



On Engagement

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ABSTRACT

In the following article, the author reflects on the experience of engagement at a high school level, through his discovery and application of philosophical concepts to a contemporary issue, and its importance to his development as a student and person.

Every interest needs a beginning, and luckily I found all I needed packaged for me between junior high and high school. My interest in philosophy was greatly helped along by teachers who took time to either prompt and provoke, or continue valuable conversations started in class. This came in all forms. My Grade 7 woodshop teacher, Mr. Beckett, talked about the foundations of scientific knowledge while I worked through technical drawings. In Grade 8, my English teacher, Mr. Taylor, kept me after class to talk about various philosophical revelations that have occurred in his life. Lastly, my Grade 11 epistemology teacher, Mr. Duncan, took time after class (even after I had finished his course) to debate and explain what he had taught me.

Although all three were very different people with very different messages, two essential factors may be drawn from their approaches which I believe made the difference to my education: discourse and personal attention. The first I believe was essential as it strengthened my ability to debate and see multiple sides to an issue, critical both to analytic and philosophical thinking. The second fostered my sense of purpose and gave me a better insight into what I was being taught, which made philosophy personally relevant to me. This good start, combined with having the

opportunity to write a major research paper as part of the International Baccalaureate program, and a social climate conducive to study of contemporary issues firmly secured this subject as my academic passion.

While searching for an area of philosophy to research, my teacher Mr. Duncan brought to my attention an article in the *Ottawa Citizen* discussing the problems of multiculturalism, linking it to postmodern philosophy. Bringing an article to show to me was not uncommon for Mr. Duncan, as this was one of his preferred ways of initiating a lesson, and this article was particularly interesting. It brought the dangers, as well as the impact, of philosophical ideas to my attention and made real to me the reasons for studying them, as areas of philosophy, postmodernism/poststructuralism are notoriously difficult to gain grounding in. Moreover, Derrida (who was to become the focus of my essay) has a fascinating, but extremely lengthy way of conveying his ideas. At first, I found the obstacles that came along with writing the paper to be intense, but, with time, I became better versed in the subject.

My first serious plunge into a university library provided me with many interesting books offering interpretations on the original works. These allowed me to gain a sense of the differing opinions on each man's works, and provided me with a guide to understanding their philosophical impact. Then, after these initial difficulties, the skills I gained in my studies started to become relevant in my other courses. Not only was it helpful to acquire a deep understanding of a major social system and the theories governing it, but the philosophical ideas I learned through my work also allowed me to evaluate works of literature more intelligently, assess political and historical events with greater insight, and gave me cause to redouble my efforts in French class, as a better knowledge of the language helped me understand, and read, Derrida's writings, and vice versa.

Although some interests, while intense at first, tend to fade over a period of time—this was not one of them. With every passing day I became more engrossed in my subject, and from it my interests branched out into other disciplines. After studying one day in the library, I came across a book that captivated me and made me appreciate the relationship between mathematics and philosophy much better. This led me to take courses in calculus and to teach myself about other topics of interest that I pursued in my spare time. This interest in mathematics allowed me to perform better, and in a complementary fashion, enjoy my science courses, making my work that much easier throughout my senior year. In time my initial passion to spread to other academic areas, causing me not only to value my education more, but also to appreciate the importance of each subject individually, as well as in relation to all

others. Once I was able to recognize the value of these works for studying multiculturalism, my interest became a part of my identity and my understanding of the world.

So then, I have obviously touted the successes of this particular project in my life, but what does that matter in a larger sense, to those who are interested in student engagement? Perhaps some importance may be attributed to the need for the different approaches that can enhance engagement, or that indeed students can/do care about their education, and that it affects them profoundly when they become captivated by an area of study. There are several other factors that I stress in order of importance. Though one may take any number of measures in attempting to engage another, there are a few prerequisites that aid the process. First, the work must be relevant to each student's learning. Whether this is achieved through the application of theory, or as simply as Mr. Duncan did by combing the morning paper for articles, matters not—his approach gave credence to the students' efforts; what was demanded was more than just a student product that was then converted to number grades on a paper. Second, each student must have the competencies to be able to research a topic of interest. When students realize that others have considered certain ideas is both humbling and reassuring, but it also offers students the opportunity to make a personal mark on the subject. Lastly, if there can be a last to this list, students cannot just be "accepting" of ideas and information. By simply taking what one learns for granted, the point is missed. Each student should be encouraged and able to contest another's idea or viewpoint (respectfully of course), and hopefully with some success. The independent thought and critical analysis involved are essential elements for becoming fully engaged. One cannot simply absorb knowledge and be as truly passionate as one who engages, debates, and tests the theories before accepting them. Furthermore, these kind of activities will more deeply entrench the ideas and conclusions established in each student's mind rather than simply taking them at face value.

While perhaps my experience is not a new one, nor the methods and practices I am advocating novel, there is no doubt that they can produce success—not only in the immediate and limited academic dimensions, but also in the greater goal of forming a concept of self. Through engagement, in whatever subject or activity of interest, one gains the purpose of self-determination and happiness in life, long after all things waver or fade away entirely. Moreover, this engagement is possible for everyone given the right set of circumstances.



Nicholas Araki Howell recently graduated from the International Baccalaureate program at Colonel By Secondary School in Ottawa, and is now studying at University of Toronto, Ontario. His research and future studies are concentrated in the philosophy of culture, postmodern and poststructural French theorists, and in organic chemistry, to provide a well-rounded appreciation for the world around him.