

## Independent School Teaching

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In a scene from Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, Sir Thomas More, in his newly gained status as Lord Chancellor, finds himself pursued by petitioners offering him gifts and pleas for patronage and he retreats to his estate. Upon alighting from the boat that returned him home along the river Thames, a former student of his, Richard Rich, approaches him and begs for a position at court. A weary More, seeing the hunger and ambition in his student's eyes, warns him away from the seductions of court, money and power that constantly threaten to corrupt even the honest man. Instead he advises Rich to become a teacher. Rich looks at him incredulously. Give up wealth, power, status, privilege? I know that look. I have seen that look. And yet here I am offering similar advice to you. Consider teaching in independent schools. There is more to it than one might think.

When I speak of independent schools, I refer to schools that are members of the National Association of Independent Schools (N.A.I.S.). There are affiliated regional accrediting organizations such as the Connecticut Association of Independent Schools (C.A.I.S.) or the Pacific N.W. Association (P.N.A.I.S.). Unlike public or parochial schools, each school is self-governing according to a mission statement and each one designs its own curriculum. These include many well-known Quaker and Episcopal boarding schools, country day schools, as well as many private schools.

In human terms independent school teaching can be demanding and rewarding personally and intellectually. In independent school teaching the job of teaching students stands front and center. No state-mandated exams, no need to publish, nor win research grants. In independent schools teachers are directly accountable to the people in the community: students, parents, colleagues. Independent school teachers create the curriculum in an effort to respond directly to the needs of the community, and in well-run schools all the constituencies work together to support teaching, and parents, administrators, trustees, teachers and students cooperate rather than compete. Independent school education is often simply too expensive to be done poorly. The product won't sell if it doesn't deliver. Although daunting, this kind of market pressure helps to encourage good teaching, which is the heart (and bread and butter) of every independent school. Because contracts are generally written for a year at a time (to take into consideration the uncertainties of enrollment) there is rarely anything approaching tenure. But talented teachers are in high demand, understandably, and whereas the average school experiences a natural turnover rate somewhere between 10%-20% a year, the job market is more fluid and more stable. There is, as a consequence, the possibility of greater mobility (as compared to the academic job market) once a person has broken into the independent school world.

At the outset, one of the biggest challenges graduate students face when contemplating independent school teaching is overcoming the culture of higher education that values research over teaching and publishing over all else. In such a culture the challenge is overcoming one's own sense that teaching at a high school would represent a demotion or a shying away from the more difficult, competitive world of scholarship. Teaching is hard enough without having to maintain one's sense that there are more important things to be doing or more happening places to be than in a classroom working with high school or even, God forbid, middle school students.

The professional feats I learned to respect while at U.Va. involved me performing my own erudition and intellectual abilities. I was trained to design marketable courses, write remarkable articles, research a groundbreaking dissertation, and prepare to turn it into a book contract. Along the way, teaching was a necessary evil (rent money) at worst and a pleasant distraction at best. But I was aware of the pity professors had for the grad student who dedicated more time to teaching than research (poor sap, must not have a knack for research after all). How many stories did we hear about award-winning teaching professors who failed to get tenure? (They didn't publish enough and disappeared.) One looked to the left and looked to the right and wondered, would I be one of those who showed the right stuff, or would I be one of the ones who dropped out ignominiously. That was the atmosphere to consider: teaching in high school was tantamount to admitting failure and inadequacy.

Indeed, when I began to speak of moving away from the academic job market and realm of post-doctoral peregrinations, my friends and colleagues looked at me with alarm if not horror and beseeched me not to despair. Hold on, don't lose hope! To imagine teaching at a high school was an act of desperation only a madman deranged by pessimism would contemplate. Think of the loss of social status. Besides, what academic didn't recoil in horror at the thought of returning to the nightmare of high school social politics? Teaching in an independent school required an act of apostasy, a shift away from the values inculcated by the academic guild. It required a different way of thinking about oneself as a scholar? a redefinition of my ego. Teaching would not be about what I could perform; it would be about what my students could do.

