

VOICES

Building Critical Thinkers and Collaborative Leaders

Table of Contents

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Touchstones Workshops | 1 |
| Letter to Readers | 2 |
| Reflections from Inside School Walls | 3 |
| Looking Forward: Back to Jordan | 3 |
| Touchstones in Prison | 4 |

Touchstones Workshops

by Ryan Phillips, Director of School Programs

One of Touchstones' most successful offerings for educators are our workshops—both open-enrollment and custom delivered workshops. For years, the semi-annual Touchstones open-enrollment workshops held in Annapolis have been popular events with teachers. Open-enrollment workshops (OEWs) provide an opportunity for educators to learn the Touchstones method outside of a school setting. Unlike customized workshops that are held for a given school's teachers and administrators, OEWs are open to people from many different disciplines—from prison psychologists to home-schooling parents. Usually the workshops fill up weeks beforehand, with participants coming from as far away as Oregon, the Dominican Republic, and South Africa. So that Touchstones' workshops are more accessible around the country, this year we are taking its show on the road to select cities that hold promise for greater Touchstones implementation.

Our first open-enrollment venture was in Austin, Texas where the weather in March is decidedly better than it is in Maryland. And, while every Touchstones workshop (OEW or customized) follows a similar structure—introducing the Touchstones methodology, running sample discussions and evaluations with participants, examining discussion dynamics, exploring question develop-

ment, and learning how Touchstones complements traditional teaching—each workshop is a unique experience.



Over the almost four years during which I've run more than 45 Touchstones workshops, I've amassed a stockpile of fond memories. Sometimes it's the location, such as at the Griffin School in Austin, where large sculptures and student art surrounded me. Other times, it's the topography. This was the case in the workshops I led in a village on the Big Island in Hawaii. And, sometimes it's the logistics, such as in October 2009, when I ran a series of workshops in Jordan for Ministry of Education officials. All but one of the workshops required the help of an interpreter who provided a concurrent translation of the workshop into Arabic.

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More often than not, what makes the workshops memorable is the cast of characters—the participants themselves. In my experience, teachers on a global scale are a more eclectic bunch of people than any other group of professionals. They bring with them widely varying educations, backgrounds, and beliefs. Sometimes there are exchanges that make you shake your head in wonder (such as the time a participant was adamant that Francis Bacon, whose essay on revenge is often our sample discussion text, was actually a *nom de plume* for a collective of writers including Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Ben Johnson). But one certainty is that every teacher I've met is dedicated to the profession of teaching and to doing what is best for their students and school communities.

Of all of the workshops, two stand out in my mind. One is the first workshop I ever led. During the discussion on Bacon's passage on revenge, a teacher shared a disturbing experience—one that she said drove her almost to murder. Silence descended on the group, and this rookie tried in vain to restart the discussion. My inexperience had left too much room and the discussion had become too personalized. It had been hijacked, and I wasn't prepared to handle the consequence. Even though the discussion failed, the evaluation of the discussion was a great success, really driving home to me just how well designed the program is. If you follow

the methodology, the mistakes (which are inevitable) can advance the development of the group.



The other memorable occasion was one of the workshops I ran in Jordan last fall. Abir Amouri, our colleague from the Ministry of Education, had been interpreting for me for eight days. Suddenly in the middle of the workshop, she stopped serving as the go-between and answered the participants' questions herself. With that moment of change, I instantly understood the enormity of our work. Here on the other side of the world with dedicated partners, we are accomplishing amazing gains. The leadership of this workshop had become a true Touchstones collaboration. Running these and all Touchstones' workshops taught me that being a successful leader takes experience and a willingness to adapt. Only working together as a group is it possible to achieve success: genuine understanding of what people can accomplish together.

Letter to Readers

Dear Reader,

It began in November, when I, a Touchstones volunteer, explained that I couldn't attend a regular volunteer commitment because I was loading a container for Ghanaian Mothers' Hope (www.gmhope.org) to ship from the Port of Baltimore to the Port of Tema in Ghana.

The very day that the container was being loaded, Howard Zeiderman, Touchstones President and Co-founder, called me and offered Touchstones materials for elementary age children. I explained that the container was full—the doors were about to close—and the materials would first need to be reviewed and approved by Ghanaian Mothers' Hope.

Ghanaian Mothers' Hope, a Maryland-based non-profit organization, has built three schools, a health center, a playground, and water facilities in Opah and Akramaman, Ghanaian villages just outside the capital city of Accra. With the opening of a primary school in Akramaman, the books could be a welcome addition. Children in Ghana (particularly in villages) learn their tribal language, but English is commonly used and essential for advancement in both education and work.

In March, Mercia Laryea, a retired official from the Ministry of Education and a powerful force for children and education in Ghanaian villages, was back in Maryland. Mercia spent one afternoon reviewing all the materials Touchstones had offered. Immediately, she asked for everything she could get. Mercia explained, "we have nothing like this that encourages discussion from marginal people, from women, and from children. We do not know how to have discussions; we must listen to men while women and children must be quiet. We will use these materials in the villages for reading for children, for discussion by women who come to the health posts—and we need to use them with adults."

