

May 2019

VOICES



The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

www.touchstones.org

Our Future is Now

Howard Zeiderman, Co-founder & Director of Leadership Programs

For several decades, many reputable business magazines and corporate leaders have sounded an alarm: future generations aren't being prepared for a world that requires a new set of skills. Some of those "new" skills include the ability to collaborate and share leadership in a 21st Century globalized and technological world.

These skills aren't meant to replace skills designed for large-scale mass production and distribution. Those skills are still necessary. However, a highly interconnected and technologically evolving world introduces new opportunities and challenges. In this world, new knowledges constantly emerge, and related business decisions require input from many different types of experts, as activity in one region and

one market bears on other regions and other markets. The skillset required to complement those we've been teaching and learning for more than 150 years are, not surprisingly, as complex as the world that requires them.

The World Economic Forum's 2016 "The Future of Jobs" report indicates that skills of creativity, interpersonal dexterity, emotional intelligence, judgment and decision-making, service orientation, ability to find common ground, and cognitive flexibility are essential skills in our world that is increasingly transformed by technology. But how are those skills being developed—in our children, our young adults, and our existing workforce and leadership? Touchstones programs are indeed addressing some of this urgent need, but there is a lot of work yet to be done.

Recently, we were hired to develop and run a customized

Touchstones program within a large corporation to help a senior management team focus on developing some of these key skills. The team's leader recognized she wasn't tapping into the full potential represented within her managers. There were members of her group who always spoke in meetings and others who were much quieter. Some rarely spoke at all, and yet each was a valued member of the team. What, she wondered, did they need to learn to do differently to make sure everyone's voice and ideas were available and accessible to the entire team?

Over four, five-hour workshop sessions, each member of the team worked on active listening and what it means to create an environment in which each person's viewpoint is welcomed and respected. By the time we finished our work with



During a Touchstones workshop for deans and directors in a recent leadership development retreat, small groups explore how building a brand requires input from all members of a team.

We envision a world where people collaborate and share leadership to resolve complex local and global issues. Our mission is to develop highly effective speakers, listeners, critical thinkers, and collaborative leaders through inclusive discussion-based programming.



the group, many had practiced running Touchstones discussions—sharing responsibility for leading and bringing in all members of the team. Since then, that group has integrated their Touchstones practice into their monthly staff meetings, rotating leadership month to month to ensure their continued development.

Next month, we'll run similar leadership development programs at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas within the Emergency and Crisis Management Master's of Science Program. The participants are enrolled in a blended learning program, which brings them to campus several times a year to work together in person. Touchstones will be a central part of building connections and trust within the cohort, as part of strengthening participants' abilities to collaborate across key leadership positions even in times of great uncertainty.

We'll also be traveling to Montgomery, Alabama to provide professional development and leadership training for members of the Community College Association of Alabama consortium. As that organization looks to foster future leadership from within its younger managers, Touchstones will feature as a primary tool for augmenting existing skillsets.



Spring Cleaning and a New Look

*Jennifer Macris,
Advancement Coordinator*

We've done a little (OK a lot of!) spring cleaning here at Touchstones and we're proud to share the fruits of our labors with you.

Touchstones has launched a new website, and we think you're going to love it! It's cleaner, easier to navigate, and puts information more readily at your fingertips. Our successful programming, curricula, and trainings haven't changed, but now you can explore our books and research more interactively. And of course, it's still filled with in-depth information and resources for those interested in exploring more fully how Touchstones develops critical

thinking skills and collaborative leadership.

Those who choose Touchstones for their teaching already know that people of all ages need to learn, and practice often, how to really listen to others—especially those with differing points of view. It's not easy or simple to share one's own ideas within a group and to make sure other perspectives are welcomed and heard. But we know it's possible, with 35 years under our belt (yes, that's a long time!) and more than 5,000,000 people already part of the Touchstones family. And we aren't stopping until everyone has access to Touchstones.

We hope you'll enjoy how our new website showcases Touchstones many great benefits and will share your feedback! Write to us at schoolprograms@touchstones.org and let us know what you think.



The new Touchstones website features a more detailed navigation that allows users to locate the information and data they want quickly and easily. In addition, our new bookstore provides interactive flipbooks and will soon include samples from Touchstones volumes in French and Spanish.



Touchstones in Thailand

Lynn Cloutier, Operations & Office Manager

It's fascinating to me that our materials are used around the world. I have enjoyed working with educators in Canada, Spain, Australia, Guadeloupe, and China, and I am currently working with a teacher, Michael Purser, in Thailand. Michael teaches at the Thai Chinese International School in Samutprakarn, near Bangkok. He began using Touchstones materials in his seventh-grade class last year, and at the same time he was writing his doctoral dissertation on discussion-based learning methods. He had learned about Touchstones from his mentor in his graduate education program and wanted to

see what the method looked like and yielded in real practice. Fortunately, Touchstones was able to provide Michael with some initial training by including him in an Open-Enrollment Workshop last fall via the internet.

