

CAREER EDUCATION – WRITTEN Q&A: Geoff Kirby

1. What is your job role and organisation?

Teacher of English, Head of Year, DofE Expedition Leader – Cottenham Village College

2. What do you do in this job?

Cottenham Village College is a local secondary school in the Cambridgeshire area. As an English Teacher responsible for the teaching of students in years 7 to 11 from the ages 11 to 16. I get to work with a range of young people in the classroom and help prepare them for their GCSE exams in year 11 when they get to that point! I also try to help encourage students to develop a love of reading for themselves.

As a Head of Year I am more involved with the pastoral side of school life – this means I help make sure everyone is getting on okay, if anyone has any issues I try to support them as best I can and coordinate a teaching staff response to further support whoever might need the help. Keeping in contact and communicating with both students and their parents is a key part of my role. As a HoY for a KS4 year group I am also quite involved with the post 16 choices process.

Thirdly, as an Expedition Leader with the Duke of Edinburgh I am in charge of the running of expedition groups in the school. My particular duties revolve around the expedition section and as part of the role I help select which students will be doing the DofE with the school, I lead camp and field training and I teach students to navigate and orienteer. Eventually I'm in charge of putting them out in the countryside to do their assessed expeditions and I manage the staff who volunteer to make it possible.

3. Why did you choose this career?

I have always been interested in the teaching profession and knew it was either this or a career in the military. I knew I didn't want a desk job and I wanted a job which offered a sense of fulfilment and the guarantee not to be the same every day. I also knew I enjoyed working with people. Teaching ticks all those boxes.

Growing up I had the privilege of having a range of excellent teachers. I found that the ones who made lessons interesting and fun I ended up working harder for and the subjects that I had charismatic teachers were the ones that I excelled in. I chose teaching because I also wanted to be able to help people build an enthusiasm for a subject that I personally really enjoy.

Teaching has been very satisfying in a number of these things. As I work with a large team of other teachers and I teach up to 150 different young people in the classroom, I get to work with a lot of people on a daily basis! And while the content that I teach might be the same each year (I have read Romeo and Juliet a terrible number of times!) I find that the way each year group acts with the texts we study is different. Working with young people can be a lot of fun and there is a lot of satisfaction in knowing that what you are helping with or teaching that day is having a positive impact on someone else's life.

4. What background education or training do you have?

I am quite local in terms of my education. I was a student at Cottenham a while ago before going to Hills Road Sixth Form College. At sixth form I studied English, Maths, History and Chemistry. I kept my

options broad as I hadn't fully decided what I wanted to do when I left secondary school. Over the two years at sixth form I found that I enjoyed my two written subjects far more than the number based ones, and so I decided to pursue those further at university.

I went to the University of Nottingham and read a joint honours degree in English and History. After graduating I then stayed in Nottingham and chose a PGCE as my route into teaching. I completed this as a post graduate degree before doing my first year of teaching in Nottingham.

5. What has your career path been?

Following completing sixth form I took a planned gap year. I spent half of it working and then the other half I travelled in. I manage to spend 3 months volunteering in Costa Rica and Nicaragua and the other 3 months between Australia and Cape Town. I always knew I wanted to take a gap year and I found that it helped me with the start of Uni as I was a year older and more mature which meant being a year more prepared than a lot of my university friends were when we first started.

After that I completed my degree and used the long summer to volunteer again through International Citizen Service (ICS). Straight after finishing the programme I began my teacher training in Nottingham. I got my first teaching job in a school in Nottingham and completed my Newly Qualified Teacher year there before getting a job back here at my old school as a fully qualified teacher. I have now been teaching for 5+ years.

6. What does a typical day involve?

One of the pros to my job is that the days are very different and new things pop up all the time. Although we have timetabled lessons and a structured day in school, my role as a Head of Year is quite reactionary and so you never know what might crop up.

In a typical day I will teach for at least 50% of the timetabled day. This is a range of year groups from year 7 to 11 and each year will be studying different texts and concepts.

Around my teaching hours I have to cram in everything else. I try to spend an hour on DofE matters a week whether that is planning the next expedition, planning training, or chasing up other sections. Most days I'll also be required to make phone calls home to parents for both good and negative reasons! There will tend to be a meeting most days after school and then at 15:30 (when everyone says teachers finish work) I can get started on all the marking and admin work that the day has generated.

7. What is your work environment like?

I work in a department of about 6 other English teachers but we are just one department in a much larger staff team. Most of the day I'll be around the English block or my HoY office so everyone knows where to find me if they need me. I have my own classroom which is nice – I get to choose what I want to put on display and organise it in the way that best fits my own teaching style. I also have an office where I can be found when not teaching.

People often joke that teachers only work from 9-3. Having done the job for 5 odd years I can 100% confirm that this is not the case! Although the holidays are definitely a perk and most teachers try not to work at all during the holidays, a teaching day can be intense and most teachers start around 8 in the morning and finish between 5-6. It is up to us exactly when we arrive or leave, so long as we are

on time for the morning briefings and completing all the work we need to do outside of the classroom. After students have left in the afternoon there is the flexibility to go home earlier and mark or plan from there if you prefer to work that way.

Due to the amount of work that needs to be done during term time it can be hard to strike a good work life balance, but this is about personal organisation and managing your time well. I manage to balance work with playing for a rugby team and training at the gym about 5-6 times a week minimum and make a point of keeping that time work free.

8. What aspects of your job are most challenging?

The most challenging aspects of the job would be marking workload around the mock season and data deadlines and working with unsupportive parents.

There are points in the year when marking can seem to take over your life a bit, and when coupled with parent evenings and open events the job can seem intensive between the holidays.

It can also be frustrating when you are doing everything you can to help with a young person's progress but this isn't being matched or recognised at home.

9. Can you give an example of a project or piece of work that you have been most proud of?

A wonderful time every year is results day in the summer holidays. It is fantastic watching students who have worked hard for their GCSEs receive their marks and see the pure excitement and happiness on their faces when they have met or exceeded their targets.

It is also incredibly satisfying with the DofE part of my role to hear parents come and thank us afterwards and to then hear students telling each other their expedition stories for months and years to come after that. It is nice to know that we offer the opportunity for these young people to make memories that will potentially last a lifetime.

10. How do you hope your career will progress?

Having only just taken on the HoY role on top of my other responsibilities this year, I am hoping to get my feet a bit more steady in this new job before further progression. I would like to continue to progress along the Pastoral career path as opposed to becoming a Head of Department, but I am in no rush to make more changes just yet. For now I would just like to become proficient and learn my new role inside out before thinking about next steps.