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Jim Persoon

Grand Valley State University

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Baseball, Cricket, and the Teaching Exchange

JIM PERSOON

(In January of 1989 Jim Persoon of the GVSU English Department and Donald Salter of the University of Newcastle School of Education began a 6-month teaching exchange.)

I'm as starry-eyed about Britain as any other red-blooded Anglophile, but it took an exchange to Newcastle upon Tyne to clear up a few things that even Masterpiece Theatre had left up in the air.

I'd seen *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and *To Serve Them All My Days*, but what about regular school kids. Did they really address teachers as sir?

I'm devoted to *Educating Rita*, but what *was* Rita doing in Michael Caine's office all alone anyway?

And cricket. I'd tried to appreciate its logic and delicacy, but why didn't, just once, some guy haul off and whack the ball into the seats?

These were the real questions I wanted this exchange to answer.

There were some wonderful miscommunications right from the start. My partner Don Salter and I, in letter after letter and phone call after phone call, would try to explain to each other the duties we'd each be facing. The phone calls would go something like this:

"Don, I've got the books ordered for your courses, what books will I be using?"

"Oh, any that you want, whatever you think useful."

"Well, what am I teaching exactly?"

"You'll have my tutor group, but they'll be in the schools Michaelmas to Easter, and you'll have returning teachers evenings, but that ends during summer term."

Silence.

"Shall I bring some books?"

"Oh no, we have plenty of books here."

It was after this particular conversation that I knew there was something different about our two systems, and that I had a lot to learn. Don and I were certainly not the first to go through this confusion. A novel my Newcastle colleagues urged me to read, David Lodge's *Changing Places*, examines the parallel lives of a British and an American professor trading places who also can't figure out what they're doing.

The American in England finds his duties described in a letter left behind for him:

I gather from Busby that you'll probably be taking over my tutorial groups. The second-year groups are rather hard going, especially the Joint Honours, but the first-year group is quite lively, and I think you'll find the two final-year groups very interesting. There are a few points you might like to bear in mind. Brenda Archer suffers badly from pre-menstrual tension so don't be surprised if she bursts into tears every now and again. The other third-year group is tricky because Robin Kenworth used to be Alice Murphy's boy-friend but lately he's been going around with Miranda Watkins, and as they're all in the same group you may find the atmosphere rather tense...

The letter, we are told, continues in this vein for several pages. Our poor American, Morris Zapp by name, is bewildered by the intimate detail this letter gives of every student with still no mention of any subject matter or course title.

Back in California, the Englishman, Philip Swallow, is equally bewildered to find his name listed in a schedule of classes next to something called "English 305: Novel-Writing," when he couldn't, as he says, write a novel to save his life.

Like Morris Zapp, I found myself responsible for the lives of my students in a way I'd never encountered before at a university. I began to understand why the English system called me a tutor, rather than the term we loosely use in America, professor. I was not here to profess some subject, I was here to tutor some people.

Like Philip Swallow, I began to wonder at the notion that the course was the thing, that three credits of English 305 taught by Swallow was equal to three credits taught by any of the other interchangeable staff.

Michael Caine had only one Rita to educate; I had sixteen. But I also got to be with them five days a week for fifteen scheduled hours, and more in the evenings if we wanted. How strange it now seems to deliver our life-changing regimens in 50-minute packages. My students couldn't comprehend our smorgasbord system. The most frequent question they asked was how my students were getting on with Don. My students. I was never able to fully communicate how it was that, while teachers and students often had a strong and warm relationship in America, one could not identify any group as "my" students, and that even to try to do so would smack a bit of a Jim Jones cult. My students in England, however, are still mine.

One of Morris Zapp's great pleasures was his university digs. If the British university teacher had nothing else, he had a room he could call his own, a decent place to sit and read his newspaper and the use of a john that was off-limits to students.

