

Changing Places: The At-Risk Student in the Touchstones Discussion Project

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The act of talking about something has a powerful effect. It is one of our most basic experiences and one that leads us to discover our world in ways that involve and engage us actively. Discussion, unlike talking or speech-making, involves conscious and direct interpersonal experiences that move a person toward others. Discussion is a connective process that engages the mind and the senses through verbal and nonverbal cues. For these compelling reasons, discussion is one of the most important ways we learn and students of all abilities benefit when they learn to participate in discussion.

The Touchstones Project was designed to develop in students those skills and behaviors necessary to participate in classroom discussion. At-risk students benefit through a process that creates the conditions where they can “change places” — that is, to exchange familiar, unproductive patterns of learning for new, participatory behaviors and thinking strategies.

For at-risk students, discussion offers access to the dynamics of the class that are not ordinarily available to them in traditional settings that employ lecture, silent reading and textbook exercises. Bobby is an example of an

at-risk student, a repeating sophomore who attends a public high school in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He often says he is bored with school and finds reading difficult. He tends to skip school when tests are given, and his attendance is erratic at best. Bobby likes to talk however, and he feels he has a lot to share, especially about his dropout days in East Los Angeles and his struggles with the "outside." He comes to school, he says, because he likes to be around other kids.

For Bobby and others who struggle with school expectations, discussion offers a way to engage their minds without barriers that traditional classes seem to erect for them. For Bobby, sitting for long periods of listening to the teacher and taking notes demanded too much from him since his skills of listening and selecting out important information were not well developed. For other at-risk students, such as Anna, a bright but inattentive and impulsive junior, class time is "wasted time." She wants to write, but is frustrated by poor skills in reasoning and reflection and gives up when she gets low grades.

In a school, discussion can play a major role in providing a setting where these students can join higher-performing students on a more equal basis, since it is their experiences and insights that contribute to the progress of a discussion, not their poor skills in reading, writing, and test-taking. Moreover, the processes that are employed in guided discussion nurture the intellectual and behavioral skills all students need to acquire if they are to learn how to learn.

For at-risk students who learn through guided discussion those behaviors and intellectual strategies that permit them to participate, there are many rewards. For Bobby it meant, after a year of Touchstones classes, staying in school. He found through discussion classes skills that enabled him to listen, question, respond and cooperate. He began to work with his peers and teachers instead of against them. He passed his State Proficiency Exam and gained new confidence. For Anna, discussion gave her a forum for clarifying ideas. She became less

timid and more assertive, and her writing improved as she practiced expressing herself and listening to others voice their opinions and insights. She went on to publish an essay in the school literary magazine.

What Happens In A Discussion?

When we convene to talk about something, we set into play a number of skills and attitudes. A true discussion moves past the mere exchange of ideas and into other realms. It involves not only a talking about something, but thinking about it, too. It creates connections between people; it effectually socializes people and forms relationships. A discussion involving readings also allows students to become more reflective and less dependent on teacher approval, and, in effect, creates the conditions for practicing and developing critical thinking skills.

The skills we need to bring to a discussion are not immediate or necessarily natural. They have to be learned. To begin with, an authentic discussion requires listening skills. To listen well means to suspend one's own "agenda" to understand what the speaker is saying and meaning to say. It is a processing of information, in a sense, that requires, for one, self-discipline and, for another, intellectual focus. The speaker must also learn to listen to the responses his remarks elicit.

Another skill we need to participate in discussion is expressiveness. To communicate our ideas well, we need to practice the ways we can best convey our meaning. This involves the speaker in exploring rhetorical formats and vocabularies. Continued involvement in discussion helps the participants understand nuances of quality and style when we use different approaches to getting our messages across to others. For example, I might find that merely explaining my point isn't working, but when I use an analogy my listeners seem to catch on to my meaning.

Discussion which examines ideas in literature (including all forms from poetry to

mathematical proofs) will require students to find ways to be persuasive and convincing. Over time, they will learn to use their texts and regard literature as an ally and not a burden. They will begin to understand the processes behind research: for example, referencing, citation, and quotation.

Besides skills, students acquire attitudes which help them perform in a Touchstone Class as well as other classes. A most important attitude is tolerance. Through discussion students find that their ideas are not the only ones that can be supported and presented. They begin to realize that people who may be strangers can talk to them and offer them something useful, a new way of thinking about revenge, say, or Euclidian geometry. In school settings where discussion is practiced, students can learn to acknowledge those with whom they have never ventured to speak to in the halls. Hopefully, this revelation about a community of thinkers leads to tolerance.

Another attitude that discussions can nurture is responsibility. Students who share their ideas in a cooperative and trusting environment learn that discussion requires cooperation and trust — the trust that they can share a thought without retribution or fear of being exposed. They realize that expressed thoughts are part of a process of thinking about something and exploring options and that thoughts can be modified and changed. Students allow their peers this process of involvement with ideas and do not argue or “put down” their peers for expressing thoughts.

They also learn to be responsible not only for presenting their ideas in a way that promotes reception but for owning their ideas, weak or strong, right or wrong. If they do not fear rebuttal, they can leave the discussion for that day and move on. Perhaps, next time, they will try a new approach or completely change their stance. Each time, though, it is their responsibility to try to communicate their thoughts.

