

## At a Crossroads at Crossroads: Looking Ahead as I Prepare to Leave My Student Status Behind

Dina Drits

*University of Utah*

AS I ENTER THE THIRD YEAR OF MY PH.D. PROGRAM IN EDUCATION, I am beginning to think of myself less as a student and more as a professional with a contribution to make toward achieving greater science literacy in our country. My border crossing is one many people at Crossroads have undertaken, or will soon undertake: student to professional. Although I have a few years left in my program, this year feels like the beginning of this transition for me as I hone in on necessary science-related coursework and contemplate dissertation topics. Even more, I have started thinking in serious and concrete ways about the career that will best suit me. As I begin this exciting and, of course, daunting process, I feel drawn toward numerous different areas and job titles within science education.

I have a variety of professional interests and experiences and so my path toward science education has been quite indirect. My interests and passions seem to straddle the line between the natural and social sciences.

After a fairly typical K-12 experience in science classes (I liked the subject but the inadequate education led to doubts about seriously pursuing it), I majored in psychology in college, and found that my favorite classes were the science-oriented ones. After graduating, I became a nonfiction children's book editor. I began by editing books on an assortment of topics but found myself gravitating toward the science books, soon working my way up to associate science editor. A book series I co-developed about ancient technologies sparked my fascination with the ancient, and especially prehistoric, world, and with that I began my graduate career as a physical anthropology (human evolution) Master's/Ph.D. student.

My intent from the beginning of this program was to focus on evolution education, and I received an assistantship to work at the on-campus science outreach organization where I helped develop programs to connect university science faculty with K-12 teachers and students. My other assistantship was teaching the lab sections of the *Introduction to Human Evolution* course in my department. After completing my Master's thesis about teaching concepts in evolution to elementary students, I decided to switch doctoral programs to education. There I felt I could make more of an impact on society by helping to defend the teaching of evolution in K-12 schools.

In my first year of this program, I ran into a significant stumbling block when the science education faculty member they promised would be hired "soon" was never hired. The other science education students left the program, but I stayed, thinking that either a science education professor would eventually be hired, or perhaps, since I had always pursued science indirectly anyway, that I would find another direction. Having explored other options, I finally decided that I am just going to commit myself to what I really want to be — a science education specialist. I received permission to contact a science educator, Adam Johnston, from a nearby university who is willing to work with me; I was invited to write this essay and attend Crossroads; and, as of a week ago, my department surprised everybody and hired a science faculty member (!) and I will be her graduate assistant at the Genetic Science Learning Center, an outreach organization at the University of Utah.

So, I've finally made this big decision for how to proceed with the rest of my program. The next step is to decide what specifically I am *excited* and *qualified* to do for my career within science education. John Settlage made a wonderful suggestion for how I should approach this question: I should think about what kinds of work I like to do, am good at, and would like to have as a part of my profession. My greatest inspiration and excitement comes from interacting with many types of people—accomplished scholars to young people. Within this, I like and am good at teaching and also developing/making/bridging connections between different people. Writing and editing is probably my strongest professional skill, especially making complex information understandable and accessible to people at varying levels of education and sophistication. I have had positive

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experiences with conducting research so far — I have conducted and presented qualitative research with my professors and have received positive feedback from them on this. I have not designed a study that I have conducted on my own yet, however.

I guess I can sum it all up this way: although my background in science is less thorough and comprehensive than I would like it to be, my varied experiences within science and social science, writing and editing for children, teaching K-12 through alternative programs, and working in science outreach should benefit my goal of advancing science literacy in our country.

**I** AM SEEKING ADVICE FROM THE CROSSROADS COMMUNITY about: a) deciding on a career that best utilizes my skill set, academic abilities, and professional experiences, and interests, and b) the kinds of research, teaching, and publishing experiences I should develop in the remaining years of my doctoral program to achieve this goal.

I feel that I could go in four different directions and be true to my professional goals and needs. First, I could be a faculty member in an education or interdisciplinary department at a Research I university. One concern I have is that I feel I will be under qualified to teach science methods courses in a traditional teacher education program because I lack full-time K-12 science teaching experience and because my background in science is possibly not comprehensive enough. I should add, however, that this year I will have an independent study field experience in secondary science classrooms where I will observe and teach some lessons, and I will also take some biology courses to improve my content knowledge. I know there are other types of faculty positions at Research I institutions that I could be qualified to fill, and I am very eager to learn about these.

Second, I could be a faculty member at a smaller teaching institution (non-Research I, liberal arts college, etc.). Here, too, I feel I would be qualified to teach in some education or interdisciplinary departments but perhaps not in teacher preparatory programs. Is the major difference between this type of institution and Research I schools that the former has higher teaching loads and lower research requirements?

Third, I feel I would be qualified for and fulfilled by working at a campus science outreach organization. I enjoyed my experience at the outreach organization during my Master's program and I will gain more experience this year at the Genetic Science Learning Center. My concern with this option is the feasibility of being hired full time at this type of organization. It seems that not every campus has one, they all appear to employ few people, and funding is slim (the Genetic Science Learning Center, for example, is funded entirely by grants). Is it also the case that typically faculty members in university departments divide their time between their department and outreach, rather than full-time employment in outreach?

Fourth, I wonder about science or science education foundations/organizations. I think that my past and future experience in outreach and research would make me a good fit for a position in this type of organization. What types of positions would fit my overall job criteria? How realistic is it to be hired here? Other possibilities include policy or curriculum development, but I have no experience with either, so I do not know if they would be a fit for me. I like the idea of being at a think tank, and I know I am not interested in pursuing museum work. I am very eager to entertain any other possibilities that I have not mentioned.

Additionally, I would like to be able to incorporate my passion for evolution education somehow into my career, perhaps through teaching or advocacy. I feel the movement to defend the teaching of evolution in K-12 can use all of the help it can get. This does not, however, need to play the most prominent role in my job. I have had an ongoing relationship with the National Center for Science Education (NCSE), an organization based in Oakland that is devoted to this cause, and I plan to continue this relationship in some capacity, probably through writing articles, possibly more.

In sum, I think I would like my role to focus primarily upon outreach, research, and teaching in science education, although not necessarily as a teacher educator in a teacher preparatory program. I am most comfortable in university or college settings, but I am open to looking outside these institutions, as long as they are education related. Again, along with discussing the best professional fit for me, I am also interested in knowing what sorts of experiences I need in order to achieve this type of position. I feel as though all the pieces are finally coming together for me, and I am very excited to begin my border crossing!