The boxes of materials are now in place for the next shipment to Ghana sometime later this year. As soon as there is a full container and funding for its transit, the shipment will be on its way!

—Mike Winn

Reflections from Inside School Walls

By a vote of the patrons, Van Horn High School moved to the Independence, Missouri School District in the summer of 2008. With the new direction came the hiring of an entire new teaching staff and the opportunity to implement strategies that would have an immediate impact on student learning. The school decided to pursue Socratic seminar and after several weeks of struggling to find appropriate text, we began to use materials from Touchstones. Now in our second year of using the materials we are conducting school-wide weekly seminars in all classes. We have moved to a place where teachers and

students have made important gains in learning to discuss, listen, pursue ideas, and develop a common respect for each other by using the Touchstones materials with the Socratic process. With the weekly seminars we also see the process being used in traditional classrooms. We have been at it long enough to learn to appreciate the process and what emerges every week.

Greg Netzer, Ph.D.

Principal, Van Horn High School; Independence, MO

Looking Forward: Back to Jordan

Pack the suitcases... we're headed back to Jordan. This July, as part of the continued professional development of Jordanian teachers in the Touchstones method, a team of six expert Touchstones trainers will spend two weeks working with more than 800 teachers throughout Jordan. Though the Jordanian Ministry of Education adopted Touchstones for use by all students (approximately 500,000) in grades 6 – 10 as part of the Arabic curriculum almost two years ago, the project to train the approximately 8,000 teachers to implement Touchstones (known in Jordan as *MaHakkaat at-Tafkir* – ‘the Touchstones way of thinking’) in their classrooms is a multi-year process.

First, Touchstones worked with the Ministry to train a Core Team of officials to ensure that the pedagogical approach is fully understood at the highest levels of governance. Then, Touchstones began training 40 supervisors who oversee the Arabic curriculum and implementation throughout Jordan. That training initiated in October 2009 through funding from the Institute for Intercultural Studies (now the Mead Fund).

Also last fall (2009), the Ministry mandated weekly peer-teacher meetings to provide all the teachers of Arabic with an opportunity to practice Touchstones together. They follow lesson plans created by Touchstones specifically to aid the transition to an authentic discussion and shared learning environment. In any setting—whether in the U.S. or in Jordan—where teachers are experts and authorities in the classroom and students learn mostly through passive means, Touchstones’ innovative approach breaks with tradition and runs contrary to the notion that teacher-driven learning yields better student achievement. Touchstones systematically translates authority and control from the teacher to the students, thereby developing self-governance, responsibility, and collaboration in education. Jordan’s commitment to such an approach at a national level demonstrates both a

serious commitment to transforming how their children are educated and a recognition that future generations must be prepared to engage more rigorously on a regional and global scale.

There are, of course, logistical issues. Some peer-teacher groups can’t meet because there are too few teachers in a given region. It is an ambitious project to reform an entire national system. But in general we are receiving reports that this effort is working. The majority of teachers are learning to see their students and their own roles in a new light—considering how the individual gifts and skills each child brings to the classroom provides a rich offering of perspective and experience that informs and shapes the classroom setting.

This summer, Touchstones will work in Jordan as it more typically does elsewhere in the world. We will provide direct training to the teachers themselves, while relying on the collaboration and assistance from the Core Team and 40 supervisors to ensure successful training outcomes. These day-long sessions also require the Touchstones team to work closely with interpreters to deliver concurrent workshops for multiple groups of 25-30 teachers. The goal: to train 10% of Jordan’s teachers of Arabic in the Touchstones method by August 1 and to redouble the Jordanian Core Team’s and supervisors’ capacity to continue ongoing training into the future. Touchstones is excited to enter this new stage of work, and we’re looking forward to reporting about the training in our fall newsletter. Stay tuned.

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Touchstones in Prison

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On March 18, the prisoners at Maryland Correctional Institute at Jessup (MCI-J) read an excerpt on friendship from Aristotle's *The Ethics*. At the end of the discussion I asked the men what they would say to a friend to persuade them to attend a Touchstones session. Here are some of their responses.

- It's a good place to share your thoughts, views, ideas, and opinions with others on all kinds of topics and subjects.
- You can voice your opinions openly.
- Touchstones allows you to get an outside point of view on matters. It's good for your growth and development.
- Touchstones makes you think in ways you might not otherwise. It provides an educational, pleasant, and positive environment.
- Touchstones provides an opportunity to meet and become familiar with others. (Insiders and outsiders alike).
- What I would say to a potential Touchstoner is: If you want to broaden your mind, expand your vocabulary, and participate in great conversations—please attend Touchstones.

While reading the prisoner's responses I was amazed at how similar they are to my own feelings. Touchstones allows diverse groups to engage in meaningful discussions, embrace what we share in common, and explore and accept the ways in which we are different. The world could certainly use more engagement like that!

—Gina Lee, Director of Community Programs & Projects



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