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## OXBRIDGE 'HABITS OF MIND' - FALL 2014 SABBATICAL REPORT - CHRIS GROOMS

*Martyrs to study are very rare. Many more injure their health by neglect of study, than by excess of it.*<sup>1</sup>

The Oxbridge<sup>2</sup> tutorial system of study has its extant roots in the recesses of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century renaissance in Europe. Not surprisingly, many of its educational principles and maxims have survived in the community colleges rising and blooming on the Texas prairie in the late nineteenth century, the first such institutions in the nation.<sup>3</sup> They share the same local genesis, ultimately evolving into a transfer system to larger universities as well as occupations. The student 'profile' that grew into the tutorial system has at its core a concern for student character as it affects intellectual growth. This has evolved not in response to the popular values and educational fads of the immediate world and its new technologies but rather in response to a liberal arts training that safeguards both character and community. In Oxbridge terms, this focus ensures the survival of civic institutions and the families they serve. Arising from the monasticism of the late Middle Ages, the Oxbridge collegiate body as a whole maintains that education without community commitment is barren, perhaps even poisonous to the immediate society and its economy; therefore, colleges and universities achieve much less when they abandon such principles.

Similarly, the community values expressed in Texas community college mission statements reflect a parallel commitment to core values arising from the evolving definition of a liberal arts education, as exemplified by Oxbridge history and tradition. No matter their standing and condition when they enter any collegiate system, students exit our campuses as living representatives of the past in their sensibilities and developed intellects. College training should allow students upon graduation to confute and steer away from the ill effects of cyclical social and economic trends from which previous generations were obliged to recover repeatedly. Whereas the spirit of the times in press and image dictate the educational direction of some larger universities and institutions, the Oxbridge and Texas community college systems share the precept that their students should prepare themselves to lead and guide the local, regional, and national temper rather than be directed by it. With reference to identity and success, an educated populace will embrace the mercurial technologies and materialism of the present, but the progress of national character depends ultimately on a rigorous review and careful examination of human nature, its unity as well as its complexity. The discipline of

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Thomas Whytehead, *College Life, Letters to an Under-graduate*. Cambridge: John Thomas Walters, 1845, 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> By reference, the University of Oxford, University of Cambridge, and its affiliate colleges.

<sup>3</sup> H. Stanton Tuttle. "Junior College Movement," *Handbook of Texas*. Texas Historical Association. Web. 12 Nov. 2014.

education at its 'core' artistic and scientific level demands that students be still and listen for a time, usually over a two- to three-year program of study, to the distant voices from the past through history and literature, before their working careers deafen them with the social noise and economic traffic of the world beyond the academic lecture halls. As reflected in the discipline of their coursework, this time at college will train them to react more flexibly to events in their future careers. By doing so, the college experience also ensures a healthier economic future for themselves, their families, and their communities.

The tenets on the table of study for my sabbatical were the so-called 'eight habits of mind' of the successful American college student: curiosity, openness, persistence, engagement, responsibility, creativity, flexibility, and metacognition.<sup>4</sup> My initial sabbatical research in London, Cambridge, and Oxford, with some research sojourns into other regions of England and Wales, revealed some stark and transparent parallels between our 'core' system of training and the traditions arising from the Oxbridge environment. As an outline for exploration and debate, this list of habits frames the following discussion.

**CURIOSITY** - [i.e. the desire to know more about the world].

The British system of private education, as with Harvard and various American higher education institutions, in contrast to the Texas community college system, involves faculty review or 'vetting' students before they matriculate into the various Oxbridge colleges. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the process, the faculty rather than the administration interview prospective students and "examine carefully and critically for deficiencies; specifically to investigate the suitability of a person for a post that requires loyalty and trustworthiness." In contrast, community college professors are more at the mercy of a student's circumstance and background as they affect their performance at all levels in our courses. We cannot predict or measure a student's curiosity or commitment to our courses before they arrive in our classrooms. We must assess these habits at the beginning of each class and each semester. As we provide core skills, we cannot always predict a student's response to the materials. An absurd but revealing analogy would be that community college professors, unlike those in the Oxbridge system, are the farmers of 'Sequoias,' the giant redwood trees. We were not there to plant the seeds (by analogy K12 education), and we won't be there to harvest when they complete their undergraduate and graduate degrees. As intermediaries, we can, however, make students aware of the value of curiosity and commitment as it affects other successful 'habits of mind.'

