

## **Putting Value Back Into Craft Education**

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A craft is learned and refined through years of dedicated study and relevant full-time practice, observing and being surrounded by those more proficient—learning through participation. This teaches the correct selection and use of tools, equipment, and materials and develops the ability to know what they are, and are not, capable of in the production of first-class work.

Quality craft education and training ensures a sound understanding of what underpins all craftsmanship—traditional and modern materials, tools, equipment, technology, and the skills of how to prepare and correctly apply them. It develops an enquiring mind that seeks to evaluate work and to reason-through the inevitable problems in the pursuit of quality work. Craft students need clearly defined high standards and ideals to aspire to, so that ultimately they will be capable of producing work that is equal to that created by their historic forebears. If made aware of these objectives from the outset of learning a craft and to readily see that this is realistically achievable, most will recognize the value of dedicated study and practice.

### **Education or Training?**

Differentiating craft education from training can be tricky, as in many respects they are two sides of the same coin, and ongoing throughout a working life. The writer sees **education** as the acquisition of the practical, theoretical, arithmetical, and technological knowledge that provides the foundation for a craft and its skills, by studying relevant textbooks, attending specified formal lessons, and through ongoing oral discourse with those of skill, knowledge, and experience from whom one is learning. **Training** is the organized sequential acquisition, development, and refinement of the numerous elementary and advanced practical skills that are part of a craft, by being surrounded by, observing, and learning from those who are more proficient in a certain craft.

## **Apprenticeships**

Apprenticeships—being taught, over a number of years, about traditional and contemporary craft materials, tools, and techniques—are the bedrock of craft heritage. Historically apprenticeships produced “journeymen” and, with some years of qualified experience, future craftsmen capable of “working to demand,” balancing the full needs of the building industry, whether new-build or the repair or restoration of traditionally constructed buildings. The apprentice learned his craft by “time serving,” legally bound to the master/company through a signed legal contract (termed the “indenture”) that established the responsibilities and obligations of both parties.

On-the-job apprenticeships worked well from the medieval period through to the late 19th century, but were not sufficient once the Industrial Revolution introduced new building materials and techniques. In the United Kingdom the response to these changes was to offer apprenticeships that provided a combination of on-site experience linked to prescribed formal, linear education and specific skill training at state-funded colleges, guided by a national examining body: “The City and Guilds of the London Institute” (CGLI). Students taught by well-qualified craftsmen/lecturers learned quickly the broader range of skills, theory, and technologies that most masters could no longer fully teach. This delivery balanced the overall skilled needs for the whole building industry.

After the Second World War, the advent and rapid progress of relatively simple fixing skills and faster construction techniques meant that building projects increasingly used cheaper semi-skilled labor. Fewer yards and craft workshops employed a hierarchical workforce of builders who had invested in apprenticeships to sustain their long-term viable future. A new construction industry dominated by developers and speculators, rather than builders, encouraged itinerant, inward-looking subcontractors who, due to the nature of priced contracts, were too busy to take the time, or spend the money, to train. This worked satisfactorily while developers were able to draw out of the pool of “time-served” craftsmen from traditional companies, with enticing higher “piece-work” money than standard “day rates.” But, with insufficient recruits on craft courses and the content diluted to speed up training, the industry was unable to replace the retiring

skilled and experienced craftsmen, and its failure to promote and maintain high quality work was soon exposed.

### **Current Craft Training**

Craft training in the United Kingdom since the early 1990s has been delivered through the “National Vocational Qualification” (NVQ) system, designed to standardize qualifications throughout industry, guaranteeing competence of “trainees” by demonstrating that they satisfy specific performance standards. This replaced indentured time-served and in-house apprenticeships with programs for students (employed or not) delivered in short, modular, assessment-led units. Though driven by the need to reduce public expenditure, it is ironically delivered through vast expensive and wholly unnecessary bureaucracy that didn’t previously exist. It is skewed in delivery toward the narrow, modern construction needs of both the “Industrial Training Boards”<sup>1</sup> and powerful large contractors, demanding basic “fixing” skills with simplistic levels of underlying theory—“Bricklaying” rather than “Brickwork.” This ignores the history of the crafts and their individual, unique heritage, which craftspeople have a duty to nurture and pass on to future generations; yet today’s workers are disenfranchised from any say in their future.

