

Interview of Curtis Thomas April 21, 2020

By Megan Abrahamson

Curtis Thomas earned a Master of Arts degree in English with a focus on medieval literature. His thesis is titled “Courtly Anger, Beastly Violence, and the Animal-Affective Prosthetic.”

After graduating he taught high school English and journalism for two years, and now works as a library media specialist (school librarian) at two elementary schools. Next school year he will work as a library media specialist at a middle school.

Q: I know that you were in Mizzou’s MA/PhD program, but decided not pursue the PhD after earning the MA. What factors influenced your decision to seek “alt-ac” employment in education?

A: There were a few things that influenced that decision. One was the job market. It was hard for me to commit to another five or so years of school with tenure-track job prospects being what they are. But personal reasons were more important. My mother died the summer after my first year at Mizzou. That really forced me to think about my long-term priorities. My dad and three brothers all live in our hometown (Springfield, MO) and my wife’s parents live there too. In the end, we decided that we wanted to live near family, even if for me that meant giving up academia. We wanted our kids to grow up around their grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Having worked for a couple of years as a high school teacher before pursuing my MA, I also knew that a career in public education could be incredibly fulfilling and worthwhile, which made the decision to leave easier on a practical level.

Q: Did your pre-graduate student work influence your job search, and how?

A: It definitely did. My bachelor’s degree is in high school English education, and I worked for two years as a broadcast journalism and media teacher before pursuing my MA at Mizzou. I was still certified to teach high school after completing my MA, so when we moved back to Springfield, I started searching for a high school English job in the area. I ended up getting hired at my high school alma mater, teaching English and journalism and advising the yearbook staff.

Q: What aspects of your career do you find challenging and rewarding? What are the tradeoffs in time, advantages or disadvantages of this job as compared with graduate school/the academy?

A: I’ll start with the advantages of working in a public high school. The most rewarding aspect of the job is your relationships with your students. Getting to know them as individuals over the course of the semester or school year is, to me, the best part of the job. I enjoy all of the rhythms of school life—seeing kids get excited about dances, clubs, sports, performances, events, assemblies. If you’re passionate about teaching, you don’t have the burden of finding time for research and publication. You still get some of the advantages of time like you do in graduate school/academia—summers off for professional development, personal projects, or travel, time off for holidays (although I definitely miss getting three or four weeks off around Christmas; most public schools give a week or two). The pay is less than it should be, but the retirement system, at least in Missouri, is a good one. In Springfield we also have the opportunity to make extra money teaching summer school classes or teaching extra classes online.

There are some disadvantages too. One is behavior management. You will spend a *lot* more time dealing with student behaviors in class. At times it will feel like you spend 90% of your time dealing with behavior rather than teaching content. If you're not someone who can love kids even when they give you attitude, curse you out, get in fights in the hallway, ignore you, and on, and on...working at a public high school will be a struggle for you. Loving the content will not be enough, because the content can often take a backseat to so much else. As a public school teacher, you'll also get pulled in a hundred different directions at once. There are staff meetings, parent conferences, parent phone calls, paperwork, mandatory professional development, voluntary-but-encouraged professional development, committees, supervision duties, and more. From what I glean on Twitter, all of this "extra" stuff is becoming/has been an issue at universities too, but it is definitely present at a public high school. And if you're someone who loves research and writing, you won't have any institutional support to scratch that itch.

I loved teaching at the high school level, but it is very, very different from teaching a college class. I've often heard that the first five years of working in public education are the hardest—many teachers leave for other jobs before they reach that point. It can be a tough and often thankless job. But if you have a heart for young people, it can be so rewarding.

Q: What are surprising ways, if any, in which your graduate degree has come in handy in your new career?

My graduate work has helped me, although the content of my degree isn't very relevant to my day-to-day work, especially now as an elementary school librarian. But skills I honed while in graduate school like time management, juggling multiple responsibilities, communicating and collaborating with others, and all of those other soft skills we use as graduate students have helped make me a better teacher. Librarians wear a dozen hats, and I'm also teaching online and working on another degree online, so being able to set deadlines, track responsibilities, and plan ahead are essential.

Follow-up: You mentioned that "librarians wear a dozen hats," and I was wondering if you could elaborate on that work a bit more. What skills, tasks, are required of you that are perhaps more unexpected or that you felt less prepared to do? Is or was there much on the job training for all these other "hats"?

A: Our school librarians are technically "library media specialists," so technology is a large part of our job responsibilities. We spend a lot of time as the first point of contact for troubleshooting student Chromebooks (we're a one-to-one district, so all students in grades 3-12 are provided their own Chromebook to use at school and at home) and teacher tech; anything we can't fix gets passed to I.T. We check out spare Chromebooks for students to use if they forget to bring theirs to school, and we process and track devices that I.T needs to repair. We're also a resource for teachers wanting support on incorporating tech tools in their lesson plans, and we collaborate with teachers on designing lessons, co-teaching content, or providing extension activities for their curriculum. So we're part I.T., part blended learning specialist, part instructional designer, and part librarian—because we still build our library collections, promote reading, check out and shelve books, and curate resources.