**OPENNESS** - [i.e., the willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world].

In the tutorial system, professors demand that students review, critique, and challenge the course content. With reference to popular and contemporary habits of mind, the system wishes to guard against thinking that any modern social habit, however revered, has to be right because it is now a general custom to do so in contemporary social circles and society. Embracing the fleeting changes in popular education technologies and philosophies as standards with which to form an informed and educated character may be comfortable, but they are treacherous to a student's education. Such tools and sentiments become excuses and crutches with which to avoid an education rather than foundations for a productive vocation.

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<sup>4</sup> "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing." Developed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTA) and the National Writing Project (NWP). January, 2011. Web. 26 Oct. 2013. <<http://wpacouncil.org/files/framework-for-success-postsecondary-writing.pdf>>.

**PERSISTENCE** - [i.e., the ability to sustain interest in and attention to short and long-term projects].

Unlike the assessment systems that our faculty have developed for various disciplines in the science and arts, the tutorial system still focusses more fully on the 'subject essay' as a major assessment tool. Even in fields that rely less on formal style for written examinations as a skill set, the ability to 'write up' any information in any field has a long-standing value in the Oxbridge culture. Promoting this requisite skill parallels the long term goal of 'writing-across-the-curriculum' programs that developed on many campuses in the '90s.

Sustaining student interest in course subjects demands a consistent review of the students' understanding of lecture information, including a written assessment of primary texts and secondary research in the field, usually in the form of an essay. This, in turn, allows professors to counsel and individualize their instruction beyond the lecture format. The overriding question that arises in the Oxbridge second-year course structure concerns not what has been discovered, but rather what has *not* been discovered or explored in any respective field. Answering these questions demands a full review of all secondary studies as well as developing an outline for future study and query. In perspective, what students don't know about their areas of study becomes as important, or perhaps more important, than what they do know.

**ENGAGEMENT** - [i.e., a sense of investment and involvement in learning].

At some point in the tutorial system, as with any social system that values education, students must acknowledge that they do not have the ability to form themselves with reference to their core skills and special knowledge sets. They must willingly court the governance (courses, syllabi, instruction) of others rather than submit themselves to the caprice and chance of the working world about them. This involves not only internal resolution but also consistent attempts to accept the rules of college life with reference to attendance, behavior, and commitment to a core preparation for their field of study. This discipline traces back to the earliest monastic 'Rules' to which universities in the tutorial system adhered. Basically, it demands that students review carefully and conscientiously the academic rules (the syllabus) under which they register. If they agree to adhere to such rules, they are welcomed, fully; if not, they are free to depart.

**RESPONSIBILITY** - [i.e., the ability to take ownership of one's actions and understand the consequences of those actions for oneself and others].

Mentoring between students as a peer pressure, usually as a part of a study cell, has a very relevant place in the Oxbridge culture, with both positive and negative results, depending on the severity of the social settings in each individual college. As this report's preface quote by Whytehead asserts, "Martyrs to study are very rare. Many more injure their health by neglect of study, than by excess of it." A wide-spread face-to-face student support system as well as an almost ubiquitous system of digital communications (email, social networking, etc.) allows for much self-regulation of both academic and social activities. A persistent, balanced pressure aids and orientates student to their current and future colleagues. This develops along a parallel line in our own community college course communications, as students take advantage of the college's Cougarmail, as well as their own digital social networks. If unbalanced or abusive, for example, from collusion and plagiarism, apathy ensues, sometimes even expulsion from the collegiate system. Much of our Dean of Student Life's responsibility is formally in the hands of faculty who live *in situ* with students at respective colleges.