The school's goals—which include developing critical thinkers, effective communicators, collaborative workers, and responsible global participants—and the Touchstones method and materials fit seamlessly together to reinforce a student-centered environment focused on 21st Century skills. As Michael's students worked through their Touchstones program, he reported progress towards 100% participation within each discussion and a marked improvement in comprehension skills. As the school is trilingual (Chinese, Thai, and English), Touchstones programs additionally

support those whose native language is not English to strengthen their speaking, listening, and comprehension skills in English.

After several months of using Touchstones with his seventh-grade students, Michael wrote that he saw all students participating actively during their discussions. He also observed during Touchstones that “students appeared to be on more equal footing in the conversation based on their assigned roles of Chairperson and Secretary... and they spoke voluntarily during the group discussions as opposed to being prompted by the facilitator.”

He further relayed that “the discussions were more inclusive, and collaboration seemed to be embedded in the seminars.” Michael also shared that his students said “they liked the flow of the discussion

From the Classroom

Touchstones Roving Reporter



During a recent project in which Touchstones prepared a response to a professional development opportunity within a Maryland school district, we reached out to a teacher for a testimonial. Who better than a teacher from within that district could explain the importance and power of Touchstones discussions—inside the classroom and out!? Here is what she had to say:

"The Touchstones Discussion Project has been a tremendous tool for helping students in my classroom acquire skills for effective collaboration as well as improve self-awareness in a community setting. Through conversations, self-reflection and partner-work, students make connections and build emotional regulation skills.

I've used the Touchstones program for several years and I've seen positive results as students learn to respond to each other

through authentic conversations. The program promotes teacher-student connection as well as student-student connection and understanding. As the lessons progress, students take ownership of the discussions and learn how to give and take constructive feedback with each other. My middle schoolers enjoyed taking turns using the Touchstones evaluation tools as a way to bring awareness regarding participation and behavior in a non-threatening manner.

I highly recommend the Touchstones Discussion Project as a means to support Social-Emotional Learning in schools. Touchstones is well-thought out, easily implemented and effective."

From Briget Koch
Effective Learning Habits for College & Career Teacher
Dumbarton Middle School



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and that they thought all students participated more” in Touchstones than in other discussion-based formats they had been part of previously.

Based on those and other positive outcomes, this fall the school is expanding Touchstones throughout the middle and high school grades. They are also hoping to host Touchstones workshops in 2020 for teachers from across the region. Stay tuned for more from Bangkok!

Together

Stefanie Takacs, MS.Ed.
Executive Director

With a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the Touchstones Discussion Project launched a new program specifically for veterans in 2017. *Completing the Odyssey: A Journey Home* compared ancient perspectives on service, war, separation, and homecoming with modern perspectives from members of America’s modern armed forces. Touchstones is the recipient of a second grant from the NEH that allows us to expand programming and replicate the original program, in addition to converting our Touchstones *Leader’s Guide* and *Participant Guide* into a print-on-demand set. We look forward to making this program available to other organizations and groups that bring veterans together to share their experiences during service and in their transition back to civilian life.

In addition, this funding provides for the development and implementation of a new program

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that explores how dialogues on the experiences of service and war can bring veterans and non-veteran civilians together through deeper and shared understanding. One of the most compelling outcomes from the NEH-funded *Completing the Odyssey* programs in 2017-2018 was a realization among most participants that their experiences must be understood within a greater context. Their lives and histories as members of the U.S. military do not define them in their entirety, nor do those experiences necessarily create insurmountable barriers and disconnects between themselves and those who have not served. “We are all human,” said one veteran participant about whether any civilian can ever understand a

veteran’s experience. “No one can know what is inside my head, what my personal experience was,” he said, “but that doesn’t mean they can’t understand me as a person.”

His statement was a watershed moment for the group. For us, as program staff, it shed light on an essential element within the process of coming home: returning to community necessarily requires civilians at the table, too—listening, speaking, and learning from and with their fellow citizens how to build this new home where everyone has a place. This new program, which will be co-led by both a Touchstones-trained veteran and a civilian, explores a contemporary work, *Tribe, Homecoming and Belonging*, by journalist Sebastian Junger. It pairs each chapter from *Tribe* with selections from *The Odyssey*, weaving together themes of cooperation over individualism, bonds of family and group or tribe, empathy and resilience, the draw of home, and homecoming and concepts of home and trust. This program starts this fall. For more information, please email me at st@touchstones.org.



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