

# An American Exchange Teacher In England

JAMES V. BRADLEY

SOME OF THE MARVELOUS experiences and rude cultural shocks I had as an exchange teacher in Manchester, England, resulted from contrasting assumptions British and Americans hold regarding secondary education and society. My exchange, administered through the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, was to West Wythenshawe College of Further Education, where I taught O- (ordinary) and A- (advanced) level biology and human biology for academic year 1974–75. Alan Jones, whom I replaced, taught in my place at Lake Forest (Ill.) High School (see the box on p. 93).

West Wythenshawe College is primarily for students who, for a variety of reasons, did not complete their examination preparations at the secondary level. As a result, I found my students older and more mature than those I was accustomed to, and highly motivated. In contrast, Alan Jones found Lake Forest students young, energetic, and in general more difficult to teach than his British students.

Both Alan and I found getting settled in a new country just a week or so before the opening of school and trying to understand and adjust to a new culture a much more stimulating experience than the common one of starting a new teaching position in a different region of one's own country.

## *A Different Approach to Curriculum*

One difference between English and American attitudes toward education I quickly noticed was that, while Americans emphasize enthusiasm for learning, self-reliance in thinking, and self-development, the English emphasize the absolute value of a specific body of knowledge to be passed on from generation to generation.

The specific body of biological knowledge to be passed on is well defined in England, and the teacher's accountability to authority is well established. The biology teacher in any British secondary school has one primary goal: to prepare his students to pass the national O- and A-level exams. These national examina-

tions take the place of our high school diploma and cumulative grade averages; they qualify students for better jobs or for entry into university or other institutions of higher learning.

O-level biology exams are usually taken at about the age of 16. A-levels involve two additional years of preparation and are usually taken at about 18 or 19, often by students fulfilling entry requirements for university.

Theoretically, a school may adopt any one of ten or more biology curricula offered by independent national examining boards. But, actually, schools of a certain region usually are associated with a particular board and tradition; administrative and interdepartmental pressures tend to maintain that association. Each examining board issues a syllabus outlining the topics and degree of coverage. Most cover a similar core of knowledge, but they use a variety of approaches, including a phylogenetic approach, a systematic approach, and the Nuffield approach (similar to our BSCS).

Most of the syllabuses present a balanced and integrated view of biology, and the old zoology-botany approach is taken by only 15% of A-level candidates. The trend is toward improving the precision with which topics are covered.

At times the syllabus seemed rather vague, and I grew anxious about how much coverage to allow certain topics. This was a situation in which Americans would use behavioral objectives. But, guided by the syllabus and previous exams and my colleagues' experience, I managed to cover all of the subject matter that later appeared on the final examination.

I did, however, find that the dictates of a syllabus were confining and in some cases irritating. For example, the O-level syllabus had extensive coverage of evolution and genetics but specifically stated that the alternation of generations in lower plants need not be mentioned. In my past work, alternation of generations had served as a base for teaching evolution and basic genetics. Its exclusion seemed ridiculous and was only one of several cases in which I felt at odds with the authority. Also, in some instances I had to cut short a subject the class was interested in, in order to cover the required material in time for the exams.

The examinations were received in the mail and opened and administered on certain dates throughout England. They were then returned immediately to the national examining boards for grading. The loss of control over a student's grade is another shock felt by

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the American teacher in England. It was pleasant, though, not having to explain grades to irate parents or students. Because of this national agreement about the body of knowledge the students must learn, individual parents in Britain have much less influence over the teacher (and education in general) than they have in the United States.

The typical O-level exam consists of two two-hour written tests. The A-level exam consists of two three-hour exams. A two- or three-hour practical may be included in the A-level exam, or field notebooks or individual work may be evaluated. The written exams are structured along similar lines for both O- and A-levels. They usually consist of a section of short-answer questions, structured questions in which data are given or an experiment is presented for interpretation, and traditional discursive questions. The exams are competitive and thorough. If the student fails, he must wait another year before taking another exam.

