the systematic use of individual and small group work, as well as full class discussion, participants develop skills that enable them to:

- Work with each other regardless of background
- Listen carefully without interrupting
- Speak clearly so others can understand

- Support opinions with evidence
- Ask questions to clarify understanding
- Admit gracefully when wrong
- Respect themselves
- Respect other people's opinions
- Think about questions that do not have simple solutions
- Learn how to learn from others

In the 1992-93 academic year, Rice High School introduced its entire freshman class to a humanities course which used the Touchstones Discussion Project as a significant component.

A private Catholic High School for young men, Rice has seen its student population change over the years to reflect the changing demographics of the community. Originally made up entirely of sons of working class Irish and Italian immigrants, the school experienced a large shift in the student body in the mid-60s. By 1968, the school was one-third white, one-third African-American and one-third Latino. By the late 70s, the Irish and Italian constituents were gone.

Today, the student body is four-fifths African-American and one-fifth Latino; over half of the students are non-Catholic. While Christian Brothers administer the school and remain on faculty, the majority of current staff members are lay people.

In spite of these changes, the school's essential mission to provide for academic excellence and to nourish spiritual and moral growth has remained constant.

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To implement the Touchstones program at Rice, five freshman humanities teachers representing diverse content areas held weekly meetings. They coordinated daily lesson plans, developed weekly current events projects and planned regular assemblies around major concepts in the Touchstones units.

These meetings proved to be energizing and eye-opening. The teachers literally revamped their curriculum on a continual and cooperative basis, utilizing the project's most successful procedures and developing pertinent strategies as particular problems emerged.

Before long, the teachers' coveted control in classroom management gave way to more student involvement. By the end of the year, the students were leading some of the classroom discussions.

"I was so amazed at what went on in my first Touchstones class that I almost literally dragged our librarian into my room so she could see how these freshman were handling and effectively running discussions after just one week of training," bragged Fred Murphy, chair of the English department.

In addition to conducting their Touchstones classes, the humanities teachers shared the concepts and techniques of the program during faculty meetings designed for that purpose. The successful transformation in student and teacher roles and the excitement of the faculty involved was contagious. The entire faculty decided that the humanities program should continue to the sophomore level.

Fortunately, Murphy, who had developed the freshman humanities course during the summer of 1992, was able to spend the following summer writing the curriculum for the sophomore course.

He polled the freshman humanities teachers to determine the specific changes that should distinguish the second-year level. The almost universal response was that "public speaking" should replace the "current events" facet. Murphy adapted the core essays in *Touchstones Volume II* into a unit-by-unit format, including a detailed teacher's guide, to help the sophomore humanities faculty understand the overall concepts and daily procedures of the program.

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Classroom management procedures include specific classroom settings and ground rules to maximize the number of students who participate in discussion and minimize the role of the teacher as explainer. Teachers are encouraged to conduct the class by getting the students themselves to lead the discussions.

"For the first time in my teaching career I had my students in a circle, calling on each other and relying on me almost minimally. It was more than a bit disarming," said Murphy.

The concept of respecting each student's opinions was formalized during the first year into a strategy called "I learn, we learn, the class learns." After an excerpt is read orally and silently, each student is expected to write in his journal what he learned or thought about the passage.

Following small group and class discussions, the class as a whole decides how to phrase a summary statement which reflects their collective opinion.

The following statements were suggested after discussion of an excerpt from *The Confessions* by St. Augustine of Hippo:

"We learned that stealing is a ruthless act and is morally corrupt."

"We learned that people who don't have what they need sometimes steal. It's an unhealthy habit, unless you are doing it for an absolutely good reason."

Next, a small group consisting of a representative from each individual Touchstones class creates a freshman class summary statement such as the following for *The Confessions*: "As a freshman class we learned that every family instills a sense of values, a sense of right and wrong in one's mind. Sometimes an individual may steal for certain necessities or just for pleasure, but stealing can never be justified."

Other Touchstones classes discussed excerpts from the writings of Francis Bacon, Herodotus, Benjamin Franklin, Plato, William James, Franz Kafka, Nietzsche, and Thucydides, as well as Frederick Douglass and Virginia Woolfe, and formulated summary statements.

The accumulation of these summaries forms the basis for an assembly program in which all freshman classes and humanities teachers participate, providing lively and often controversial discussions about concepts explored in Touchstones readings.

The Touchstones discussion technique is also used in assembly programs which focus on current school concerns. After one assembly addressed a troubling outbreak of graffiti, the incidents subsided.

In another instance, a Touchstones discussion based on one of the Kwanzaa principles resulted in the development of a very successful after-school program in which Rice students tutor neighboring

elementary school children on a weekly basis. Students have learned that positive and beneficial actions can result from constructive discussions.

By now, more than half of the Rice faculty is or has been directly involved in the humanities course. The discussion techniques have filtered into all subject areas, and teachers have learned to interact with students in nontraditional styles.

The entire student body has been involved with the program, and students take an active role in the class structure. Since their ideas are seriously appreciated, they also demonstrate a willingness to participate as leaders.

The Touchstones Discussion Project has served as a valuable base from which to launch significant improvements in the school's teaching and learning experiences.

Murphy summarized the experience in these words: "I believe humanities, with the Touchstones Discussion Project as the touchstones, has transformed me as an instructor and has greatly changed how students and teachers learn at Rice."