

The Professional Classroom

By Robin Newton, Croatan High School, North Carolina

I teach at a school that is a 30-minute drive from my house. I don't mind the drive, though—I listen to audiobooks and podcasts and music that my colleagues would be horrified by. The drive in many places is scenic; I cross four bridges, and enjoy watching the sun rise (or set) over the waterways.

About three years ago, I noticed that I often passed the same vehicle going in the opposite direction both morning and evening. The car—a pearl white Porsche Panamera—caught my eye because I was perplexed: I can understand spending \$150K on a 911 Turbo, but why spend \$80K on a four-door sedan?

As time passed, I found myself speculating about the driver of the Porsche. Where did he live? More importantly, since we seemed to keep the same hours, where did he work? I couldn't help but reflect on the juxtaposition—we're both working at least 10 hours a day, but he's driving a Porsche and I'm driving a Volkswagen.

The universe answered my question one summer day. While driving a route I seldom took, I saw the Porsche parked at an attorney's office about two blocks from where I live. Of course. A lawyer.¹ I asked my neighbor (who seems to know everything about everyone) if he knew who the Porsche driver was. He told me that the Porsche driver is a criminal lawyer who specializes in DWIs and that he charges a \$1500 consultation fee and bills \$250 an hour if he takes the case. I make \$19.32 an hour.²

¹ If I were casting a movie about a teacher and her arch enemy, and if in this movie I was going to shamelessly exploit every stereotype I could about both teachers and lawyers, then the teacher would probably be a selfless white female and the arch enemy would probably be a criminal defense lawyer. The actual plot's a little hazy, but would likely involve me door-dinging his Porsche in the Harris Teeter parking lot.

² And that amount is if I only work 8 hours a day for 21.5 days a month for 10 months a year. In reality, I work at least 10 hours a day, and I usually work about 5 hours on both Saturday and Sunday. Also, I understand that the comparison is a vast oversimplification of the resources utilized by both the lawyer and myself. My point, while partially fallacious, is resting on rhetorical righteousness.

Once I learned the Porsche driver's occupation, and after I calculated my measly salary, I thought about why society entitles one profession over another.³ I realized almost immediately that my premise was faulty: money does not a professional make. So, instead, I set out to ascertain what criteria society uses to determine who is a professional. An afternoon of research brought me to the idea that the social contract inherently confers professionalism upon citizens. But how, I wondered?

By coincidence, a former student of mine had just given me a gift, a copy of *The Social Contract* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The book was a joke between us—he had said the words “social contract” so many times during a class seminar that I had drawn a “pause” button on a scrap of paper and set it in front of him. But as I flipped through the pages, I realized there was some applicability to the problem that had been niggling at the back of my mind: we, as a society, agree about who is a professional and who is not. Much to my chagrin, and my former student's glee, I began to read Rousseau in earnest, and I found a paragraph that seemed to speak to my hypothesis.

The passing from the state of nature to the civil society produces a remarkable change in man; it puts justice as a rule of conduct in the place of instinct, and gives his actions the moral quality they previously lacked. It is only then, when the voice of duty has taken the place of physical impulse, and right that of desire, that man, who has hitherto thought only of himself, finds himself compelled to act on other principles, and to consult his reason rather than the study of his inclinations. And although in civil society man surrenders some of the advantages that belong to the state of nature, he gains in return far greater ones; his faculties are so exercised and developed, his mind is so enlarged, his sentiments so ennobled, and his whole spirit so elevated that, if the abuse of his new condition did not in many cases lower him to something worse than what he had left, he should constantly bless the happy hour that lifted him for ever from the state of nature and from a stupid, limited animal

³ I do not intend to walk down the well-traveled road of why teachers are paid less than other professionals in this essay.

made a creature of intelligence and a man. ⁴

What I concluded from Rousseau is that in a civil society, a citizen listens to the voice of duty, where principle and reason guide his or her actions. Further, to paraphrase Rousseau, as a citizen of a civil society, my abilities are honed, my mind is expanded, my emotions are dignified, my spirit is lifted up, and I bless the moment that I became a creature of intelligence. The clouds part, the sun shines, and the air is sweet with scholarship.

And it was here, as my father would say, that I began to chase rabbits: I abandoned my quest about why society bestows the mantel of professionalism on some and not others (and rewards them accordingly) and instead scrutinized my own classroom for signs of the social contract.

Reflecting on my four years of teaching, I realized I actively curate a classroom of citizens transitioning from a state of nature to membership in a civil society. While I know that many may leave my class today and revert to the place of instinct—they are after all 17-years-old—but come again tomorrow, they know that entering into our classroom demands that they consult their reason rather than their inclinations.

This classroom environment of professionals is carefully considered on my part.

1. The last day of school is just as important as the first day of school. There are no “do nothing” days. This enforces the citizen student’s consultation of reason instead of reversion to his or her inclinations.
2. Expectation management. This includes a structured environment but also contingency operations (the “what if”). This demands the citizen student follow the voice of duty rather than physical impulse.
3. Respect for the process. Reading and writing and thinking about reading and writing are difficult tasks and anyone who tells us differently is wrong. The time we spend studying texts or writing our own texts is sacrosanct. This allows the exercising and development of the citizen student’s faculties.

⁴ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract*. Penguin Books, 1968, pp. 64-65.

4. Questioning. This is non-specific. Question me about why I chose the text; question the text about the assumptions it is founded on; question one another about our inferences. This encourages the citizen student's enlargement of mind.

While the Porsche driver and I both profit—financially and spiritually—from our positions as citizens of a civil society, I know my spiritual reward is greater when I can coax a classroom composed only of white students (within a school that is 85% white, within a county that is 90% white) into caring about the rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr. So, when I pass the Porsche driver in the mornings and evenings, I can smugly nod to him, acknowledging the importance of our respective roles in this society.



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