The percentage of students who pass biology varies from year to year, but a typical year for any one examining board may show 60% of the candidates passing O-levels and 70% passing the A-levels. Letter grades similar to our own are given; and, of course, the students with higher grades get preference for certain jobs or for entrance to university.

The examinations are flexible. Various feedback mechanisms exist between biology teachers and the examining boards so that the syllabuses change throughout the years.

Changes in the basic curricula of local schools through the addition of new courses, however, seem very slow and cumbersome as compared to the change possible in U.S. schools. The red tape a British teacher has to go through to get a new course approved and to arrange for external examination of the course is, I believe, prohibitive. And I don't believe that a teacher could introduce minicourses into such a system.

### *Professionals and Authority*

The lack of rapid change in British curriculum is due in part to another basic British assumption that is different from our American attitudes. The English believe in authority, in the stability of their institutions and culture. Americans distrust authority and see their institutions and culture as continually changing.

The stability of the British educational system and the long-established examination system have important advantages: an employer or university knows exactly what standards the successful O- or A-level candidate has met. The teacher's success and his accountability are easily measured by how many of his students pass their exams. And high standards are maintained. Any student passing A-level biology is, at the very least, equal in achievement and discipline to the average American student completing the first year of university biology. In an era of constant com-

plaint about falling standards in U.S. education, a British-like system is undoubtedly very appealing to some people.

The high standards upheld by the O- and A-level examinations are, however, not without heavy cost. I knew many potentially good students who simply could not cope with such a rigorous system so early in life. The stigma of failure will lie heavy upon them. In the British system there seems to be so little time to explore, to wonder, to dream, or to enjoy learning.

Before I leave the topic of British social stability and acceptance of authority, I would like to say that the roles of teachers and administrators seemed clearly defined and accepted—not by written contract but by many years of mutual acceptance. Certainly disagreements arise, but never did I see a challenge to the other's authority by either side. Though my reaction to the O- and A-level examination system was typically American (I strongly resented teaching what someone else thought important, and felt threatened by an external authority I could not communicate with), I found the contact between teachers and their local college administrators much more relaxed and pleasant than it usually is in the United States.

The professionalism of my colleagues, the use of lab assistants, and the fact that I received only four pieces of paper from the college administration in the course of the entire year (and thus was allowed to concentrate on my teaching) were things that greatly impressed me about Wythenshawe College.

### *Attitudes toward Education*

A third basic difference between English and American assumptions about secondary education and society is that the English have traditionally thought of education as a prerogative of the middle and upper classes (and, for exceptionally bright students, a means of moving up from the working class to the middle class). Americans see education as the right of every citizen and are motivated primarily by the monetary rewards and the increased prestige offered by higher education. Americans simply haven't the strong class associations with education that the British have.

It is fascinating to see a foreign country deal with its problems and, in a rather perverse way, heartening to know that U.S. schools are not the only ones with problems. In Britain some of the problems stem from the heritage of the class-conscious secondary-school structure.

Long before the idea of mass education became a reality in Britain, the class association with education was well established, with the children of the nobility and the wealthy attending private grammar schools in preparation for entrance into Oxford or Cambridge (the only universities in England until the 19th century).

It was only with the passing of the Elementary Edu-

## A British Teacher in America

Alan Jones

Having already been to the U.S. on a six-week Greyhound tour in 1972, and since watching enthralled Alistair Cooke's "America" on television, I was eager to come back again and spend more time in the U.S.

My exchange post was at Lake Forest High School, just north of Chicago. It is a rural suburb, bordered by urbanized Highland Park and North Chicago, enveloped by towering elms much prized by the community—a community of wealthy commuters and socially active wives.

I was to teach introductory biology to freshmen and sophomores, an age group with which I was not familiar. The two other Biology I teachers, I soon learned, adopted radically different methods of teaching. So I settled down into teaching the way I normally taught in England, and ran up against immediate difficulties. The students were not used to my teaching methods, nor, I think, my higher standards associated with more mature students—although the subject level was the same.