**CREATIVITY** - [i.e., the ability to use novel approaches for generating, investigating, and representing ideas].

In the Oxbridge tutorial system, students network in smaller study groups, usually meeting in the resident dormitories and common rooms of each college, as an ancillary activity to specific subject lectures and papers in their respective fields. One 'habit of mind' that has evolved and developed since the medieval period is to keep a note-taking system common to each subject for the purpose of commenting and writing longer essays that address various arguments and subjects in their target fields. The 'commonplace book' that each student develops is much more than a collection of notes from lectures. It is a hand-written personal diary of quotes and information from relevant sources, such as books, journals, and basic primary sources in their chosen subject field. Students value and develop these personal records of their academic growth and career specializations.<sup>5</sup>

One important maxim that appeared repeatedly in my discussions and study quotes Francis Bacon: "Reading maketh a *full* man, conference a *ready* man, writing an *exact* man."<sup>6</sup> Thus, training in note-taking by hand and related study skills allows students to differentiate what they clearly see as well as what remains obscure with reference to any course of study.<sup>7</sup> The materials and discussions that arose during this sabbatical reminded me of how many years it took to develop an effective (and sometimes ineffective) note-taking system for gleaning from my instructors the essential knowledge from a semester's worth of lectures. Consistent oral and hand-written dialog between tutor and students as review of their essential lecture and reading notes accounts for the measurable shift from nescience to knowledge in Oxbridge course subjects.

**FLEXIBILITY** - [i.e., the ability to adapt to situations, expectations, or demands].

For instructors and students, the Oxbridge tutorial system tends to divide activities between senior lecturers (large student groups) and tutors (smaller student groups). Over the years, a gradual shift from oral instruction to book instruction evolved from a time when the price of printed books was prohibitive. This was true until the beginning of the nineteenth century when cheaper paper and commercial presses begin to populate the cities and towns outside the academic circles of London, Oxford, and Cambridge.<sup>8</sup> Since this development, the main object of instruction has been the guidance and assessment of close reading. Lecturers and tutors have shifted their focus to assisting students to arrange their academic calendars as well as provide assistance in taking advantage of the extensive libraries in each college. These activities are similar to our campus-wide Student Life orientations as well as the presentation and explanation of introductory materials (syllabi, calendar, and academic policies) on the first day of class by faculty in their respective fields.

Unlike the digital resources that have arisen over the last decade (digital journals, periodical databases such as *JSTOR*, etc.), the careful preservation of print has persisted in the Oxbridge system, and the dutiful efforts to keep printed texts from rot and decay has metamorphosed over the centuries into a reverence for the ceaseless quest, care, and protection of knowledge. This activity extends far beyond the simple memorization and regurgitation of course content. Rather, it demands that students read differently,

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<sup>5</sup> For a history of this habit, read Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, especially the section on university life, 217-224, passim.

<sup>6</sup> This quote appears in many guises over the centuries. For example, Benjamin Franklin recorded the maxim as, "Reading makes a full man, meditation a profound man, discourse a clear man."

<sup>7</sup> For a supporting argument, read Robinson Meyers's recent article, "To Remember a Lecture Better, Take Notes by Hand," *The Atlantic*, May 1, 2014, Web, 12 Feb. 2015.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed and informed history of this development, read James Raven, *Booksapes: Geographies of Printing and Publishing in London before 1800*. London: The British Library, 2014, passim.

critically, attentively, searching for and even delighting in brief anecdotes, accidental hints, the incomplete and imperfect records of knowledge that connect their own humanity to that of another age.<sup>9</sup> This type of close reading requires a different attitude towards study, an attitude that values the feelings and emotions of past authors and writers as well as their intellects. As the Roman rhetorician Quintilian suggests, the adolescent training and education of the ancients provides a path to understanding not only their habits of thought but also our own.<sup>10</sup> Such curiosity begins in the cradle and deserves academic nourishment throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The Oxbridge system considers the whole life experience of the student as a way both to regulate and couple personal growth with academic flexibility.

**METACOGNITION** – [i.e., the ability to reflect on one’s own thinking as well as on the individual and cultural processes used to structure knowledge].

