



# Sometimes the best teaching is no “teaching” at all

by Terence Gilheany

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**R**ecently I was invited to speak about my sabbatical year in Jerusalem to the eighth grade World Religions class of our neighboring St. Anne’s Episcopal School. The class was scheduled to end just as my own VI Form ethics class was to begin. I thus did not know exactly when I would be back on campus. Usually, a teacher would ask another teacher to cover a class they would be missing — perhaps select a video to show, or give students additional reading to do during that time. I chose, however, to ask my students to run the class themselves.

Often, I begin my ethics classes by polling them on a challenging question arising from our reading. This time, I emailed the class in advance with the poll question, which happened to be, “How heavily should we weight the good of future generations vs. the good of our own?” I also suggested several more prompts for additional class discussion, and left it at that.

As it turned out, I was able to return only about ten minutes into class. When I poked my head in, the students were listening attentively to a peer. I asked, “May I come in?” Several students nodded, and added, “You need to be quiet — you don’t have the speaking stick.” I noticed the student who had been speaking held three markers connected together. That must be the speaking stick.

I settled into a chair on the side of the room. The student resumed speaking, making a subtle point about the issue under discussion. Several hands went up, the speaking stick was passed,

and the analysis continued. I did not speak the entire period, but every student spoke at least twice, I noticed. Afterwards, I heard about the beginning of class. Immediately after the poll, everyone had broken out in a raucous debate, and they quickly agreed that a moderating method would be preferable.

Given the portrayal of adolescents in our culture, one might have expected that I would be surprised by this turn of events. I, however, while pleased, was not surprised. These students have been genuinely engaged in our course’s questions throughout the year. They have, I suspect, been developing their skills as independent learners throughout their St. Andrew’s School careers and, for some, before they came to our School. There is undeniably a place for active teaching, for a teacher sharing his perspective, asking a series of follow-up questions, or splitting students into conversation pairs. With dedicated scholars, however, sometimes the best approach can be to provide them with resources and get out of their way. Sometimes the best teaching is no “teaching” at all. ❖

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