

Rights vs. Responsibilities: Where's the Balance in an Era of Global Citizenship?

Red-headed, and double-ear-ringed, William sports stylish glasses and a ready smile. An articulate "20-something", he teaches *Citizenship, Rights and Responsibilities* in one of Glasgow's tough, inner city public secondary schools. It's easy to imagine his popularity with teenagers, and refreshing to hear his sincere, self-reflective professionalism as he describes a classroom challenge he faced last year:

Doing his best to bring course content alive, William proposes a mock election to his class of sixteen-year-olds. Students study the platforms of all the official political parties in Britain, and any willing student can choose the party most representative of his or her political viewpoint, craft a campaign platform and describe this position in a culminating speech to classmates, followed by voting.

To William's surprise Anthony, a slight and shy teenager, expresses an interest in running on the *White National Party* or WNP ticket. William describes the WNP as an extreme, conservative political party, historically white supremacist, and a bastion for the violent Skinhead street gang movement within Britain. The party's beliefs run completely counter to William's vision of a flourishing and humane global society. William observes that young Anthony, something of a loner at school, is completely earnest about the WNP and quite knowledgeable of its political agenda. William suspects that Anthony's viewpoint derives from and mirrors his parents'.

Analysis

Anthony's request throws William into a profound and very real dilemma. William can certainly make a compelling case for encouraging Anthony to explore democratic notions of free speech and thought, regardless of how their political opinions diverge. After all, the point of William's course is to explore the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. But William can also make a powerful argument for talking Anthony out of his choice. Taking a stand in favor of white supremacy in this racially and ethnically diverse, impoverished neighborhood could lead to unpredictable, violent outbursts well beyond the classroom walls, where William can't guarantee Anthony's safety. While William believes it's his job to teach that each individual in a democracy has the right and the responsibility to be heard, it's also his obligation to protect his students from harm – especially a small and lonely boy not very capable of defending himself. Beyond Anthony's immediate and individual plight, William worries about the mock election backfiring. What if his young students learn that participatory democracy leads to trouble, alienation, and even physical harm? How likely will they then be to participate in democracy as adults?

Applying the "greatest good for the greatest number" approach to resolving William's dilemma might provide a convincing argument for prohibiting any activity that will lead to the endangerment of our young people. However, Immanuel Kant, and his fellow "rule-based"-problem solvers might lobby for allowing and even encouraging students to practice our democratic ideals, without presuming to predict the future consequences. Like those who drafted Britain's Magna Carta, or the U.S. Constitution, they would not allow fearful predictions about the future to get in the way of acting on principles.

Of course, when lofty idealists take pen in hand they aren't staring at the faces of trusting adolescents, whose very lives and future attitudes could depend on our decision making. What are the most compelling aspects to William's conflict in your opinion? What is the best way to resolve this dilemma, and can you articulate the moral reasoning that justifies your answer?

Note: This dilemma comes to you without their real-life resolutions. We encourage you to think for yourself about how you might resolve them, since the nature of each dilemma is highly individualistic. In sharing these dilemmas, we do not endorse them in any way, but rather offer them for your consideration.