Training Spotting: An American Observes Occupational Learning in England

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Abstract
English further education and American higher education and continuing education institutions have valuable lessons to teach each other. American community colleges can learn from English standards and assessment practices and innovative partnerships. English further education institutions can learn from Americans' emphasis on accessibility to education.

Snugly perched atop a corner of Norwich Cathedral's close, the Dean and Chapter Library is a small treasure trove of late medieval and early-modern manuscripts and early printed books where I found myself researching seventeenth-century English Puritan writers in the summer of 2000. Scanning through the card catalog one afternoon, I noticed that the cards in a subject drawer were not in alphabetical order, which I brought to the attention of sub-sub-librarian Brenda. "Oh, dear," she said, "well . . . I'm not quite sure what to do about this. We'd best leave it as it is. You see He developed a quite complex classification system, and sometimes there's an order within an order." Sub-librarian Mollard, overhearing this exchange added, "Yes, and He's been dead for years, so we can't ask Him."

Meanwhile, on the busy commercial streets outside the cathedral grounds, about every third pedestrian could be seen using a mobile phone, a far greater percentage than I was accustomed to seeing in the States.

There will always be an England, so the song goes, but it increasingly combines extraordinary contrasts of tradition and innovation. In the Dean and Chapter library, it was not a muddled Librarian (the "He" who, like God, was not to be named) who errs but we who cannot discern His inscrutable cataloging plan. However, outside of the precincts of custom and tradition, the English education system explores innovations in occupational learning. These include rigorous national standards, teaching and learning models that emphasize both the theoretical and the practical, and partnerships that leverage funding, capital resources, and technology.

Virginia Community College System Professional Development initiatives have enabled me to travel to

England twice in the past five years. In 1996-1997, I participated in the VaCIE-CEMP faculty exchange with Jacki Clift, then head of Media Studies at Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College. In 2000 a summer research grant enabled me to return to Stoke-on-Trent for ten days, to live at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, Norfolk, for one month, to attend an International Forum of the Council on Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (CPTSC) in London, and to present a paper at the International Medieval Congress at the University of Leeds.

If many of the English are devoted to train spotting, the obsessive hobby of watching and recording the engines and cars of the British rail system, I must confess that I'm a devotee of "training spotting." When traveling to a new place, I like to observe and record the indigenous education systems. In England I have observed the role of national standards, innovations in teaching and learning, and creative educational partnerships.

National standards. British society is characterized by a degree of uniformity that must seem quite amazing, if not alarming, to an American's eyes. This includes the national educational standards, not only in the liberal arts and sciences but also in occupational and technical fields of study. Accountability for these standards is maintained by evaluating teachers' grading of students' work and by the national examinations that students take annually. Those national exams include extensive written portions that require students not only to provide appropriate answers but also to explain their answers (and to demonstrate theoretical as well as practical knowledge, not to mention verbal skills). Students are held accountable for both detailed knowledge and global comprehension of detailed knowledge and are expected to have the skills to communicate both. This requires painstaking written examinations that are read and scored by hundreds of teachers, not Scantron sheets marked with number 2 pencils and read by machines, which are the norm in the American "wham-bam-thank-you-exam" model, such as the Virginia SOL tests.

English education relies on various levels of national examinations to certify students' qualifications. The traditional route from schools and colleges to higher education begins with the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), taken at about age sixteen, followed a year or two later by the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced (A) level. Performance on A Level exams, typically liberal arts and sciences subjects, determines a student's acceptance to an English university. In contrast, General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) are related to occupational and technical fields, such as business, health and social care, catering and hospitality, or information technology, and typically certify a student for employment, though they may also precede further education. National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) are work-based, are taken during employment, and are awarded

on the basis of competence, which is assessed through performance in the workplace, but may also include practice simulations, or oral and written questions and assignments.

Attendees at the International Forum of the Council on Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication held in London in June 2000 were provided with the then-newly-released technical communication standards for England. *National Occupational Standards for Technical Communicators* has been published by the ISTC, the Institute for the Professional Communicator, after a four-year process of development and promises to be an invaluable guide for faculty teaching technical communication topics and courses. England's Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA) will use these professional standards to establish educational standards in the form of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). (See ISTC.)

Teaching and learning. One innovative institution that I visited in the summer of 2000 employs self-contained learning communities, each with its own particular expertise and identity, and has taken the lead in England's science and technology education and research. This innovative institution is called Cambridge University, and it might be characterized as the grandparent of American higher education because it was the intellectual incubator of the Puritan scholars who settled in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and started a school in the early seventeenth century that a Cambridge University alumnus, John Harvard, eventually endowed. Although in some ways Cambridge is a kind of education theme park for tourists (who, like me, lined up around King's College Chapel to hear the famous choir chant evensong), its several colleges are the prototype of today's "learning communities" (in other words, "learning community" is but old "college" writ large in educational jargon) and it has persisted in maintaining its leadership in science and technology (the legacy of one of its more famous alumni, Isaac Newton). Cambridge is home to one of Europe's first "technology parks" started in 1970, a gathering of a critical mass of intellectual and venture capital (see Galbraith), and in 2000 the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation awarded the university 200 million dollars in a scholarship endowment that will entice the best and the brightest students to study there in any field of their choosing. In contrast, the more hide-bound Oxford University is scrambling to assert its place in the digital age (see Cohen).