The first few weeks saw hostile students and parents, and I quickly became aware of a very different attitude to schooling. Here the parents, at least in this community, were actively involved in their children's progress, and if it was not satisfactory, fault was ascribed either to student or teacher.

The students themselves, even on a day-to-day basis, were extremely grade conscious—urged on, I suspect, by parents. "What's my grade today?"—as if it had changed from the day before! Another comment I found strange was, "What are we doing today?" or "Are we doing anything today?"—as if today at last we might be doing something interesting! Also, working in compulsory education for the first time, I was at a loss as to how to deal with students who made no attempt to disguise their contempt for schooling. I found the need to be a disciplinarian as well as a "giver of information" difficult to adjust to.



Alan Jones

Generally, I found the students socially mature and quite sophisticated, yet at the same time academically less advanced than students of the same age in the U.K. The affluence of the area must be in part responsible for this, although I think it is fair to say that American students seem to be "into" more things than British students.

I also felt that the students here had a lower level of respect for me as a teacher than I experience in the U.K. One thing that saddened me was that I was rarely considered a British biology teacher, but only a biology teacher. The cultural side of the exchange was only infrequently tapped by my students. I did, however, have the opportunity to speak to other groups in the school—once on British government and another time on British accents and dialects.

The staff, on the other hand, was very interested in the fact that I was British. Several of them had been to England and had some English ancestry, and it was clear that some of them had a special place in their hearts for Britain. The first few months were hectic socially, and we were constantly invited out to meals at lively homes. On my previous trip, I had been greatly impressed with the warmth and generosity of Americans and these early months confirmed this. With the money I earned helping coach soccer we flew to San Diego at Christmas, and I was amazed and deeply touched when I was presented with a sizeable contribution from the staff to help us finance our trip.

Of the school itself, there are many good things to say. I was impressed with the audiovisual facilities, there being video carrels with color monitors into which I could schedule groups to see some of the large collection of tapes the school had. I was also impressed with the variety and depth of courses on the curriculum. In an automobile society, driver education makes great sense and should be made compulsory in English schools. The size and range of the athletics program was also impressive.

At the end of the first semester I gave a questionnaire to all my students in order to obtain their impressions on having a foreign exchange teacher. The results were fascinating and generally favorable. A full 80% of the students thought the exchange of teachers from one country to another was a good idea and most had enjoyed the experience. Comments were mixed. Some thought "we've got good enough teachers here already," while others thought my accent was "really neat." However, some said the accent had given them a little difficulty. "You're teaching us to pronounce the words all wrong," and others, "Biology is boring, but with the weird accent, you have perked it up some."

ation Act in 1870 and the rapid growth of secondary schools after World War I that education became generally available to the working class.

With increased demand for higher education, a system of testing was introduced in 1944 for children of 11 or 12. Those passing these "11-plus" exams were placed in grammar schools and destined primarily for university training. Those who failed went to secondary modern schools, where the emphasis was placed on practical and vocational courses.

In some areas of the country strong objections were raised that this selection process perpetuated class distinction: middle-class children would, because of their environment, do well on the examinations; and working-class children would not have an equal chance at university. The secondary modern schools, it was claimed, would become primarily working class.

As a result of negative responses to the 11-plus, some school districts established comprehensive schools, which theoretically cater to the needs of all students. Comprehensive schools are similar to U.S. high schools. The idea of the comprehensive schools

has gained in strength and is now a main issue in British education.

While I was in England, the government (Labor) instituted changes aimed at forcing all schools receiving state monies to become comprehensive schools. Naturally, the grammar schools (whose histories, in some cases, reach back hundreds of years) and parents who believe in selective schools and look at comprehensives as mainly working-class schools are offering strong resistance. I found being an attentive observer on the sidelines rather than a participant in the center of educational controversy a unique and comfortable experience.