1. Industrial Training Boards (ITBs) tripartite (government, employers and unions) training boards in industry established by the 1964 'Industrial Training Act', and financed by employers through a statutory levy/grant system with firms that provide training. The Construction Industry Training Board, is the revenant board for the building industry.

The former CGLI apprenticeship system had its deficiencies: no national, unified system of performance criteria to mark practical work in college workshops, linked to acceptable standards for site work; and subjective marking by the class tutor. Bright students could gain excellent marks for academic work but barely pass the all-important practical tests, yet still become “fully qualified.” Though these particular deficiencies, to the credit of NVQ, have been addressed with a degree of success, the former system, with superior overall college-based study, should never

have been scrapped, only fine-tuned. Many employers in the UK voice concern that many NVQ-qualified craftspeople are not as proficient as required, limiting secure employment opportunities. The writer's experience supports this opinion, as he has many bricklayers, fully qualified by NVQ standards, come to him to learn higher-level craft skills, yet few possess the breadth of craft knowledge or advanced tool skills necessary to properly progress.

Industry and educators failing to recognize and reverse this trend are losing the highest expressions of the crafts to narrowly tutored "specialists" and "conservators," unqualified in them. Conservation and restoration were, and must never be, divorced from their craft home. They are an essential part of the full repertoire of a qualified craftsman—as they have always been down through history. The writer's apprenticeship, in the traditional and modern aspects of his craft, combined with hard work, study, and dedication, fully equipped him to work on new build and the repair or restoration of all periods of historic brickwork, as it was deemed part of craftsman's broad range of skills. In this respect one applauds the ethos being engendered at the new American College of the Building Arts, in Charleston, S.C., where they uphold many of the writer's beliefs on the importance of good quality and all-embracing craft education and accompanying training ([www.buildingartscollege.us](http://www.buildingartscollege.us)).

Modern craft skills training is simply not balancing the needs of the overall building industry.

### **Regaining the Balance: Delivering Craft Education and Training**

Regaining the former balance requires putting value back into craft education and training, to attract and retain dedicated students who have the potential to achieve fully respected qualifications by all professionals across the whole industry. Vital to its success will be the professional retention of the foremost peer-respected, experienced, and highly skilled master craftspeople as instructors. Program planners will also need to consult with relevant industrial organizations and professional educators, to design intuitive, validated, linear programs with clearly defined routes from start to completion, through a well-thought-out craft syllabus. This would guide a pragmatically delivered and cross-subject related craft curriculum of skills, theory, and related technology, underpinned with historical background to achieve meaningful context.

Students once more must be reconnected to traditional materials, their preparation, and the skills of handcrafting and use, to be able to eventually replicate selected enrichments from past centuries with authenticity within their apprenticeship course. Yet they must also fully learn about up-to-date factory-made materials, tools, equipment, and associated craft techniques for contemporary construction too.

Bureaucracy and overhead costs should be kept low, so that most funding is spent within workshops and classrooms. With appropriate levels of funding by colleges, with sponsorships, and with financial and in-kind support by stakeholders, institutions should be able to provide first-class facilities to teach in and programs of the quality to earn international recognition.

### **Recruitment of Students**

This approach requires recruiting students with the right attitude, aptitude, and ability to succeed in the crafts. Young people today, however, are often influenced by prevailing social attitudes that see little virtue in the ethos of working with one's hands and years of study to qualify. This must be addressed so that both parents and their children view traditional skilled crafts as dignified and fulfilling, with real status.

