

*Abstract:*

## **Enabling Authenticity: Helping students find their "true selves" through communicative and cultural imagination**

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School shooters are clearly sick individuals, in the sense that they are neither functionally adjusted within society, nor at peace with themselves. In their confusion and anxiety, they are literally dying to have their stories heard, but part of the tragedy is that these stories never get fully developed. These young people never "find themselves," and in their pain and frustration with this failed search for themselves, they lash out against those they blame this failure on, including themselves! I suggest that the best means of preventing school shootings, and other related problems, is to provide students with greater support in searching for and/or constructing viable personal identities.

Drawing on recent scholarship regarding *communicative, narrative* and *cultural imagination* and a decade's worth of personal experience as a teacher of "value subjects" and an anti-bullying program coordinator, I explore the various ways in which students come to conclusions about their personal essence and potential value. In particular, I consider proposals by David E. Engen and Elizabeth J. Tisdell for enabling students to become more aware of themselves and those around them, which these authors believe will lead to greater equity, tolerance, mutual respect and value awareness; and then I offer my own slightly contrasting approach to realizing these same goals.

Engen operates on the assumption that "reality is produced by communication;" and that through being aware of this communicative process, through identification with others' narratives, through empathizing with others' experiences and through carefully considering the effects one's communication may have on others, ethical behaviour can be developed. Tisdell, on the other hand, believes in tapping into a God-given spiritual "core essence" within each individual. She rejects religious dogmas which attempt to authoritatively define this spiritual essence, and she recognizes an infinite number of cultural variations in how this essence is experienced, but she still believes in this transcendent element within each of us. She further believes that cross-cultural exploration of this shared spiritual experience is an essential means of empowering the marginalized. As idealistically beautiful and functional as these approaches may be, however, they are based on mutually exclusive metaphysical assumptions about the nature of the human experience. Nor are these approaches the only possible meta-ethical foundations available for young people to build upon.

In teaching secondary school philosophy, religious education and social sciences, I have attempted to help students critically evaluate such metaphysical and meta-ethical assumptions, and from there to construct their own value systems which enable them both to respect themselves and relate to a world outside of their own skin. Like Engen and Tisdell, I have had very positive classroom experiences and student feedback in this endeavour. I believe that the further development of this aspect of philosophy instruction, providing a stable foundation for students' personal existential considerations, may be the best way to make our schools into safer places.