

Challenging Assumptions

something that you accept as true without question or proof

Challenging Assumptions

“Staff at RGS have the right relationships with their students such that boys are prepared to question and seek clarification in an inquisitive and respectful manner”

Alex Wallace , Deputy Headmaster

It was 11 years ago when I learnt one of the most valuable lessons my life! I was teaching at a school in Oxfordshire. The position of Head of Year 7 had come up. I loved the school and felt I was a strong candidate for the role. At the time all of my colleagues and in many cases friends, told me it was a “done deal”. I made a huge mistake by assuming they were correct. I did not prepare with anywhere near the discipline that was required for such an interview. I was sloppy and foolish and I did not get the job. I was devastated, but it was one of the most important experiences of my professional career. Since that moment, I have never assumed anything is a given in my professional world. That’s not to say I have always nailed interviews since, but I have always been fully prepared.

It is often the easy option to believe the assumption. It can take courage to challenge that assumption. The person sharing the knowledge may be in a position of responsibility; a teacher or a boss. This can make it even more tricky to challenge an assumption. We hear on food adverts we should “Buy British”. This is a lovely sentiment, but do we ask why? Yes, it might help our economy and support our

farmers, but what about those farmers in Mali also trying to feed their families?

We hear about big Transnational Corporations exploiting workers in South East Asia. We assume this is the case, but with a bit of research you realise many of these companies are providing excellent opportunities for the local population.

On an even larger scale, those providing the assumptions have a great responsibility. In the 1930s to the 1950s, smoking was advertised as good for your health - "Don't be foolish, take your doctor's advice: **Smoke** a fresh cigarette." So from the 1930s to the 1950s, advertising's most powerful phrase - "doctors recommend" - was paired with the world's deadliest consumer product.

What do we need to be able to challenge assumptions? We need to have courage, we need to occasionally swim against the tide and we need to not be afraid to get it wrong. We also need the self discipline to research the topic/statement to be able to have the evidence to challenge the assumption.

It is sometimes intimidating for a person to challenge someone for a number of reasons. These include not being confident in one's own knowledge, not wishing to cause offence, not wanting to look foolish, not wanting to draw attention to oneself and even for fear of the reaction.

I think all the above applies to the classroom. Teachers at RGS are very well informed, but it is also great to be challenged by the students. Challenging an assumption does not mean being rude or showing off. Challenging an assumption can allow for greater depth of understanding and can take the conversation in the classroom to the next level. I hope the staff at RGS have the right relationships with their students so that boys are prepared to question and seek clarification in an inquisitive and respectful manner. This challenge can lead to the most rewarding part of being a teacher - you are suddenly sharing a passion, you are sharing your passion.

One of the issues that can sometimes stifle these opportunities in the classroom is the need to get through so much content in the current GCSE and A-level courses. However, we have a staff who are teaching their specialisms and I know how much they enjoy being challenged in their subjects, so much so that if a discussion spills into breaktime

or lunchtimes they won't even realise. Of course the other 30 students in the class might point out the time!

A final thought...



My introduction at the top of the article discussed my disappointment at not getting the Head of Year role in my previous school, a school I was really enjoying. However, it turned out to be the best thing that could have happened as 72 hours later I was offered a job at The Royal Grammar School, High Wycombe. Maybe it was meant to be...

For further information on the Ethos of Learning please refer to the RGS website: www.rgshw.com or Alex Wallace, Deputy Headmaster, arw@rgshw.com