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INTRODUCTION

Teachable Moments began for me in the autumn of 1970. I was a first-year teacher, attending my first in-service. The presenter, Dr. Max Jones, seemed to be saying something quite profound.

I remained guarded since most of the other teachers displayed no more interest than at any other in-service meeting (I'm inclined to believe, now, the reason for this apparent lack of interest derived from the disarming simplicity of what was being said). I may not have appeared enthusiastic, but I knew a seed was being planted. This seed has grown into the knowledge that learning works better, transfers better, and impacts more profoundly when connected with the circumstances and situations of real life.

There is a saying that when the student is ready, the teacher will appear. Unfortunately, it is too often the case today that the teacher has predetermined what is to be learnt, and the student had better be ready to learn it, without any explanation as to the relevance of the subject to the student's life.

Teachable Moments may turn our ideas on teaching and learning upside down. It is student-oriented. It moves us into the students' world and challenges us to teach from there. The students' world is the primary and ultimate source of learning. If this is the case, then students must learn to be responsible for their own learning. It is our job to meet them there.

Teachable Moments is about process, not product. I have used some of these activities for thirty years. They are always fresh, as each moment is fresh. They are always evolving.

Dr. Jones was a world-renowned psychiatrist. He had worked with the patients at a Scottish mental institution and had shown them how they could learn from their environment, grow with it, and transform it. His efforts were so successful that by the end of his tenure, patients worked side-by-side with staff in hospital administration. He helped derelicts in London learn to live effectively on the street while staying out of trouble, but he failed in his attempt to make American schools more



WHEN EXPERTS DISAGREE

Suppose we disagree on a subject – reforming health care, or maintaining a healthy diet. Chances are, no matter what view each of us holds, in today’s world one can find an expert to support that position.

WHEN EXPERTS DISAGREE

The fact that experts disagree has been a bonus to high school debaters and other contentious folk. It can, however, create some real discomfort for people who hope someone can tell them the one right way to think about issues. In an age of exploding information and complex global problems, a responsible adult needs to help the next generation learn to appreciate expertise as a useful resource in decision-making. And since experts will always disagree, a teacher needs to help students gain confidence in their ability to finally select their own point of view from conflicting opinions.

I came across an article about chess experts, in which an expert was defined as someone with an unusual skill level, knowledge base, and response time to a situation or task. It occurred to me that we often get confused about the role experts play in our society – treating them as the final authority who should produce a magic ‘right answer’ or, even worse, as the source of support for preconceived opinions or ideologies. If I’m trying to win a chess match, consulting an expert might be helpful. If I want to prepare a luscious banquet, I’d do well to find an expert chef.

However, when we start dealing with complex global problems, such recourse to experts can be dangerous. No single individual is going to solve the world hunger problem; there is no one expert who can bring peace to the troubled regions of the globe. In addressing global problems the experts serve us by providing information and recommended options. They offer alternative perspectives on the issue that come from the expert’s experience, specialised knowledge, and often the full-time commitment required to delve into a complex problem.

So what do we need to teach the next generation about experts? We need to teach them to value and make use of the unique perspective an expert can bring to the study of global issues. Students need to not expect an answer from an expert. They need to learn to be cautious when an expert is presented as one who can justify a single viewpoint rather than as one who can enrich the debate. And students need to build confidence in their own abilities to understand and make decisions about the role experts should play in dealing with global problems.



TO HELP STUDENTS (OR ANYONE) PRACTISE DEALING WELL WITH EXPERTS:

LESSON 1

- Pick a topic of interest and then have students brainstorm a large list of experts that could be consulted. Then have each student pick five or ten that they would consult and have them explain their reasons. Also talk about the reasons for not consulting those whom everyone omitted.
- Pick an issue – euthanasia and abortion are favourites. Have the students find opinions from two experts who disagree.
- A good way to help students gain a perspective on expertise is to survey the class to find out the kinds of expertise various students have available. You may be amazed to find rock hounds, competitive bikers, and budding botanists in the most unexpected corners of your room.