One must also factor in to any new craft education and training programs, semi-skilled adults working within the crafts, to harness and develop any potential demonstrated. Most have picked up craft skills on site and produce acceptable standards of work. They need to be made aware of the benefits of developing knowledge and skills to increase pride in their craft, to enhance their abilities, and to obtain full qualification that will provide a platform for future advancement in the crafts and, perhaps later, other aspects of the construction industry. To encourage them to register and attend relevant courses at the appropriate level, credits can be granted for their existing skills and experience.

As head of Trowel Trades at Bedford College, Bedford, England, (1987-92) the writer knows that many adult students are nervous about re-entering formal education years after leaving school, where perhaps they found academic learning difficult. Most underestimate how maturity has made them receptive to learning. Adult attendance has positive effects on younger students, brings site experiences into the classroom, and raises levels of class behavior. Some, fed-up with years of routine craftwork on new-build, find through their studies an attraction to the more sensitive areas of conservative repair and restoration, providing a whole new challenge for the mature craftsperson.

### **The Learning Environment**

Part- or full-time formal study at approved colleges must provide a combination of education and training linked to craft history and architecture. Too many workers today lack any empathetic understanding of the craft methods, tools, and historical practices of the buildings they work on. This knowledge is vital if we are to ensure that craftspeople can confidently meet the combined practical demands of modern and traditional work to the highest standards.

This off-site study in the colleges should be supplemented, where appropriate, by time on high-level and specialized craftwork alongside master craftspeople, in their workshops or on site. A true master not only teaches verbally but also by direct example, nor does he just inform apprentices of values but reveals them through conduct and interrelationships. Students will learn lessons about resourcefulness that can never be gleaned from books, and be stimulated and inspired by witnessing a willingness and dedication to pursue perfection, no matter what it takes—the hallmark of true craftsmanship.

### **A Student-Employer Agreement**

After the student completes formal school education and decides to learn a craft, a learning agreement based on the “indenture” could be drawn up that binds the apprentice and company to an approved complementary course. This would assign responsibility to the student to be receptive to work and learning the craft, attend agreed courses, be well behaved, and safeguard

and uphold craft knowledge and skills. Employer and college responsibilities to provide safe, productive work and a conducive learning environment, and to meet the specified terms of the appropriate year of apprenticeship would also be set down. The examining authority that sets the syllabi and oversees the apprenticeship would monitor progress and compensation .

Upon successful completion, the agreement could be formally signed off by employer, college, and examining bodies and presented to the newly qualified craftsperson in a formal ceremony similar to university graduation day. Names and qualifications could then be added to an approved national and international register of qualified craftspersons.

## **Conclusion**

Radical change is necessary for current craft education and training. There is no coherent future vision in current craft training systems, only optimism that somehow things will simply work out in the future. They will not! We live in an age of image makeovers, and the recent revival of the name “apprentice” instead of “trainee” is a good example of trying to recreate an image; but as with most image makeovers, this lacks real meaning. Those of us fortunate to have had all-embracing time-served craft apprenticeships, and to have worked alongside and learned from older craftsmen possessing traditional skills and knowledge, are now around 50 years of age plus. When we, and particularly the master craftsmen, are gone, that historic craft link will be forever broken.

We must invest quality time, energy, and money into well-designed craft education and training, studying and respecting both past and modern aspects, and encourage self-belief in our future craftspeople—for we are no less able today than historic craftsmen of producing the masterpieces we marvel at today. How can we ask professionals and clients whose employment we seek to value our crafts and craftspeople if we fail to place value and pride in them first? Only by demanding quality apprenticeships and learning environments that develop an ethos clearly seen to be producing superb craftspeople, employed in an industry that promotes quality of work and service, can we ask others to also place value on our once-noble crafts.

One ignores a craft's history, knowledge, and skills at one's peril, perhaps best summed up by this old Chinese proverb:

*"If a man dwells on the past then he robs the present. But if a man ignores the past then he may rob the future. The seeds of our destiny are nurtured by the roots of the past."*

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