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The benefits of working in an independent K-12 school as a Ph.D. grad (opinion)

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I made the decision to stop looking for academic jobs several years ago. It had been a long four years of trying, complete with a few close calls and lots of assurances that something, someday would work out. But it never did, and I'd grown tired of waiting.

My wife's career was taking off a lot faster than mine, and by the time the job season rolled around again, we had a child on the way and all the shifting priorities that come along with a growing family. I actually ran two searches my last time on the market -- one for tenure-track English jobs, one for teaching at independent schools. I applied to roughly 100 academic jobs over the course of four years and wound up empty-handed.

Owing to some generous help from friends and a healthy dose of serendipity, it took only 10 applications to get an offer from an independent school. I am now in the third year of my new career, having traded seminars and workshops for writing exercises, recess duty and regular professional training. I still remember the sinking feeling that I got when I found out that the last academic job I was up for would go to someone else, but it's hard to believe that I once invested so much in a field that was obviously not going to work out for me.

For those of you in somewhat similar situations, I offer some thoughts on my postacademic -- or post-higher education -- life.

Teaching can be fun. I always liked teaching and thought it was a valuable part of my fledgling academic career. Only from the outside, though, have I realized how difficult it can be to really invest in teaching in a university setting. In this age of intense competition for rankings and the focus on research, our

higher education system doesn't do much to incentivize being good at this most fundamental of professional tasks.

But at my current institution, the environment couldn't be more different. Everyone is motivated to be an excellent teacher, and we get all the resources we need to do our best in the classroom. In my five years of teaching at the university level, I was observed no more than three or four times. At my current job, hardly a week goes by when a colleague isn't sitting off to the side, taking notes and figuring out what we can do better.

We also have regular access to professional development funds well in excess of what I would have received as a junior faculty member at most universities, in addition to an abundance of colleagues who are always interested in collaborating on projects, developing new courses or just sharing ideas. As a consequence, I've started enjoying teaching more than ever.

In part, this transformation is because, with no research requirements and a reasonable teaching load, I finally have the time and the energy to really focus on getting good at it. But it's also because I'm in an environment where successes in the classroom -- even small ones, and sometimes especially the small ones -- are prioritized, celebrated and built upon every day.

The Ph.D. has value. No one ever asked me about my dissertation topic or my publications when I was interviewing with high schools, nor were they concerned with the courses that I taught at the college level. But that's not to say that I wasted my time in graduate school. If your goal is teaching in an independent school, a Ph.D. program might not be the best use of your time. That said, I make use of the knowledge and skills I gained throughout my graduate studies every day.

First of all, you accumulate an immense amount of learning in the course of all the teaching and research that goes into a humanities Ph.D., not to mention a facility in making it accessible to people who aren't experts in your field. When people ask, "How would you teach *Things Fall Apart*?" or "What book could I use to help students think about revolutions?" I almost always have something useful in mind.

The Ph.D. has helped me in a lot of other ways, as well. Have you developed and taught a new course? Presented at a national conference? Undergone the rigors of an academic job talk Q&A? Those are all tasks that have important corollaries in the world of K-12 education. And then there were also the three years I spent alongside my wife as a dorm parent at our university, a role in which we ran community events, mentored our students and responded to the innumerable crises that define contemporary late adolescence. As a college teacher, it's easy to slip into the fiction that your job is solely about developing young minds, especially if you're at an elite private university. In a middle or high school setting, ignoring the social and emotional foundations of intellectual development is the road to perdition. In hindsight, taking on the college housing job was one of the best career decisions I ever made.

It's a culture shock. One thing I learned quickly in my new role is that while academics often get called out for using incomprehensible jargon, teachers also have more than their share of technical terms. It didn't take more than a few weeks into the first school year for me to start incorporating them, almost unwittingly, into my daily vocabulary. I casually refer to "unpacking" an experience, or "sharing out," or "tuning a lesson," all of which my former self would have greeted with skepticism, to say the least.

Other forms of teacher jargon have been harder to digest, though, and this is where I've had to actively constrain my deeply ingrained academic inclination toward cynicism. "Design thinking" is everywhere in K-12 education these days, even though what passes for design thinking is mostly unrecognizable to people who work in design. "Impact" and "reform" and "change" are also on everyone's lips, even though most of them just seem to me like fancy ways of not talking about poverty.

I learned very quickly to identify that sinking sense of frustration that comes when confronted with those and other educational terms of art, but most important, I also learned how to hold back my knee-jerk skepticism and listen to what my colleagues were actually saying. Used rightly, the critical powers so carefully honed by a humanities Ph.D. can be a powerful tool in the K-12 world. However, when you're trying to keep a bunch of seventh graders on track, so can design thinking's emphasis on hands-on, student-led inquiry.

Academe trained me to think that everything was nonsense until you can show that it isn't. K-12 education has taught me that, approached critically, what might sound like nonsense can help you do important work, too.

You gain a whole life. My last two years in academe seemed ideal, at least for me. I was busy, but I still managed to write and publish and make progress on my book project while doing other things that I enjoyed. But after a while -- especially after the birth of our daughter -- it became obvious that actually getting a tenure-track offer would mean letting go of a lot of what I enjoyed and taking on a lot of what I didn't. Needless to say, such tensions are almost nonexistent in the present version of my life. I wake up and go to work, teach my classes, go to meetings, meet with students, do some events, and then I go home. Rarely does work come with me. My nights, weekends and summers (summers!) are mine to spend reading and writing, riding my bicycle, or exploring the woods with my wife and daughter and dog.

Sure, I don't get to teach my favorite books anymore, at least not with any regularity. But I did get to teach freshmen about the history and theory of horror movies this year, and my scholarly work continues in some ways, too. It's not what I thought I'd be doing five years ago, and it took a while to come to terms with the fact that my career was not going to be the one for which I had planned. But if the past few years have taught me anything, it's that the life I have now is the life I really wanted all along.

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