As a teacher one does not perform one's own specialized knowledge; a teacher helps the student take center stage. So by deciding to teach I was, in a sense, ceasing to see myself as a performer and a producer of new knowledge as

such. Instead I was opting to encourage others to experience the joy of learning and discovering the world of scholarship. Teaching at an independent school has drawn on my academic background and research, but has required me to step down off the stage, so to speak, stop performing, and help cultivate the students' powers and performances. My courses focus on the activity of history: students learn what it means to experience the exhilaration of research and the detective work of tracking down a topic of interest; my students learn to question testimony and interrogate sources and find a way to put the pieces together into a larger report to their peers. The point is not to show them what I know or have them digest my conclusions and findings, but to help them learn how to learn by diving in and trying it out for themselves. My job is to be the adult to reassure them and offer suggestions, not to be the all-knowing sage.

Teaching my students to become more articulate thinkers now means pushing them to learn about the things of their world. Unlike the cozy certainties of a lecture, when dealing with my students' interests and ideas I am faced with never knowing in advance quite what they will say or choose to investigate. My job has become about helping teenagers construe and present their ideas and their experiences. My career is not about performing for an audience or seeking approval or accolades. It is not about becoming an expert with specialized knowledge and authority due to my publication record. In that sense I have graduated and can turn my attentions to the next generation,

Certainly?there are many avenues and venues for teaching, and I respect those who seek the tenured tracks, but I, for one, found that the academic job market was inhospitable and offered little incentive for or appreciation of the human qualities that make people good teachers. I have found the path of teaching continually challenging and stimulating, and I have learned from experienced colleagues ways to help students become more independent as thinkers and writers. I have learned about crafting clearly-defined assignments and thought-provoking assessments. In the end, every student is different, every class takes on a different dynamic, and to stay fresh a teacher has to keep adapting and finding ways to respond to the needs and interests of one's students.

Although it is hard to quantify, teaching has also been a broadening educational experience for me. I sometimes describe it as applied vs. theoretical pragmatics. Teaching at an independent school integrates many aspects of my background and training. When speaking to an advisee or his parents about adolescent development, I find myself appreciating Leibniz's philosophy of freedom or Marx's theory of alienation. Studying institutional politics provided me perspective during faculty meetings. Foucault's interrogations of power, or Gadamer's arguments concerning legitimate authority were all the more pressing when confronting naturally rebellious teenagers.

In the days and weeks after September 11th, 2001, I never for a moment wondered why I was doing my job. The more the world threatened to fall apart the more those students needed adults around them to offer support and to facilitate and guide their need to talk and find fellowship with each other. As the country recoiled in fear, I drew heavily on my background in Enlightenment political theory to remind people of their better selves, lest they opted to trade the promise of security for the prerogatives of freedom.

Working with students has brought me in contact with people of all ages, something I missed while working in academia. It also has meant, in my case, being able to choose among many interesting urban environments where independent schools are located. And given the relative portability of the independent school teaching experience, it can lead to a more flexible career path. After three years in Albany New York, for example, my partner and I were able to find jobs in a city of our choosing (Portland, Oregon) teaching together at the same school: our offices are now located across the hall from each other (he teaches English). If only academia offered such mobility?but such are the dues of tenure.

I understand the attraction of academia, the power and prestige of it all, the rush one gets from contemplating performing excellence and becoming the expert, and the promises of meritocracy and scientific progress, and yet, as with many seductions, the lure of Academia's Siren's song does nothing to diminish its hazards. As I heard it said well once, "You can't eat prestige." As you imagine your future, look to institutions that welcome you and treat you well, and look for a career that allows you to integrate the many aspects of your liberal arts education. The liberal arts represent traditions and literature, skills and values that need to be passed on. Thomas More knew well the world of power and its compromises and pitfalls and his advice, though simple, was heartfelt, and even a little wistful: "Be a teacher."