

The Ring of Gyges in Touchstones Discussions

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A significant change during the life of ACTC is the increase in international students in the United States, from 453,000 in 1994 to 975,000 today (IIE web). Given a choice, few international undergraduates opt to study core texts or courses. Conducting Touchstones Discussions with these students would not only draw them out of silence in their classes, but also awaken them to the pleasures of reading and talking about core texts. I speak from holding Touchstones Discussions in Yangon (Rangoon), Myanmar, with twelve cohorts of Burmese students in the pre-collegiate program who then entered over sixty different liberal arts colleges, spread from Bates to St. John's in Santa Fe, from Davidson to St. Olaf. This paper first illustrates the Touchstones approach to the Ring of Gyges by giving excerpts from three class discussions by Burmese students. The core of the paper explains the Touchstones process and its results. The concluding paragraph mentions a collaboration to explore using Touchstones Discussions to help international undergraduates to open their minds to humanities texts.

Rarely when teaching the *Republic* do we give ourselves the luxury of spending a whole class period on Glaucon's story of the Ring of Gyges. Much as we might regret slighting this transition from the disputation with Thrasymachus on whether might makes right to the tale of a shepherd who took a ring from the corpse of a giant, we hurry on. The Touchstones Discussions Project, founded by three faculty members of St. John's College in Annapolis, MD, uses Gyges as one of the many forty-five-minute lessons to empower students. At the pre-collegiate program, our purpose for using Touchstones since 2003 is to turn around students who have dwelt

for ten years in rote memorization toward the light of a liberal education.

Perhaps your tendency in a discussion of the Ring of Gyges is similar to my former approach, to go straight for the heart by taking up Glaucon's assertion that if a just man and an unjust man each had a ring with the power of invisibility, they would similarly steal and despoil. However, the *Touchstones Teacher's Guide* for Volume A stated the purpose of the lesson by setting a large context: "Students will discuss the difference between public and private behavior and what motivates people to be good" (Zeiderman 147). The structure of every Touchstones lesson relates the central theme of the text to the students' own experiences. Here Touchstones plays with the notion of invisibility by requiring students to reflect on a mode of visibility that everyone experiences. Even before reading the one-page text, students jot down their own answers to the question: What will you normally avoid doing in front of your parents, grandparents, or teachers?

Since Burmese families are strong, students see their grandparents frequently. Youth culture there is changing fast, due in part to Facebook and YouTube, but they mention that they would not leave their grandparents' home without kneeling in front of them to receive a Buddhist blessing. The students' realization of ways they modify their actions in the presence of a respected audience welcomes them to say frankly—first in a small group, then with the whole class—what they would do if they were invisible.

"When I was a kid, if I had been invisible, I would have picked a fight."

"I would have liked to slip away to the playground instead of doing my homework."

A young woman asserted, "You don't need to think of doing only bad things if you are invisible. You might want to do something good and not be known."

A snappy challenge from another woman: "Like what?"

She improvised, "Uhh, like kill a bad person."

A teacher knows that it is time to toss out a fresh question. The *Touchstones Teacher's Guide* is packed with possible questions to use. A fundamental question the guide suggests for the Ring of Gyges is "Would most people take money left on a table?" Here I am recalling a discussion about three months into the school year in 2003. A sixteen-year-old said approximately the following: "Our family leaves money lying around on the table at home all the time. Of course, my younger brother and I never take it. Even during some days when workmen came to repair the electric system, the money was still there when they left."

"Maybe the workmen didn't bother because it was a small amount."

"Maybe they did not take it because they had pride in being honest."

All the other exchanges recounted in this paper come from notes I took in February 2016 in two classes at the Connect Institute, a new school preparing students to transfer as juniors to American universities. In both the first and second class, I tossed out questions, as is appropriate in the first weeks of a Touchstones group learning how to take charge of running their discussions. In the first class this view was asserted early in a derisive tone by a woman of twenty: "Of course, most people would take money lying on the table."

"Yes, it is not a good idea to leave money lying around."

“I think most people would not take a small amount of money, but if the opportunity came to take \$5,000,000, they would take it.”

“You have to consider the situation of the person. We are students and do not need money.”

“I think that no one can love someone more than you love yourself. If necessary, a person will take the money.”

“If you took the money no matter whether people saw you or not, you would know that you had taken it.”

“Some people have fear of karma, and that is why they do not take money. Your karma will follow you.”

Almost at the end of class time, the same woman who set the cynical tone asserted, “Everyone is greedy. I would take the money because I would do something good with it. Otherwise, someone else who takes it might do something bad with it.”

There was a quick retort: “That is just an excuse for taking the money. Everyone knows that stealing is bad.” Immediately another student spoke. “What if a child is taught by his parents that stealing is good?” I did not intervene but ended the discussion after the next remark. “If you steal, you will worry about getting caught.”

