Teacher Profile:
Engagement Through Essential Questions

by Ben Panzeca '16

The dynamic between teacher and student is one that is as impactful as it is unique. A weak relationship with a teacher can send a student careening into a world of stress, while a positive one can truly change their life. I can personally attest that my teachers have had a significant positive effect on my life academically, socially, and spiritually. I am happy to say that for me, CHCA became a place of positive educational reinforcement very quickly, widely due to the faculty. I give a lot of credit to many of my teachers for the positive impact they had on my school years, each step of the way.

One of the many CHCA teachers doing wonderful work in the classroom is Grade 8 Christian Studies teacher, Mr. Jared Treadway. For the past nine years, he has been a shining example of what makes CHCA such a special place to learn. While being at a school that strives to be Christ-centered in every way, Jared has established his classroom as a home for challenging thoughts and ideas. He arrived in 2007, as he was finishing his degree at Hebrew Union College. I spent some time asking Mr. Treadway about his work at CHCA, classroom philosophy, and the "essential questions" that have made a lasting impression on his students.

B: How/when did you become employed at CHCA?

J: I was finishing up my degree at Hebrew Union College when Suella Slemmons, a former teacher at CHCA, recommended that I apply. This was in 2007.

B: What were your initial impressions of the school?

J: I loved it. I enjoyed the professionalism of my co-workers, the high caliber of the students, and the Christ-centered focus of the school in general. I feel I discovered my calling in life when I found CHCA.

B: What was your classroom philosophy coming into CHCA?

J: Most of my teaching experience had been as a youth pastor or as a graduate assistant, so I had to formulate a philosophy as I went along. I started with a desire for my students to know God better, to become more spiritually grounded, and to have a better understanding of orthodox Christian doctrine. These are all still goals of mine each year.

B: How has it changed since?

J: As I gained more experience, I discovered that many students lacked a basic ability to think through their beliefs. They most simply parroted without conviction what their parents, church, or former teachers had told them to believe. These were usually "good" beliefs, but they weren't owned by the students themselves. Many knew what to think, but how to think was something that eluded them. Since most 8th graders are at an age where they are questioning everything anyway (including authority), I attempted to harness this adolescent momentum and channel it into analytical thinking. This is precisely what Socrates did in Athens 400 years before Christ. Jesus himself helped his potential followers to understand that the legalistic rut many had fallen into needed to be rethought and understood from a more compassionate point of view. In my class, we take a step back from indoctrination and look at the bigger context of reality and how our faith fits into real life. Students really dig, being able to discuss "deep" questions without being chastised, preached at, or otherwise made to feel small. My class is a safe place to explore big questions, and I encourage them to do the same thing at home with their parents.

B: What do you consider to be the most valuable thing you try to teach to your students?

J: Following the example of Jesus is what will truly save the world. Love, humility, and compassion are often overlooked as the primary elements of what it means to be a Christian. When we read Carl Sagan's essay, "The Pale Blue Dot", we see our smallness in the universe, the fragility of the earth, how we are all stuck here with each other, and how hatred, pride, and war are not viable options if we want to survive. When we learn to listen to each other, we understand that we may not always be right, and when we put ourselves in the other person's shoes (empathy), we see how much our thinking is egocentric ("I am always right") or sociocentric ("my group is always right"). Being aware of these tendencies in our thought-processes is the first step to critical thinking, and critical thinking tempered by love, empathy, and compassion is what will ultimately alleviate human suffering in the world. This is what Christians should be best at.

B: What is the importance of the essential questions that you and your class create and examine?

J: God is not afraid of our questions. In fact, just like many parents, He probably gets irritated when we don't use our minds to their fullest potential! We are, after all, made in his image. The quality of our answers is determined by the quality of our questions. Answers are great, but they all too frequently lead to complacency and non-thinking. However, when we continually question our conclusions and ask better questions the next time around, we can make our understanding of the truth even better. If Copernicus and Galileo had simply accepted the status quo of Ptolemaic astronomy, how much longer would we have believed in a geocentric universe? If Martin Luther hadn't questioned the abuses of certain theological ideas, how much longer would the poor peasants have been exploited economically and spiritually? If Paul had not questioned the prevailing notion that only Jews could be children of God, how many Gentiles would have perished? Reexamining and rethinking our ideas is vital to our understanding of the truth. So, to answer your question, I encourage students to practice asking essential questions by examining the ideas found in famous aphorisms. We look at these quotes from as many different angles as we can. No author gets a free pass. No student gets a free pass. I don't even get a free pass! We learn to listen to each other, question each other, question our preconceptions, and formulate important essential questions. The dignity of our neighbor—and the value of the truth—demand at least as much. In this respect, I frequently learn as much from my students as they do from me.

B: Have there been any memorable experiences that stand out here at CHCA?

J: Too many to count. Whenever I see a student's eyes light up when they finally understand an idea or process, I get a thrill. When I see them putting together a worldview based upon the example of Jesus, I feel the hours of work have been truly worth it. When they come back to me years later talking about the ideas we discussed in Pale Blue Dot, Flatland, or Plato, I occasionally get chills. Most of the specific memorable experiences are of a non-academic nature, usually involving creative ways of waking up sleepy students, or seeing the bizarre abilities many of them have and are proud to display to their classmates. It makes our time together sweeter!

This year, Mr. Treadway's students were tasked with an exercise to create *essential questions* to be used in some school communications. Below is a sampling of some of those questions. Engage in a healthy discussion with family or friends around the dinner table tonight!

- How much evidence is needed for it to be compelling?
- Why do the people who have more knowledge need more humility?
- Why are ignorant people more confident?
- What shapes how we see reality?
- Do our biases shape our beliefs or do our beliefs shape our biases?
- Why is the way we see reality important?
- Should you still believe in something if there is nothing to back it up?
- Why do we need to learn the truth through failure and not success?
- Why do people sometimes see reality differently than you? Will we ever all see it the same way?
- Do we have to develop a world perspective in order to have peace on Earth?