

Touchstones Discussion Project: “Building Community Through Discussion Everywhere”

By Charles Green

If you live in the Annapolis area, you’ve probably heard of the unusual program at St. John’s College, the “Great Books School,” where students sit around a table and talk about classic works of the Western tradition. Well, there’s a nonprofit that brings this seminar style into all sorts of different settings, from retirement communities to elementary schools and even prisons. It’s known as Touchstones Discussion Project, and it’s been extremely successful. Founded in 1984 by three tutors from St. John’s, Touchstones programs are now in more than 42 countries, and more than five million people have participated in at least one.

Originally called the “Touchstones Project,” it was started by Howard Zeiderman, Geoffrey Comber and Nick Maistrellis, all tutors (or professors) at St. John’s College. They wanted to see if they could adapt the college’s unique discussion-based style to different educational settings, and allow “all students, regardless of their economic or educational background” to learn how to think and work together. After some tinkering, they came up with a method that, with a few changes depending on the location, is practiced in every Touchstones class.

Participants read edited and selected excerpts from works of philosophy, literature, history and art. A moderator – usually a teacher or volunteer who has prepared for this role – guides the group in a discussion of the work, asking questions that help them to understand it, and discussing how its themes might be relevant to their own lives. Toward the end of each session, participants spend time analyzing their role, pointing out if they dominated the conversation, if quieter folks felt comfortable speaking up, and ways to improve the discussion. They conclude whether the discussion was a good one or not. As Executive Director Stefanie Takacs recently explained in a speech, Touchstones “teaches people how to have a discussion.”

As its website states, “the goal in all Touchstones programs is to enable every participant to be both leaders and collaborators.” As each program progresses, participants become more comfortable engaging with the material, actively listening to each other, and sharing personal stories that help them understand the works’ themes. The moderator’s role becomes less important. This

different way of learning can take some getting used to. A teacher who uses Touchstones in his classroom remarked that he once told a student who had trouble seeing the goal that “the process is the destination.”

One of Touchstones’ more unusual programs has been working with prisoners. In the mid-’90s, a group of men serving life sentences at the Maryland House of Corrections asked the project to run a program with them, with the goal of helping the prisoners prepare for productive lives before and after their release. Since then, Touchstones has run a weekly program at the correctional institute in Jessup. In 2015, Touchstones also started two weekly programs at the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women, after being invited to work with the women at the prison school. More than 175 women have participated since then. Many of these women will be released, and the hope is that, in Stephanie Takacs’ words, participating in Touchstones helps them “see education not as a threat, but as a way of improving their lives.”

Another new program is working with veterans. *Completing the Odyssey: A Journey Home* is an eight-week course in which recent and older veterans discuss excerpts from Homer’s classic work *The Odyssey* and more contemporary military stories, such as soldiers’ letters home and their poetry. They are exploring the themes of leadership, courage and loyalty, as well as discussing the challenges of transitioning to civilian life. Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, they have had three sessions so far, and participants have found it incredibly meaningful.

Through talking about the tale of Odysseus’ journey home, they can share their own stories of homecoming, and hopefully help each other.

During these fractious times, when it seems people are more divided than ever, Touchstones may be one of the best ways of bringing people together. By reading classic texts, they learn how to listen to each other, and how to talk about important things, despite their differences. Perhaps this is a way to build community. To learn more, please visit www.touchstones.org

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