In the second class, the first comment in the large group came from a man of nineteen. “I hate stealing. When I was a child my parents were very strict and did not permit me to eat candy, and so I stole chocolate every time I could.” That discussion degenerated into opposing blunt assertions. “Our character is shaped by how our parents raise us since childhood.”

“No, our character is shaped by how we shape it ourselves.”

“Our character is shaped by our education.”

“Everyone is intelligent enough to know the best course of action is not to steal.”

“You should think about the people in war-torn Iraq. They know that they need to steal to keep alive. They have brains, just like other people.”

“You are trying to judge that those people are different. Are you saying that they have less education than you?”

The young man who brought up Iraq did not have an opportunity to answer because another blurted out, “Generals and cronies are smart, but they are not educated. The generals might have sacrificed themselves on the frontlines for the country when they were young, but now they are corrupt.” Near the end of the class a man of seventeen observed, “If you take money that is not yours, it will not feel good. Easy money is boring. You have to work hard for it.” A woman of eighteen continued in that direction to talk about Thailand, the historic enemy of Burma. “Getting money dishonestly affects some people differently from the way it affects others. When I was a student in Bangkok, I left my mobile phone in a cab. The driver went to a lot of trouble to return it. He called the first number and found out who I was and carried the phone to my home.”

“That’s amazing. My father’s friend is a taxi driver. He gets about four mobile phones each month because customers forget them. He does not bother to try to return them.”

I ended the discussion after that comment in order to let the ethical Thai taxi driver stand in contrast to the Burmese driver.

These discussions follow four guidelines to enable the students take responsibility for the dynamics of their discussions:

- Read the Text Carefully.
- Speak Clearly.
- Listen to What Others Say and Don't Interrupt.
- Give Others Your Respect.

The five phases of a Touchstones class begin as the teacher reads the text aloud while the students read silently. Second is individual work as students re-read the text and think about two initial questions that apply the central idea of the text to their lives, thus empowering students to speak as authorities on their own experiences. Third is the small-group discussion when students in groups of four discuss their answers to the two initial questions. Classmates listen to their peers. Thus, in their small groups they solicit a variety of views and discover different interpretations of the theme. Fourth is the large-group discussion by the whole class, except for two students who are observers. Here the teacher can deepen the discussion, for instance, in connection with the Ring of Gyges by asking students to come up with an acquaintance who would definitely refrain from taking money lying on a table and why. The fifth phase is when the two observers report back to the class their comments on the class dynamics in running a shared discussion.

Finally, students know about the goals of learning from Touchstones discussions. They include eleven specific ones:

1. listen better to what others say
2. explain your own ideas
3. speak and work with others whether you know them or not
4. receive correction and criticism from others
5. ask about what you don't understand
6. admit when you're wrong
7. think about questions for which the answers are uncertain
8. learn from others
9. teach others
10. teach yourself and
11. become more aware of how others see you.

As we examine the goals, we note that points 1 and 2 form a pair. Listening and explaining better enabled the vast majority of my pre-collegiate students to achieve point 5, ask about what you don't understand. They typically mastered that essential skill by midyear, but it never surfaced in the two sessions at Connect Institute. Achieving points 4 and 6 is difficult in any classroom. Receiving correction and criticism did not occur in the snappy accusation against the woman asserting she would use the lost money beneficially.

Point 7, thinking about questions for which the answers are uncertain, is such a strongly practiced skill in Touchstones Discussions that pre-collegiate students eagerly deal with questions leading to other questions in all of their classes.

Point 8. Probably the most learning from each that occurred in the two quoted discussions was the young woman's account of the Bangkok taxi driver returning her mobile phone. The students' context is that the historic hatred still taught in the government curriculum between Myanmar and Thailand is deeper than the historic French and German animosity. I noted the wide-open eyes in the circle.

Points 9 and 10—teach others and teach yourself—are achieved first in the small groups and then in the large group when the teacher lets the group take responsibility for the quality of the discussion.

Point 11, becoming aware of how others see you, is augmented by the teacher's ending the discussion to allow a five-minute feedback report on the dynamics of the large-group discussion by the two student observers. They use a checklist to evaluate the actions of the students and the teacher in creating a good discussion.

In coming to Point 3 last—speak and work with others whether you know them or not—I can say that Touchstones Discussions achieves it superbly. From the start of the program, we held Saturday outreach sessions using a Touchstones format. Current students came for the fun of sharing points of view and to make new friends.

The resistance of international college students to engaging core texts can be overcome through appropriate use of Touchstones Discussions. Since Touchstones Discussions have no homework and deal with interesting topics, international students at college can find immediate satisfaction in taking it as a noncredit course meeting once a week. At the University of Virginia at Wise, Sanders Huguenin, the provost, and the author are collaborating to develop a program of Touchstones Discussions for international students at U.S. colleges.

Works Cited

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