

## Tom English: From Wonder to Wisdom: Engaging Young Minds

At Christian Brothers High School in Sacramento, California, the freshmen in Tom English's world history class build the Great Wall of China across their classroom – using Legos and books. And sometimes, they rebuild it – because mysterious earthquakes wreck

emotionally, the students can move on to more challenging academic material, he believes.

Getting students engaged in a subject doesn't always require Legos. Sometimes, the tool can be as simple as the question, "Why?" Mr. English uses that tool frequently in his college-level *Introduction to Philosophy* course for seniors. Take, for example, a session on epistemology, the philosophy of knowledge.

says. "If they answer the question 'Why?', I turn around and ask it again. 'Why?' is the simplest of questions, but it's also one of the most difficult."

Students find themselves emotionally engaged and challenged to reply. "They're always looking to me for an answer, and I won't give it to them," Mr. English says. "I tell them that I'm a student just like them. I'm always learning."



*Tom English helps students prepare for their class presentations not by telling them the answers, but by asking them the questions.*

destruction overnight or because the Great Emperor of China (a.k.a. Mr. English) wants it rebuilt.

Part of the idea is to give students a feel for what life was like in the times they're studying, but another part is engagement. Projects like the Great Wall "keep them emotionally as well as intellectually involved," Mr. English says. Once they're hooked

It starts simply enough, with questions: "What do you know?" "How do you know you know?" "What can you know?" The goal is to help students develop an attitude of critical questioning, rather than easy acceptance of sensory or common sense answers.

"When they start explaining 'how they know' or 'what they think they know,' then I ask, 'How can you verify this?'" Mr. English

Allison Albericci, a recent philosophy alumnus, confirms the effectiveness of Mr. English's strategy. His class "makes you examine what you believe and try to justify that." The question, "What do you know?" pulled Allison out of her old consciousness and dropped her on new intellectual turf. "I had never asked that question," she says, "and I don't think I've answered it yet."