

**NB:** This is not a conventional academic essay. It is, rather, a short piece of journalism which appeared in *Gobannian* – a newsletter for former pupils of King Henry VIII Comprehensive School, Abergavenny. I attended KHS between 1982 and 1989 and was asked in 2016 if I would be willing to write something brief about my professional life now and my memories of the school, nearly three decades after leaving.

## New Observations

Neil Badmington

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I spend my working days encouraging people to think for themselves.

I am Professor of English Literature at Cardiff University; I was a pupil of KHS between 1982 and 1989. After leaving the school I was educated at Exeter University, the University of California, and Cardiff University.

I am writing these words in mid-July. The semester is over and most of the students have left for the summer. The graduation ceremony was last week; the corridors are quiet. But it will not be long before this year's freshers arrive. I have observed the ritual for seventeen years; its nuances have changed over time. When I began lecturing in 1999, for instance, Freshers' Week was, for the new arrivals, a leap into the unknown, but these days many of the incoming students have already made contact with each other over the summer through social media groups designed specifically for this purpose. They greet their new friends like old friends.

One thing, however, seems not to change: the intellectual leap demanded by the passage from secondary to higher education. Every year I watch a new set of students come to terms with the fact that they are no longer in school. Sometimes this registers in the awareness that, well, registers of attendance are no longer taken as a matter of routine and that parents are no longer keeping an eye on things. But more often I see a dawning realization that I am not going to tell them what to think, that I am not going to tell them what to write in the final assessment, that the university is a space to interrogate, and not merely internalize, existing knowledge. Some students find this unsettling at first, in my experience, and I've heard them refer to losing their 'safety net'. This is perfectly understandable: many report a secondary education in which teaching was teaching for the exam and the exam alone. I don't for one moment blame teachers for this: it's not their fault that schooling in Britain has been infantilized by a series of governments of different persuasions and reduced to a set of league tables and targets which compel endlessly monitored educators to train their pupils into writing what the

examiners want to see. This might get the results, might tick all the boxes, but it is, as I see it, the death of independent, critical, creative thinking.

I feel fortunate to have attended KHS in the days before the National Curriculum and the bureaucratic surveillance of today: the dead hand of the Education Reform Act of 1988 hadn't quite strangled schools by the time I left in 1989. Our teachers taught us what we needed to know, of course, and we followed a syllabus which led to examinations; it was not a case of 'anything goes'. But there seemed back then to be an inquisitive freedom which modern education policy makes difficult or even impossible. League tables and targets do not cope well with innovation, originality, and the unforeseen.

There was a particular KHS context in which I recall being asked consistently to think for myself: A-level Spanish lessons. There were only two of us studying the subject in my year-group, so we were taught in a tiny space behind a language classroom on, as I remember it, the top floor of the Upper School Building. The teacher ensured that we knew the grammar, the vocabulary and the literary texts on which we would be assessed; he was thorough and careful. But he went further. He would often set aside time in each lesson to some kind of debate, in Spanish, on a timely topic. The only rule was that we would talk, take up a position, see other possibilities -- in short, that we would think for ourselves.

One of those conversations has always stayed with me. Although Britain's railways weren't formally privatized until the 1990s, the idea must have been in the air towards the end of the previous decade because I remember a day on which we were asked whether or not we thought that this would be a wise move. I don't remember precisely how the conversation unfolded, but I do remember with perfect clarity an intervention from the teacher: 'Why', he asked, 'is making a profit out of public transport so important? Why don't we just accept that a decent transport network is a basic requirement of civilization and run things at a loss if we have to?' I'd never been asked that kind of question; I'd never been asked to imagine that kind of possibility.

No doubt the tabloids would, had they known that a dangerous secret society was meeting just off the Old Hereford Road at the taxpayers' expense, have denounced this as an act of calculated left-wing brainwashing which made the Education Reform Act all the more important. But this was anything but political indoctrination: it was, rather, an open invitation to think for ourselves, to think on our feet, to consider the case and to take up a position. I don't think that it really

mattered what we said in reply, but what *did* matter was that we approached the world around us independently, critically, freely.

I often remember those illuminating and spirited Spanish lessons when I'm urging my students to develop their own perspectives on the literary or cultural texts that we're discussing in the seminar room. I'm regularly depressed to learn that, more often than not, the only members of the class who experienced genuine critical debate in their school days were privately educated. I remain fiercely proud of my comprehensive education, and it saddens me to see what a series of ill-judged national policies have done to the British state system in which my own children are now being schooled.

Another former KHS pupil, the cultural critic Raymond Williams, once proposed that a culture 'has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested'. I don't think that I was aware of Williams's legacy when I was at KHS: the school library didn't yet bear his name, and I didn't encounter any of his work, which I now sometimes teach, until I was an undergraduate. Some years after leaving, though, I learnt that my Spanish teacher had lived not far from the house in which Raymond Williams had grown up. When I think now of the 'new observations and meanings' which we were encouraged to offer and test in those A-level lessons, I can only conclude that there must have been something in the Pandy air.

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**Neil Badmington is Professor of English Literature at Cardiff University. His books include *The Afterlives of Roland Barthes* (Bloomsbury, 2016) and *Hitchcock's Magic* (University of Wales Press, 2011).**