Eventually these skills and attitudes lead to a group dynamic that supports learning. The

group begins to understand that together they can explore ideas and arrive at new ideas or that they can examine ideas with texts in ways that contribute to their own thought processes. This realization is the basis for scholarship and, of course, learning about our world.

The Touchstones Discussion Project

Luke is the star seventh grade student in an inner city Hartford School. Tom is failing and has not 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.

The at-risk student, Tom, finds a place in this discussion and also relates to other students in ways he hadn't before. Discussion offers learning possibilities for all students, and already, discussion is common as we know in classes that deal with “issues.” In academic classrooms, however, discussion is too often left out or occurs infrequently or in haphazard ways. This is because discussion requires specific skills in communication — verbal skills and behavioral skills — to benefit all participants and their learning. In order for students to conduct a discussion, they must learn to cooperate and to

recognize the purposes and process of a discussion. This takes practice and direction.

The Touchstones Discussion Project was designed to create such conditions for learning discussion skills. Touchstones implements weekly 45-minute discussion classes for students in grades 7-12. Strategically selected texts are read in class and discussed. A two-page selection from, for example, Kant, Frederick Douglass, Christine Pisan or Lao Tsu is read aloud and silently. In each class, students write down questions, work in small groups to consider discussion strategies, and finally participate in a class discussion. By the end of the first year, students themselves design the class format, choose the text, and conduct the discussion. Students of all abilities and reading levels participate, from highly gifted to at-risk and special education students. Within the Touchstones format, all students possess strengths and weaknesses. It is, therefore, very useful for creating a cooperative learning environment for heterogeneous as well as homogeneous groups.

In this specially designed discussion format, student motivation toward school increases. In addition, students develop particular skills of questioning, listening, thinking, cooperating and teaching themselves. Since these skills are relevant to all classes, students transfer these skills to their work in subject-area classes.

Teachers who include discussion take on a different role than that of the teacher in a traditional class. Unlike the lecturer, the Touchstones leader/teacher assists students as a facilitator not as the source of knowledge. Students will not be used to, nor sometimes willing, to see the teacher in this new light. In discussion, they will turn to her for assurance or for "an answer." The teacher must resist the temptation to take on this familiar role and give the students permission to intellectually "move around" within a discussion. She assures them through nonverbal and verbal means that a discussion does not have to lead to her answer nor to her opinion. This can be a very real revelation to students.

In fact, this revelation can cause some students uneasiness, especially those who have learned the art of giving back answers, a method developed through years of answering questions at the back of textbooks. Students who have not found it easy to memorize answers in textbook chapters will find, on the other hand, that discussion can allow them the opportunity to join the class in ways they have never experienced. In time, the group works through these attitudes of insecurity and finds ways to value participation differently than in the question-answer system. What often happens is that the group learns to look at each other differently and to expect from everyone the possibility of contribution and participation. This promotes a new experience with the sharing and learning of ideas.

The Touchstones texts are short enough to read aloud so that reading ability is not a deciding factor in comprehension or, in participation. The texts were selected to elicit some idea useful for discussion, ideas which are familiar, yet unfamiliar or contradictory. For example, in a passage stating Newton's laws about gravity, students are urged to consider some kind of ideal experience as they think about Newton's laws and ask themselves, "Why is he making these claims in spite of everyone's experience?"

Touchstones discussions involve small group and large group activities. A 45-minute discussion without some variation will fail and be added to the list of "boring things we do in school." By using small group activities that can be brought back into a large group discussion, students who are not willing to talk in a large group can benefit. After a small group discussion, those students who weren't first willing to talk in a large group might eventually try expressing their thoughts with the group.

Since students learn in a Touchstones discussion the process of discussion, texts contribute to the discussion and provide a touchstone for discussion, but they do not become the focus of the learning experience. The teacher/leader, therefore, facilitates the discussion through a

variety of techniques, sometimes, for example, using silence or pauses as part of the process, allowing the group to work out its own ways of moving the discussion from person to person. The teacher/leader might, at times, break in, to ask the students what they think about how the discussion is proceeding: "Who's talking and who's listening?" "What are the listeners doing while others are talking?" These moments focus the students on the process of involving themselves in discussion and the skills they need to do so. They also begin to understand the roles of listening and speaking, and each is mutually active and necessary.

During the year, students experience a progression of skills. The year proceeds from simple discussion settings to more complex ones, so that by the end of the year, students know the process as well as the teacher. By the end of the year, students are able to conduct a discussion without teacher involvement.

With these skills learned and practiced, students have a valuable tool for learning which will serve them well in school and later in the workplace and in their personal lives. The sharing of ideas, the interaction between a text and one's companions is what we mean when we talk about "learning for learning's sake." When students know that they all possess the skills to express themselves and to listen and share, they learn a confidence that other forms of education do not always promote.

Students in Pittsburgh who had completed a year of Touchstones commented on their experiences during the year as positive and useful. As one student said, "I like it when the teacher doesn't tell me the answers . . . I learned to say what I think, and I learned to express myself and to get along with people." During this final session, these students expressed their confidence and articulated their satisfaction with their new skills to each other and their teacher as they look forward to graduation.