

ALUMNI PROFILE: ALEXANDER MACLEOD, CLASS OF 1994

THINKING IN THE ALTERNATIVE

This is a note for the students and parents who have difficulty mastering the French language. I enjoyed my seven years at EB immensely, but I was never the strongest French student. Still, I thrived in the bilingual system. I've come to realize that a dual French/English pedagogy broadened my perceptions and increased my depth of analysis.

Though I now use the American style of mathematics to add up the zeros in the rent of my one bedroom Manhattan apartment, I can still remember the alternative French system. While I may no longer rely on it, I recall how it helped me to understand why the American system worked as it did. If math is the great universal language, then being exposed to two of its dialects highlighted both its essential elements and those that are merely cultural conventions.

At the same time that I was thriving in math, I continued to struggle in French. The syntax and conjugations of the language have always challenged me. In order to get around this problem, I found myself coming up with creative ways of saying what would otherwise be simple expressions. Perhaps I wasn't elegant, but I was at least functional. This functionalism forced me to think of several ways to explain the same thing, on my feet. Forming alternative narratives at an early age came to be of particular importance later on in my life.

After I left EB following the fifth grade, I moved on to a more traditional, American-style education and eventually decided to major in history at UCLA. Part of the reason I chose this major was because of the intensive writing it required and the challenge of weaving arguments together in novel and ultimately persuasive ways. As I honed this skill, I came to realize that in many ways I was using the same alternative method I'd adopted when trying to explain myself in French. If one approach seemed inappropriate, I'd look for another that still explained the same concept.

After writing an honors thesis on civil war in the early Roman Empire, I began to question whether I'd like to make a career as an historian. I began looking for something as challenging as Ancient History, but which also had more room for me to make an original contribution. Fascinated by the legal aspects of Roman law, I decided to explore the current legal system. I experienced a baptism by fire by working for one of the largest law firms in New York City for two years as a paralegal. Despite the pressure, I enjoyed having to plot various courses of action on the spot, just like in French class.

As a law student at NYU, I now find that I continue to use the practices I developed to get by at EB. Few doctrines or concepts are absolute, rather each is relatively defined by its societal context; complete answers necessarily consider alternative theories. Overcoming my difficulties with the French language taught me an invaluable method of problem solving—thinking in the alternative.

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