Like Morris (and Michael Caine), I found myself in a spacious, be-windowed office,

with a teaching room permanently my own, carpeted, with cushy chairs and book-lined walls, and outfitted with coffee and tea service. At the building entrance was a porter. His presence made me feel I had finally made it, that I was teaching at the Ritz. I became a card-carrying member of the Senior Common Room, where sober and dignified dons read the *Times* over lunch and got in a bit of snooker. Sometimes I would deign to eat with my students at the “junior” common room, which was crowded, loud, and considerably less sober. This was the North of England, where a man is not a man unless he can drink his pints at lunch.

At one point in Lodge’s novel, Morris Zapp looks at a university notice board and doubles over in a fit of laughter:

The noticeboard distantly reminded Morris of the early work of Robert Rauschenberg: a thumb-tacked montage of variegated scraps of paper — letterheaded notepaper, memo sheets, compliment slips, pages torn clumsily from college notebooks, inverted envelopes, reversed invoices, even fragments of wrapping paper with tails of scotch tape still adhering to them — all bearing cryptic messages from faculty to students about courses, rendezvous, assignments and books, scribbled in a variety of scarcely decipherable hands with pencil, ink and coloured ball-point. The end of the Gutenberg era was evidently not an issue here: they were still living in a manuscript culture.

I can attest to the accuracy of Lodge’s scene. The hand-written word had an importance in public life that I had not anticipated. I taught what we would call graduate students, language and literature majors who having taken their university degrees now were doing a one-year post-graduate certificate in education course (PGCE). This is the standard route for teacher-training in Britain. When it came time to write the thesis (called a dissertation; the Ph. D. dissertation is called a thesis), even that august document was, by many of them, hand-written. The typed letter was considered by many schools to be acceptable, but a bit less professional than a hand-written one. I may be about to overstate the case, but I can only express my surprise at finding this preference for content over form, after decades of being bombarded over here by shoddy products in slick packaging. The British seem a bit better than we are at sussing out that kind of elegant emptiness (“suss”: to figure out, from the acronym of an anti-terrorist “search upon suspicion” law).

In my time at the University of Newcastle I sussed out the answers to my first two questions. Michael Caine taught Rita alone because of something called the Open University, a way for non-traditional students to get a degree by a combination of

TV, summer school, and tutorials. He was her tutor. And yes, school kids called men 'sir' and women 'miss'. Those who speak the Geordie dialect of Newcastle also call everyone 'man', so a female teacher is addressed as 'miss-man'. I re-learned that punctuation conventions are truly conventional. My British colleagues did not see sentences such as this one as incorrect, they allowed that the comma was appropriate here. They also used single rather than double quotation marks, as in my sentence above.

The answer to my third question, however, is still a mystery to me. I never quite sussed out the ways of cricket. Not for want of trying. I even took a PE class in it. I learned to bowl, I learned batting strokes, I learned rules and hand signals and how to put on the pads properly. I learned terms like 'off stump' and 'square leg'. I learned to pour tea. But the first time in a game that I stepped to the plate — well, there's no plate — the first time I positioned myself sort of in front of my wicket, and the first ball bowled to me, a big fat slow red ball coming down the center of the pitch, taking one nice easy bounce and not deviating or curving, well I did to that ball what any true American would do, I hauled off and whacked a line drive back through the pitcher's box. It was caught. My teammates looked embarrassed for me. I was beaming. I had hit a rope, and it wasn't my fault that I hadn't quite hit it where they ain't. "Keep hittin' the ball hard, the hits will drop," I could hear my childhood hero saying.

The next batter up started nicking and dribbling what to me looked like foul balls and scoring run after run. As his total mounted, I began to understand that the object of the game had nothing to do with the crack of the bat, the stinging liner, the home run arcing high over Fenway's left-field wall. Just for a moment I began to grasp cricket. I determined that I too was going to nick and cut and ricochet and stroke the ball for hour after hour and run after run. I started to get dizzy at the transformation, the values and habits of a lifetime about to be over-ridden, I couldn't have felt stranger if I'd suddenly waked up as a cockroach.

I would've changed too, but it was tea time, my plane left for America soon after, and, well, there are some things you just can't change, no matter how extreme or shocking the experiences you go through.