For most students in England, the path to the university includes two years at a sixth-form college, a combination of our senior year of high school in a college-prep program and the freshman year of college in general-education courses. While many of the courses of study at a sixth-form college embrace liberal arts and sciences, some (like media studies and information technology) employ both theoretical and practical learning. Learning by doing and

critical reflection on active learning are characteristic of learning here. Each student in Media Studies at Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College, for example, is required to produce a mockup of a magazine, employing graphics, layout design, and text. In addition to producing the equivalent of full-color galley proofs, the students must also provide a written meta-analysis of their publications, including explanations of the magazine's marketing demographics and of the design style. Similarly, students in Information Technology produce with Visual Basic a calculator for grammar school student use; the students must also explain the design criteria that they employed. The national exams for which students energetically prepare also include prompts that require students to produce solutions and to explain the solutions. No "multiple-guess" questions here.

Creative partnerships. In one of the last legacies of the New Tories, which was continued by New Labour, colleges and sixth-form colleges were denationalized and told to fend for themselves. Market competition, they were told, was the solution to institutional stagnation. It didn't work, so in more recent years, British schools have been encouraged to seek collaboration rather than competition. This approach has produced some remarkable achievements. Two that I observed are the Staffordshire University Lichfield Centre, a partnership between a former polytechnic that is now a university and two merged colleges; and The Learning Shop next to the market in Norwich, a one-stop storefront collaboration among further learning schools, sixth-form colleges, colleges, and two universities.

Tamworth and Lichfield College is the product of the merging of two schools in southern Staffordshire, an English county that has undergone serious economic hardship as a result of the Thatcher government's closing of mines and the erosion of the pottery industry to foreign competition. The college provides nursery facilities and other resources for its students. Staffordshire University, located in Stoke-on-Trent, is one of England's former polytechnic institutes that now has independent university status. The Staffordshire University Lichfield Centre, situated next to the Lichfield campus of Tamworth and Lichfield College, leverages the resources of the college and the university in order to provide lifelong learning opportunities to adults. It is probably as close to an American community college campus as you will find in England, a country that has tended to tell its citizens, “If you haven't gone to university when you're nineteen, don't expect to do it later.” This is a cultural obstacle, which was exacerbated by British unions' failed promise of lifelong employment for their members, that the center needed to overcome. Founding director, Chris Birch, explains that the center foresaw the need for investment in its bandwidth before its bricks. Therefore, the first stage of the physical plant was modest while its information technology resources were ambitious. The result has been thriving enrollments, which have resulted in further resources to expand the facilities. The center's modern building looks and

feels like an attractive office building, with a large glass wall along the open two-floor corridor. Birch also characterizes the center's mission as providing "anytime, anyplace, anypace" learning. In addition to a School of Office Technology, a School of Business, and general computer courses, the center also offers several full-time courses of study, including a bachelor's in Business Studies, a certificate of Higher Education in French, a post-graduate certificate in Family and Community History, and an LLB in Law. Web sites for these innovative partnerships provide visitors with an introduction to their mission and projects, as well as research and position papers documenting their successes.

The Learning Shop, a storefront operation located beside the old Guild Hall and the even older open-air market in downtown Norwich, the provincial capital of Norfolk shire, combines staff members from Norwich City College, the University of East Anglia, the Open University, the Norfolk Adult Education Service, Easton College, the Norwich School of Art and Design, Norfolk Careers Services, WEETU (The Women's Employment Enterprise and Training Unit), and the Learning and Skills Council of Norfolk to provide adult learners with guidance that leads them toward over 100 institutions providing training and education. The Learning Shop was started in 1996 as part of a collaborative venture among business, government, and education institutions in the region, an initiative that also included a Norwich Learning Festival. In its first year, it served 20,000 clients. With its turn-of-the-last-century shopping district location, The Learning Shop feels more like a travel agency than an education establishment, and it only serves as an advice center, not a classroom or lab facility. In a country where education is still a marker of social and economic class distinction, an accessible and comfortable venue for such a center is essential to its success in reaching people who traditionally would not imagine themselves in further education. What is remarkable about The Learning Shop is that institutions who might have seen themselves as players in a zero-sum, winner-take-all game for enrollments, instead work collaboratively to find the right institution for the learner's interests and needs.

Assessment and accountability are the hallmarks of English further education, from which we in the States can learn some important lessons in how to establish standards, how to provide accountability for maintaining standards, and how to assess student achievement of standards. Access is the hallmark of the American higher education system, particularly the community college, which in my view is the only thing distinctly American in American higher education, from which the English can learn. Longstanding historical and cultural connections between England and Virginia might be the foundation for trans-Atlantic learning partnerships between the commonwealth and England through which we can continue to learn from each other. The VaCIE-CEMP program is one such model of educational

exchange. Other partnerships might include long-term faculty and student exchanges, short-term study-abroad experiences for students, dual-enrollment opportunities, and resource sharing. We have a great deal to learn from each other.

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