Sabbatical Report – Chris Grooms, Fall 2008

For my sabbatical, I received a formal invitation to reside as a visiting Research Associate at the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Research in Aberystwyth, Wales, United Kingdom, for the Fall of 2008.

The Centre provided a private office, a fully-loaded laptop (web and word processors), and intranet system wide access to the archive of the National Library of Wales and international library archives. The staff met once or twice a day with each other in both formal and informal meetings to discuss the framework and progress for editing new editions of medieval poetry texts (scholarly activities) as well as project grants and deadlines (administrative activities). Most of the projects have a three to five year cycle of editing, proofing, and publishing, with in-house publishing standards and style sheets, based on the annotated needs and directives of scholars in the field.

Scholarly Enrichment

In addition to these activities, the Centre hosts symposiums and lectures with invited specialists in Celtic languages, literatures, linguistics, history, and archaeology. While in residence, I attended a one-day symposium on online dictionaries systems in Celtic languages (part of the larger University of Wales and Oxford dictionary projects) as well as a cross-disciplinary one-day symposium on the origins of Celtic cultures with the newest research in the field of linguistics, archaeology, and genetics (the Genome).

In November, I received an invitation from the National Library of Wales to give a lecture and concert on eighteenth and nineteenth century folk music and the development of a new digital archive in that field. I outlined the features of a new catalog that would allow literary and music scholars to cross-reference their research.

The State of the College Textbook in Britain

Scholars in the Centre provide editions through a multi-level approach to any given poem: background and biography, text and variants, syntactic and literary line notes, and vocabulary. This allows the most comprehensive and accurate treatment of the text, yet it does not always follow that what they produce is useful in a classroom setting. With reference to student contact, the British system is less dynamic and student/teacher centered that the American system. Very few professors require textbooks. They may circulate relevant bibliographies, but undergraduate students benefit only from the scope and limits of campus libraries.
The National Library of Wales does not allow undergraduate access to its materials. Undergraduate students depend wholly on the local University library. Very few of the scholars working on the Centre’s projects have any contact with university teaching staff with reference to pedagogy or content design. Their relationship with teaching staffs at universities is at best indifferent and at worst economically antagonistic (all universities and research centers compete for grants and moneys).

The published editions of medieval poetry have an independent life as reference books rather than ancillary materials to relevant courses, and the administrative gaps between directors, deans, and professors only overlap at the larger council levels with little or no contact with teaching staff or instructors. This bureaucratization of these centers of study as well as the relevant university departments is the single greatest weakness of the British system for textbook production, and it provides little support to students or instructors.

The educational dysfunction that has occurred between academic publication competition for moneys from the British education councils and their relevance to the classroom has weakened the ability of professors to teach effectively and has diminished the value of the British undergraduate degree. Obsessed with disconnected publications as the single measurement of the worth of a teacher, the British system has eroded the value of developing superior or even adequate teaching texts. Administrative bodies pressure professors into producing texts or articles that may or may not have any relevance to their courses. An institution’s research rating is more important than the academic needs and training of students. It is a great tragedy to the quality of British education that this trend continues. Students rarely buy standard or course-integrated textbooks, and the editions of primary texts are too expensive to afford for their own personal libraries.

The Centre has endeavored to create by subscription an affordable set of texts of for scholars and students, but competing with the Oxbridge and satellite university presses has left it somewhat in the publishing backwash with reference to a web presence. Student cannot buy directly from the Centre without going through an outside web-based vendor, which raises the costs even higher.

The process of creating basic texts at the Centre is very exact and demanding. Unfortunately, few students benefit from access to such texts in the British system. Various academic bureaucracies hamper the sharing of knowledge by instructors and students. As a result, students lose the benefit of an informed access to the very literatures that their course majors promote as a subject of study, nor are there any web-based materials available to clarify the gaps.
The Gaps in Web-based Access

IT providers within their university systems, many of whom have no understanding or interest in the complexities of scholarship and education, dictate the design and access to materials in the British education system. As the scholars and instructors do not have a say in the design of pages (instructional and individual scholarly web sites), their knowledge and expertise rarely find a presence for students beyond the classroom seminar and lecture environments, nor do scholars in the Centre have any contact with or input into the design and presence of Centre’s web site.

Academic web sites have become closed worlds to all but a few members of staff who have some contact with the university’s IT service staff. As a result, even the web presence of the texts has diminished to almost nothing, and the interest is growing less and less to provide such access as the bureaucratic restraints get more dense with IT. This condition has undermined the morale of the educational staff as well as the students, especially instructors and students who have participated in a larger and freer academic environment outside the United Kingdom.

Conclusion – the American Advantage

Although more rigorous by definition of editing and primary text access, the ability of the British-based textbook production to serve all but a few specialized audiences has diminished greatly. Although textbook prices in America have increased, we should more fully value the presence of teacher/student-centered textbooks and ancillary publications in the classroom. We should more fully appreciate the existence and dynamic development of the American college textbook. Coupled with web-based access to a larger academic web, American textbooks offer a depth and freedom of access to a printed and digital world of knowledge that other countries deny their students.

As faculty at Collin College examine the complexities of choosing textbooks for their students, my experience with the British undergraduate environment has strengthened my belief that we must not exclude or eliminate textbooks altogether as a cost-cutting remedy in favor of stand-alone electronic editions (with the exception of web-based reference works). Our courses and students would be the poorer for it and ill-prepared for their future careers, as the American textbook, its ancillaries, and the competition within those academic publication industries, have inspired and shaped an academic rigor that continues to connect the cutting edge of research to successful classroom outcomes. Community colleges are academic laboratories as well as academic businesses, and the development, review, and editorial shape of the American textbook has leveled the quality of Collin College course content with that of any four-year institution in the country.
Although pricing is an issue for continuous and competitive review, the process of textbook adoption has created interdisciplinary discussions that continually improve course quality. Such internal discussions have disappeared in other countries to the detriment of their undergraduate programs. The quality of American textbooks continues to be a unique feature and advantage to our classrooms. To eliminate this feature would harm the future of American education both at the local and national levels.