

THE PRACTICE OF A PEDAGOGUE

‘I’m training to be a history teacher.’ Raised eyebrows greet my answer, making me feel as if I’m appearing on the Jerry Springer show. For some reason, the thought of being a teacher fills most of my friends with dread.

‘Are you at Homerton then?’ Aaah, the omnipresent question to PGCE (Post Graduate Certificate of Education) students. I explain that while Homerton is one of the Faculty of Education sites, I’m a member of Emmanuel College, and have been since I matriculated in 1999 to study history. I’d always been interested in pursuing a career in teaching, but had kept it on the backburner while I got other dreams out of my system. I had grown weary of being educated solidly since the age of five, and the thought of an intense year of teacher-training had me running for the hills. However, event management lost its glamour as the promise of schmoozing with the rich and the beautiful lost out to lugging Giant Jenga into the Old Library. Being a buyer for HMV also lost its trendy charm as I found that the key to success lay in predicting when artists were going to die, and being prepared with a large pile of ‘Best Of’ compilations ready to sell to the mourning public.

It was thus with a range of eclectic work experience behind me that I embarked on the one-year course at Cambridge, returning to the dreamy spires of Emmanuel for one final burst of academia. What little I knew of the choppy seas ahead. Despite warnings of ‘the hardest you’ll ever work’ and ‘it’s hell: don’t do it’, I have now managed to emerge from the fires of PGCE as a fully-forged NQT (Newly Qualified Teacher), although I’m sure I’ve still got much to learn! The course is divided into two distinct sections: the theory and the practice. The study of child psychology and the different stages of motivation, combined with subject-specific workshops and lectures, take up three days a week for the first term, while the remaining two are spent in school. The plan is for you to be eased into the role of a classroom teacher, although I’m sure that there’s no sure-fire way of ensuring a smooth entry. My first full-class experience saw me crashing into a Year 10 GCSE class with pictures of the bubonic plague and origami booklets. Looking back on my early lesson plans, learning objectives and evaluations, I only hope that I didn’t do too much damage to the futures of the young things I was let loose in front of!

Being a trainee from Cambridge has also met with mixed responses from colleagues in school. There is little argument that this PGCE course is one of the best in the country, but also doing my BA here perhaps placed extra pressure on me to perform. In particular, the ‘topic’-based approach

of the History BA often means that graduates have huge gaps in their general historical knowledge although they may be an expert in certain fields. This, however, is nothing that a Cambridge-style midnight cramming session and a cup of strong coffee cannot solve.

Broad subject knowledge is, without a doubt, one of the greatest concerns for any teacher trainee. For history in particular it is a vital part of the job, but also something that is prone to being scuppered by your placement school's schemes of work. Teaching yourself the history of Native Americans or the progress of Medicine Through Time prior to teaching it to a class of 30 adolescents is quite a challenge. Combine this with the initial hope that you can concurrently maintain living the 'student lifestyle' and you can guarantee to be in bed with exhaustion by Christmas.

But all this must be set against what has been a thoroughly exciting and rewarding year. I'll leave Cambridge for the final time with some incredibly joyful memories of this year's training, prior to beginning a full-time job as a history teacher at a comprehensive school in Guildford. I hope that my own educational experiences will encourage my students to aim for the best in their own achievements, whatever these might be. If it includes them opting to take history through their time at school, that can only be a bonus.

'But what are your kids like?' people ask. I can only respond by saying that they are all remarkable in their own special ways. My training has seen me teach at comprehensive schools in Huntingdon, north of Cambridge, for the first term and Braintree in Essex for the other two. Whether for bad or worse, there are many students that I will remember for a long time to come.

Perhaps the greatest bunch of young people I had the pleasure to teach was a Year 11 class, shortly before they left to sit their GCSEs. Some were 'difficult' in terms of their behaviour and attitude, but were all thoroughly good fun and keen to learn: as long as they saw the point in learning. I'm sure that every teacher has their own stories of turning the unmotivated into rigorous academic animals, and with 11C I experienced mine. The proof, of course, will be in the pudding of their results, but their attitude and enthusiasm in class suggested that something positive was happening in the room. I felt like hugging every single one of them when they did some breathtaking work on the day my subject lecturer came in to observe me. The downside, of course, is that my lecturer was caught up in traffic and so actually missed this great lesson, witnessing instead a shambles of a study on interpretations of the Gunpowder Plot!

The other events and people to remember are the soap opera characters! The Year 8 pupil who thought that his ride in the lift at the Science Museum had triggered a fire alarm that led to a full-scale evacuation of the building is a particular favourite. Moreover, the time I was offered the chance to buy eggs by a Year 9 boy who had 'borrowed' some chickens from his neighbours will be long-remembered. Or perhaps one of the outgoing Year 11 guys who turned up to the leaver's prom in the back of an ice-cream van playing The Ride of the Valkyries on its chimes.

I'm particularly fond of the Year 7 form with whom I've been working as a form tutor. When told by their usual form tutor that I would be leaving soon and that I should be 'thanked appropriately', one of the boys asked what that meant. Another shouted out, 'It means we need to buy him a present, moron'. My pointed finger and shocked look brought an embarrassed apology out of him, before he turned back to the first student and quietly whispered, 'It means we need to buy him a present, moron'. Priceless.

At least I haven't told too many fibs to my classes, unlike my partner trainee. Asked about the birthmark on his neck, he gravely informed the inquisitive young chap that it was a wound sustained during a knife fight in Caracas during his time on board HMS Argonaught. Suffice to say, he has quickly gained a reputation as a teacher that you shouldn't mess with!

With regards the experience of training, the long drive from Cambridge to Braintree certainly took its toll towards the end of my placement. Although the journey through pretty thatched villages was initially an enjoyable and peaceful start to the day, I eventually reached the point where I was looking forward to a quick 20 minute drive from my new flat to my new school in September. However, being so (relatively) far from Cambridge has had its benefits.

First, there is the advantage that I have never seen any of my students around the city in the evening or at weekends! One of the most awkward situations to find oneself in when teaching is at the bar when a group of students walk in! A second positive issue is that the three trainees who have been with me in Braintree have formed a very close bond. The physics trainee is, himself, a member of Emmanuel.

The year has, therefore, been a rollercoaster ride. The dawning realisation within the first two weeks that this was something that required determination and a true desire to teach in order to succeed did not put me off. In fact, I'd say that training to be a teacher has been the most worthwhile thing I've done in my life so far. With the current crisis in

teaching, the government are keen to see new people training to join the profession. People who have been to Emmanuel know the value of a good education. I have no hesitation in urging those who have a desire to bring out the best in people to investigate the possibility of teaching. You'll laugh, you'll cry, and most importantly you may be sold eggs by a 14-year-old.

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