A flexible heuristic that values childhood experiences can describe but not explain the success of the tutorial system. At its heart is the core of living instruction, a precept dating to the Middle Ages and antiquity. As the British statesman Thomas Carlyle once declared: “Soul must catch fire through a mysterious contact with a living soul. [The] mind grows not like a vegetable (by having its roots littered with etymological compost), but like a spirit by mysterious contact of spirit, thought kindling itself at the fire of living thought.”<sup>11</sup> Simply capturing print or digital information offers no real instruction or guided recollection and thought. Texts alone have no explicit powers to adapt themselves to different types of readers. That requires face-to-face individual instruction. To our peril, we imagine that an interface on a computer screen can instruct.<sup>12</sup>

Like many of the students matriculating into the Oxbridge environment, our high school or home-schooled students arrive in our freshman community college courses conditioned by a broad state of close high school campus discipline and compulsory studies, to which we add the core courses. Our students must learn to replace the external restraints to which they have had to submit by law at the K12 level with a more mature recognition of the inward principles of self-discipline and self-control as they work studiously towards their undergraduate degrees. As community college instructors, we must guide them through this wild and unsteady current of educational change towards their majors and eventual careers.

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The larger question then arises of how do we as community college instructors create and sustain in our students a burning (or at least smoldering) affection for our course subjects. One answer may be to impress upon our students the value of recognizing their ignorance as well as their knowledge. They must learn to acknowledge that even the subject for which they develop a passion will forever be a vanishing horizon of discovery. They must learn to accept that they may never read or fully comprehend a variety of subjects in the arts and sciences. They must learn to set boundaries in order to unify their purpose and energies in their major subjects without wandering in too many unrelated and undisciplined directions, thus wasting their academic energies. The tutorial system accomplishes this with consistent face-to-face dialog and a personal system of note-taking that internalizes knowledge in a reasoned way for future deliberation and application.

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<sup>9</sup> For a fuller discussion, read Thomas Whytehead, ‘Letter VII, The Library,’ passim.

<sup>10</sup> Quintilian, *The Orator’s Education*. London: Loeb, 2001. Books I-XII, passim.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (Boston 1836), 109.

<sup>12</sup> For the most recent and detailed discussion, read media philosopher Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2012, passim.

As a college, we could promote:

- Better training in study skills and note-taking, targeting different types of courses as a bridge between high school and college level environments.
- Less physical isolation, especially intervening with digital technologies (cell phone and social networking communications), an instructional oversight that balances and blends activities between face-to-face and screen interfaces rather than relying solely on stand-alone systems of remote education and social identity, especially with reference to more rigorous classroom activities.
- More directed reading, critical thinking exercises, and personal dialog with students in the office and classroom; redesigning peer work to emphasize critical thinking skills, and reconnecting oral discourse to composition skills.
- As part of a first class day syllabus or even larger orientation activities, developing and presenting to incoming students an honest profile of the academic leap from K12 to college that identifies and targets the weaknesses in academic habits of mind from external restraints to internal motivation and direction.

As an abiding practice, many members of faculty already meet with their colleagues and students to create a healthy academy. Refreshing this discourse and acknowledging our strengths and weaknesses by way of reexamining our own higher education history and culture and how we target student outcomes in the classroom and office as mentors can only promote even more pedagogical growth and collegiality.

## COLLEGE PRESENTATIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Based on my sabbatical research and activities,

- I am developing materials for classroom presentation in English 1301 (Composition I) and English 1302 (Composition II), including new orientation discussion to include with all of my syllabi, in-class exercises, research paper exercises, and restructuring individual student conference schedules.
- I am preparing to present at the Faculty Development Conference in Fall 2015 or Spring 2016.
- In addition I am sharing my work with the LINK committee (College English faculty liaison with the local K12 English instructors).
- As site editor for the college Writing Center, I am developing tutoring materials and handouts for students who need help with study and composition.
- I will also present at the new Student Orientation in Fall 2015 and Spring 2016 as part of the student/faculty roundtables.

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