

Touchstone Project, teaching, learning

Al Rutledge

There is strong evidence that traditional teaching-learning techniques do not work for everyone and that a very successful alternative can be found in the Touchstone Project. "Our thought," says Howard Zeiderman, co-founder of the project, "is that students' attitudes towards themselves and the learning process can change."

By implementing these changes through a process of free discussions, Zeiderman explains, "Touchstones is a complementary program that allows students to learn skills that

transfer to the classroom and empowers them to take responsibility for their own ideas."

How is this different from the traditional teaching-learning technique? There are many differences. One, explains Zeiderman, "is that in the regular classroom there are, in the minds of both teachers and students, the good student and the poor student."

"Those classifications don't work in Touchstones," he advises, "Also, there is the essential teacher-student relationship, in Touchstones that hierarchy is eliminated, the teacher is present but not dominant."

The Touchstones method is developed around discussion groups; it is designed to encourage student participation without consideration of a student's ability to read, whether they're considered disruptive or model students.

A class is gathered in a circle, with a teacher in the midst, the teacher reads a short text from a non-contemporary work, say, from Hobbes, Machiavelli, Homer, Joyce, Dickens, Thackeray.

The text is short and there has been no previous preparation because those students, not in the habit of preparing, would left out. Also, the text is read aloud and silently so that non, or slow readers may participate.

The discussion begins with an opening question. It may be asked by the teacher or a student. Zeiderman says, "You let the students speak about themselves and bring their own experiences into the discussion."

"The process does not encourage conflict but the exchange of ideas. The student learns to think critically, communicate orally, impose self discipline by listening to and respecting other points of view and taking responsibility for their own opinions."

"It helps to develop skills having to do with questioning ideas, listening and taking learning seriously," he adds.

These discussions last until the next period bell rings. There is no closure, summary or conclusion. The discussion is open-ended.

The inclusion of personal experience to illuminate certain aspect of the text under discussion allows students to recognize the continuity between the work they do in school and their out of school experiences.

The student learns to apply what he or she already knows to the formal educational structure. Having confidence in their opinions, students articulate their ideas, listen to others, apply the rule of evidence to support their ideas and to examine the ideas of others. These skills apply to the complex activity of critical thinking.

Poor readers use their listening skills, and good readers learn to listen.

The project provides three volumes for discussion. Volume I is designed to foster the desire to take responsibility for one's education and to learn the skill of learning from other students as well as the teacher.

Volume II teaches one to learn from oneself. To learn to cooperate with others of different abilities and

backgrounds, and to learn to think coherently and responsibly in situations which have neither models nor precedents.

Volume III enables students to make explicit the implicit opinions and attitudes around which their actions gravitate.

The Touchstones Project began in 1984 when Zeiderman along with Geoffrey Comber (a Fulbright Scholar) and Nicholas Maistrellis, all tutors at St. Johns College, set out to design a classical magnet school for the Hartford, CN school system.

Since then the project has been adopted by school systems in Pittsburgh, PA, Los Angeles, CA, rural Alabama, Washington, DC, Baltimore and Annapolis, MD.

8/16/92