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Prisoners learn to teach themselves

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A radical experiment in education is occurring at the Maryland House of Corrections/Jessup. Each Tuesday night 20 inmates, many serving life sentences, meet with Howard Zeiderman of St. John's College, Annapolis, and a creator of the Touchstones discussion Project. These men participate in, analyze, and learn to lead discussions. Touchstones discussions require a reconception of power. Men who have felt powerless suddenly recognize their own intelligence and seriousness. The prisoners feel that Touchstones discussions could be a decisive step in humanizing their own environment. They plan to spread this program through prison. Their hope is to give meaning to their lives through their sole possession - their thought and their speech.

Touchstones, a discussion program designed to help students think and communicate better, is the brainchild of Geoffrey Comber, and Nicholas Maistrellis, and Howard Zeiderman, three professors at St. John's College, Annapolis. Begun in 1984 with students at the Classical Magnet School in Hartford, Connecticut, it has gone on to influence more than

a quarter of a million students, in grades two through 12, throughout the United States and six foreign countries.

The impetus for the work at the Maryland House of Corrections/Jessup came from within the prison itself. Last year inmate Margin Hale, who had seen some Touchstones materials, invited Howard Zeiderman to meet with him and ten other inmates. These longtimers, many of whom were officers of prison organizations as the Legal Clinic, asked him to bring Touchstones to their institution. Mr. Zeiderman agreed to this radical experiment. He would work with a group of 15-20 inmates over a period of months, eventually teaching them to become leaders themselves, spreading the program throughout

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the prison population. An inmate stated their purposes succinctly: To help other prisons think for themselves.

This past fall Mr. Zeiderman approached the administration of the medium/maximum security prison, volunteering to implement the Touchstones program. (As the program expands he seeks funding for the program). The question he had to face was, "Would prisoners be able to undertake this extremely complex intellectual activity?" Many conventional experts, held captive by their own assumptions about

prisoners, doubted it. Mr. Zeiderman admits. Persuaded by the seriousness displayed in his first meeting with the inmates he felt his own presuppositions shatter. "If the real experts on prison populations -- the prisoners themselves -- felt Touchstones could be useful, who was I to dissuade them?" he asks. Besides, he had witnessed the power of Touchstones to transform people of all backgrounds and abilities into active participants, who through discussions grew to appreciate opposing views and to feel at ease thinking in uncertain situations.

He and the inmates decided to undertake this experiment. The ultimate plan was to devise a program that could be duplicated in other prisons and detention centers. In a typical session, Mr. Zeiderman reads aloud an excerpt from Hobbes' Leviathan or Malcolm X's Autobiography, or the Bible. He then asks members to write a question they would use to initiate discussion on the text. To begin the discussion, he throws out the first question. Throughout the sessions, inmates address the complex intellectual and behavioral issues brought up by the Touchstones texts. After the 60-minute discussions, the group spends equal time analyzing what occurred: who dominated, who didn't listen, and who was interrupted. Most important, they consider how they'll respond when they're in charge. This they also do by analyzing video tapes of their discussions. The prisoners now lead the discussions themselves.

Today, less than a year into the Jessup Project, as the inmates call it, the group has created within a hostile environment a thoughtful continuing discussion. A core group of leaders has developed among the inmates, and new participants are becoming involved. Mr. Zeiderman observes that while "the program will not solve the problem of crime, it will permit others to recognize that inmates are human beings capable of a very high and difficult form of activity."