### *An Unforgettable Experience*

The year in England was an unforgettable experience for my family as well as for me. My 10-year-old son had a kind but very firm teacher who helped him improve his reading. My two teenage daughters attended a strict grammar school where even the color of their

(Concluded on p. 118)

and writing "to the appropriate congressman" to express our feelings when few if any of us really know the existing situation or have practical ideas about how to alleviate it.

Mayer's attack on Congress's action regarding NSF funds for 1976 is based on the position that a conflict exists "between those desiring to maintain the status quo and those who believe change is necessary to face the future effectively." I have seen no action on the part of NSF, professional educators, or any large group that makes the present implementation procedures practiced by such agencies as NSF accountable to the education community. It is not easy for the taxpayer to perceive why the burden for the decline in knowledge is not directly attributable to the education system. We as educators need to put forth our arguments with reason rather than as emotional and partisan factors if we are to effectuate change. And unless we are willing to be accountable, to disclose our weaknesses as well as our strengths, we are going to continue to be at the mercy of those policy-making individuals who do not have to look for the substantiation of a program.

*Elmer R. Seevers*  
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*William V. Mayer comments:*

Elmer R. Seevers concentrates on need in his letter which, in turn, makes his needs known. Such expressed needs can then be subject to needs assessment and appropriate steps taken to meet them. Because American education is a diverse enterprise, its needs are varied and no one curriculum or program can satisfy them all. Needs have been expressed by inner city schools, minorities, womens' groups, colleges, school boards, parents, and others. The critical issue is that unless needs are delineated no effort is taken to meet them. The thrust of my October article was to have those interested make their needs known to their appropriate representatives concerning the values of past NSF-sponsored summer and academic year institutes and implementation and dissemination activities. If they are not perceived as needed, they will not be continued. Just as Seevers has expressed his perceived needs, so should those teachers who feel that updating in current content and modern methodology increases their effectiveness make their needs known to the congressional members who have eliminated this segment of the NSF program. The articulation of a need is the first step in meeting it. I urge those interested to follow Seever's example in expressing their needs in the appropriate forum.

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### Forgetfulness

Blessed are the forgetful; for they get the better even of their blunders.—*Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche*

## *Exchange Teacher . . .* from p. 93

underclothes was dictated (dark blue). They managed to adjust and did well.

New habits for all of us formed easily, out of necessity. There were no large paper bags for groceries; so we had to remember to take our cloth shopping bags to the store. In the furnished duplex we rented, doors closed off unheated rooms, and a simple timing device turned on central heating at selected times. We got used to smaller cars that get 40 miles per gallon. At first many things seemed small. Eventually, the waste of energy in the United States seemed gross.

We bought a camper (a small converted van) and did quite a bit of traveling in Britain and Europe. We went on sightseeing outings with the Manchester exchange-teachers club. We had dinner with various colleagues and friends (who, in their zeal to provide for the American tastes they had heard of, sometimes had their houses blazing hot and sometimes pressed glasses of ice water upon us as soon as we arrived). My colleagues in the science department at West Wythenshawe College are among my very best friends.

All in all it was a wonderful year. I hope that anyone interested in an exchange will contact HEW.

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### Scientists Find Monkeys Have Brains that Function Asymmetrically

A Stanford University scientist recently reported that monkeys possess a type of brain which had earlier been associated primarily with man's specific intellectual capacities. The discovery by Henry H. Dewson helps to bridge a gap in our knowledge of the stages of evolution in the human brain.

In the human, there is a lack of symmetry of brain organization, with each half of the brain specialized to handle different activities. The left half deals particularly with those activities which contribute to the understanding and use of spoken language. Dewson said that, like humans, monkeys have been found to have similar asymmetries of brain function.

Seeking to determine why man's brain functions asymmetrically, Dewson and his associates turned to other animals. Under NSF grants, the researchers trained more than a dozen macaque monkeys to recognize various sounds and to match these sounds with certain colors. The task demands not only listening and looking but a form of recall memory as well. Dewson believes that the trained monkeys can be used as an animal model for studies of such maladies as strokes, which lead in humans to aphasia or loss of the capacity for understanding or expressing thoughts conveyed by language.