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LEANetwork
Secondary Educators

How can we effectively engage high school students in religion classes?

by Bill Leese



“wrong answer.”

While there *are* obviously right answers and wrong answers in all disciplines, inquiry-based teaching guides the discovery so that students develop higher order reasoning with greater personal integration and analysis. The added challenge with religion is the fact that our biblical heritage does have truths to affirm. However, religious teaching method need not be merely proclamatory. In fact, teaching students to simply parrot back the correct answer does the Christian faith an injustice by ignoring the biblical heritage of learning through struggle. (See the Psalms or Rabbinic instruction method for such evidence.) For ideas on creating a culture of thinking and inquiry, consider *Intellectual Character* by Ron Ritchart. Also, see other resources at [Project Zero](#) at Harvard.

Effective learning is “socially constructed” (including collaboration as a learning community) and “individually integrated” (in metacognition through self reflection). The Understanding by Design® curriculum planning process facilitates student understanding and not merely the transmission of information. (Here is a wealth of UbD [resources](#) or visit [www.ascd.org](#)). Such emphasis on inquiry naturally leads to themes such as the relationships between science and religion, faith and reason, peace and justice, conflict and reconciliation – all units embedded in religion and other humanities courses at HKIS.

Relevancy

As “required” courses in Lutheran high school curriculum, religion classes need not be merely “endured” by students. Hong Kong International School’s mission states we are “grounded in the Christian faith respecting the spiritual lives of all.” Within this vision, we strive to craft religion courses that are intellectually engaging, culturally and personally relevant, and experiential.

Big Ideas

Our religion classes begin with “first order essential questions” which help to establish a climate of intellectual curiosity. Questions like “what are life and death all about?” and “what is truth?” give the course an exploratory nature. Inquiry-based learning honors the process over the product such that covering material is not as important as uncovering questions, some of which the students generate themselves. Such a learning environment validates every student’s contribution and does not simply condemn the

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Skeptics become

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Review, Reflect, Resolve

While the author’s ministry is at an international school in China, how does his experience and suggestions relate to you and your student body?

Which of the strategies reported might also work for you? What needs to be done to implement it?

Links & Resources

For ideas on creating a culture of thinking and inquiry, see other resources at [Project Zero](#) at Harvard.

Find a wealth of Understanding by Design® [resources](#).

Visit [www.ascd.org](#), an educational leadership organization dedicated to advancing best practices and policies for the success of each learner.

Use resources produced by the [Biblical Literacy Project](#).

[Crossroads](#), an organization in Hong Kong, creates simulation experiences through their Global Village project, which could be a model for a Christian service organization near your school.

View a 50-meter labyrinth on the HKIS field that allows the entire student body to simultaneously engage in a “gratitude prayer walk” on [YouTube](#).

Explore interdisciplinary courses at HKIS’s [Humanities Department](#).

While building familiarity with the biblical text is important, authentic biblical literacy also probes the impact of the Bible on western history. At HKIS we have recently benefited in this regard by using resources produced by the [Biblical Literacy Project](#). We also explore the Bible's confrontational response to the hierarchical systems which oppress the poor and destroy human relationships. As students discover "Sabbath Economics" or the principles behind the Year of Jubilee or Jesus' response to the oppressive systems of the 1st Century, the biblical story comes alive with remarkable pertinence. Simply stating the Bible is relevant will do little to counter the prevailing opposite impression. Skeptics become enthusiasts of the Bible when they discover its counter-cultural voice that has and still does confront oppressive systems with a transformation message of restorative justice and hope.

Role Models

Finding Christians who are making a positive difference today also engages the skeptic. We frequently have guest speakers in our classes from Hong Kong or those passing through who tell their stories. Local Christian service organizations can also demonstrate faith in action. One such organization in Hong Kong called [Crossroads](#) not only collects relief supplies for global crises, but also creates various simulation experiences through their Global Village project for student and adult groups in Hong Kong. This global simulation experience is being replicated around the world, as well, and could be a model for a Christian service organization near your school.

Integrate – Authenticate – Experience – Serve

At HKIS, Religion is embedded into the Humanities Department to improve our collaboration and integration. Among many benefits, this facilitates the creation of interdisciplinary courses, one of which is called "Service, Society and the Sacred." We have also developed a summer service trip to Mongolia and now another to Rwanda which, in part, satisfies religion credit. These and other interdisciplinary courses can be explored at our [Humanities Department](#). Through service learning, studying both the cultural and spiritual dimensions of compassion along with the experience itself in the students' spiritual lives and worldview are transformed.

Service can also be done on-campus. Our religion courses rotate with planning school-wide "Community Gatherings" (chapel-like events). These highly participatory, student-designed events integrate a biblical concept/story with the yearlong Community Gathering theme. For example, during Fall 2010 a world religion course built a 50-meter labyrinth on our field for the entire student body to simultaneously engage in a "gratitude prayer walk." (You can view this experience on [YouTube](#).) As part of the unit studying the Jewish history of "wilderness journeys," in gratitude for God's blessings amidst life's challenges, our student planners gained an entirely new appreciation for Jewish people by creating a meaningful event for their peers.

Teaching Digital Natives

Effectively teaching religion recognizes that "digital natives" learn differently from previous generations of learners. So long as they serve as a means, not the end, religion courses benefit from meaningful use of blogs, googledocs, wikis, twitter, realtime interaction, as well as film, documentaries, shorts, and music. For example, HKIS offers a religion course called "Biblical Themes in Film." For one resource among many on how to explore faith through film, visit [Reel Faith](#). [TED talks](#) are frequent tools in our Humanities courses to stimulate thinking and dialogue.

While the tools of technology have become common for the "digital native," research shows they tend to struggle with thoughtful reflection. Well-crafted religion classes can naturally serve to experience such practices as meditation to help students develop personal disciplines to help counter the potential numbing effect of the world wide web. We also find it valuable for students to write an essay to carefully articulate views on God and spirituality.

Spiritual Journey

Besides their technologies fluency, today's learners are accomplished at multi-tasking and non-linear thinking. They are adventurous and take risks, yet are still surprisingly willing to explore their own spirituality. A new study published in early 2011 gives encouraging evidence that today's college students will actively explore spirituality. (See *Cultivating the Spirit How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives* by Astin, Astin and Lindholm.) The study states that amidst their diverse backgrounds "students share many common hopes, concerns, passions, dreams and responsibilities within the essence of their humanity. They also ask the same existential questions of their humanity." (p. 27) An effective religious education in high school will promote students' preparation for a meaningful young adult spiritual quest, especially with the ability to self reflect, and engage in meaningful service to others.

William Leese is teacher and Spiritual Life Coordinator of the High School at Hong Kong International School. William is the 2011 LEA Distinguished Secondary Educator.

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Astin, Alexander W., Helen S. Astin, Jennifer A. Lindholm. *Cultivating the Spirit How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 2011.

enthusiasts of the Bible when they discover its counter-cultural voice that has and still does confront oppressive systems with a transformation message of restorative justice and hope.

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[Planning for a 1:1 Environment by Sharon Wallace \(LEADnet\)](#)

[Extreme Challenges, Extreme Blessings by Krista Nagy \(GLEnet\)](#)

Johnston, Robert K. *Reel Spirituality*. Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, 2003.

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Roncace, Mark, Patrick Gray. *Teaching the Bible: Practical Strategies for Classroom Instruction*. Society of Biblical Literature: Atlanta, 2005

Photos by Robin Hillert, a senior at Walther Lutheran High School, Melrose Park, Illinois.



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