We're fortunate in our district to have librarians and staffed libraries in all of our schools, although some elementary schools, like the two I work at, have to share a librarian. But librarians, and school librarians especially, have to constantly advocate for ourselves so decision-makers know the impact we have on student success, because we're often some of the first jobs to get cut when districts start tightening their belts. That said, our department is great about providing professional learning throughout the school year and in the summer, so we have plenty of opportunities to learn about new resources and collaborate on reading promotion and best practices. My days are much busier as a librarian than they were as an English teacher, but I love being the person teachers and students turn to when they need help.

Q: What does a typical day at your job look like? Does your job involve a standard routine, or do you work on projects as they arise? What is the annual workflow?

A: When I worked as a high school teacher, a typical day started at 7:30 am. That was our contract time to be at school. I would get things ready for the day, answer emails, etc., before the first class of the day started at about 8:00. At the school where I worked, our classes were on an alternating block schedule of four hour-and-a-half blocks a day, alternating classes every other day. Most teachers had three classes a day with one block set aside for plan time, so six classes total. The amount of prep work you had depended on how many different classes you were given to teach. Plan time would be used to write lesson plans for later in the week, call parents, meet with teachers in your department, and grade. We got 30 minutes for lunch. The last class ended at about 3:00, and we were contracted to work until at least 3:30—although I often ended up staying until at least 4:00 working on lessons and grading. For us, the school year starts in early or mid-August and ends in the middle of May, with days off around Thanksgiving, a week or two off for winter break, and a week off for spring break in March, as well as other three or four-day weekends throughout the year. Summers provide some professional development opportunities, some of them paid, as well as, in our district, the chance to work two month-long sessions of summer school in June and July.

Follow-up: How has your job changed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic? What does your job have you doing now that maybe you did not expect? How well does your career more generally and your place of work specifically care for its employees and students during a global pandemic?

A: Springfield Public Schools has provided Chromebooks to every student in grades 3-12 for several years now, so we were in a pretty good place to transition to online learning when we shut down in March. After we closed, the district was able to get Chromebooks to students in 1st and 2nd grades and provided iPads to kindergarten students. Access to the internet for many families has been an issue; the district had a limited number of mobile hotspots students could apply for before the pandemic, and recently purchased 2,000 more. The daily data allowance on those hotspots is really limited, but it's at least a partial solution.

The district mailed paper packets with weekly learning opportunities to elementary students, and teachers are providing digital learning opportunities. Mostly, our jobs right now are to check in on families and connect with students. As a librarian, I'm providing optional weekly activities for students to complete, read-alouds, reading challenges, and am available to conference with students to answer questions, help them find ebooks in our collections, or just chat. When this

whole thing started, I also spent a lot of time helping teachers get their Canvas courses set up—many of the teachers at my schools had very little experience using Canvas, and were pretty stressed about suddenly having to be online teachers.

SPS has also been providing breakfast and lunch at each school through a drive-up service, and is using a few schools to provide childcare for healthcare workers. The rollout hasn't been perfect and there have been some missteps, but I have appreciated that the district has remained committed to paying employees during this closure and has continued supporting the community with meals, opportunities to learn, family check-ins, and access to technology.

Q: What have you accomplished in your job of which you're most proud?

As a high school teacher, I was most proud of the staffs I led—both the broadcast journalism team I advised before leaving for Mizzou, and the yearbook staff I advised when I came back to teaching. Those kinds of responsibilities are a huge challenge, but the relationships you build with teams like those are really special. As a librarian, I've been able to start a book talk podcast with my students, where I talk with students one-on-one about books they love and want to recommend to the rest of the school, which has been a lot of fun.

Q: What do you wish you had known as a graduate student? What advice would you give your graduate school self if you could?

A: I would tell myself to do my best not to stress too much about papers or assignments and focus on enjoying my time as a student. I miss being able to learn new things every day about topics and texts I find fascinating, to get to talk about books and ideas with really smart people, to wander the library looking for those books that would help me shape an argument. It wasn't a perfect experience and I'm sure I'm looking back on it with rose-tinted glasses, but I look back on my two short years at Mizzou fondly, and although leaving was the right decision for me and my family, I wish I'd had more time to soak it all in.

Q: What challenges do you see for graduate students transitioning from academia to working outside the academy (but still in education)?

A: One of the biggest challenges would be getting certified to teach if you wanted to search for a job at a public school. A private school would have fewer requirements, but I'm not sure what that process would entail. Some education programs offer routes to certification for graduate degree holders, but it would likely require taking some education classes and completing a semester of training as a student teacher. Another challenge would be the culture shift. Teaching at the secondary level is just an entirely different beast compared to teaching at the college level, as I tried to convey above. I would recommend reaching out to a school in the area and see about shadowing a teacher or two for a day. Schools and school districts can vary so widely in their own cultures, expectations, and student populations, but doing so could help give an idea of what it's like to be in a high school classroom.