

Owers Lecture 2011

The University Technology College
- a basis for a manufacturing renaissance?

Thursday 24th March 2011

5pm

Oracle's City Office in Moorgate, London

The coalition government have argued that economic recovery depends on a manufacturing renaissance - what part can the innovations proposed in the University Technical College movement play to address this need?

Stephen Capper, Headteacher of Sawyers Hall College, will outline the philosophical foundations of the University Technology College movement and explain the issues facing the development of a new UTC.

Peter Mitchell, Chief Executive of the Baker Dearing Educational Trust, will respond to Stephen's presentation in preparation for a discussion with participants.

This is the text of Stephen's lecture.

Good evening and welcome.

Can I first thank Richard Millwood for inviting me to speak at this annual Owers Lecture about the University Technical College programme. I should also like to thank Peter Mitchell for agreeing to share the podium with me this evening. Peter will introduce himself, of course, but you may know that he is the Director of Education for the Edge Foundation working on the national programme for University Technical Colleges amongst other things.

Perhaps by way of introduction to myself I should say that I am a secondary Headteacher in a closing school and some might say that I should be out looking for a job rather than be here tonight speaking to you about University Technical Colleges however I was pleased to see that Richard entitled the talk 'UTCs and Manufacturing Renaissance'. **(Or perhaps I should just say 'Made in Britain'!)** If you are an

economist you might be quite interested in that and again if you are in the manufacturing sector you might be quite interested in that but if I am talking to young people and I am talking to their parents and I am talking to practitioners in the field, I would probably want to talk more about elevating the practical, valuing the technical perhaps. The core purpose of University Technical Colleges being to do just that. Or is a UTC actually the **restoration** of education and learning in its fullest, truest and proper sense. And that is really the text of my talk tonight. I want to explore the idea that there isn't inherently a difference between practical, technical and academic, that these are disciplines in themselves that they can in fact be blended and woven together and that what we are really about is engaging young people (indeed adults as well) in the process of education and learning so that they might succeed, so that they can do better, so that they can take pride in their work and they can take pride in their lives and that is perhaps a bigger text than a 'manufacturing renaissance'.

If I start off at the beginning the story begins for me in Barnard Castle, it might be a strange place to start but I was doing a teaching practice in Barnard Castle in 1985 and I took my lunch in a motor vehicle and engineering workshop with a chap I shared a car with. He happened to be the Head of the practical learning element of the Design and Technology Department at the time and specialised in motor vehicle workshop and engineering practice. What struck me was that during the numerous lunches we had together in this workshop we were always surrounded by dozens of young people, boys and girls, who were industriously engaged in taking cars apart, in working on machines, in assembling various items and being particularly obsessed with the mechanical nature of things. These young people came voluntarily in their lunchtime and come the end of lunch none of us particularly wanted to leave. Perhaps I and my counterpart because we had to teach in the afternoon but the young people because they were extremely engaged in what they were doing.

At the end of my teaching practice I thanked him very much for the lunches and for the experience of seeing his engineering workshop in practice and he looked at me and said 'well I will be retiring in a year or two and in any case this will all be gone.' 'How so?' said I, 'Well we are paving the way for the National Curriculum and the National Curriculum won't involve any of this sort of thing, so it is all going to go and I am going to go with it.' His words proved to be entirely true and I have

struggled ever since with that picture in schools from inner city Leicester to East London to rural and urban Essex to try to engage the practical and sustain it and I have seen the failure of successive initiatives in trying to bridge what is a perceived gap between the academic and the vocational. The Technical Vocational Educational Initiative, TVEI, the Certificate in Pre-Vocational Education, the CPVE programme, the General National Vocational Qualification, the GNVQ programme which was labyrinthine in its nature and the attempted development of some dedicated vocational centres notably of course Lord Baker's City Technology Colleges which in fact sowed the seed for the Academy programme later taken on by the Labour Government and now again in a different guise by the Coalition.

In latter years there has been a distinct decline in vocational and practical education in schools. There simply hasn't been an emphasis on it and there hasn't been a driving force for it. The well broadcast Diploma programme was bedevilled and beset by problems from the outset and despite its best intentions the result was an overly complex and very difficult to manage qualification which even its ardent supporters had to accept needed reform. Very latterly the BTEC debate and as to whether BTEC is fit for purpose has been at the forefront of many Headteachers' minds. Is the BTEC fit for purpose? I think not. It doesn't actually do as a qualification what we need it to do. It simply, once again like many of its predecessors tries to over complicate the system of assessment and the testing of young people to see that they have reached a certain level so that we can gauge a certain output without ever properly looking at whether they have actually learnt anything meaningful or useful at all.

If I take you back to Durham for a second, I was very, very fortunate in Durham to have as one of my Professors Frank Coffield. Frank Coffield is a passionate supporter of the underdog and is a strong advocate of the north east region. You will of course remember that the 80s were somewhat bleak in the North East; well before any regeneration. He later moved to London and in an inaugural lecture to the Institute of Education in 2006, entitled '**Running ever faster down the wrong road**' he identifies seven inherent weaknesses in the education system and its development of vocational education and learning.

His thesis is that what we actually require is a programme for education, a programme for learning, a programme for engaging in this learning experience to improve outcomes. He points frequently to the signal failure of successive governments to address the issue of educational reform.

In his introduction he states:

‘My case is that the government’s failure for reform in the public services despite significant investments and successes is now doing more harm than good. It needs to be fundamentally redesigned and later I will briefly outline a few proposals for a different system. But first, we must stop running faster and faster down the wrong road. The destination is inappropriate, the curriculum out-dated, the policing too heavy and the determination to put the foot down even harder on the accelerator is a symptom of a dangerous machismo, best left to Top Gear presenters’. (Coffield)

Frank Coffield’s thesis puts learning at the centre of the academic vocational divide.

(Slide 1) ‘No learning society is likely ever to be created in the UK or anywhere else without an appropriate theory (or theories) of learning’. (Coffield)

Lorna Unwin in another lecture at the Institute of Education in 2009 enticingly entitled ‘Sensuality, sustainability and social justice; vocational education in changing times,’ points to a similar line of thinking. She examines what might be the new vision of vocational education, what do we mean by vocational education and is there indeed a gap between the academic world of ideas and vocational practical and technical learning.

In a quotation from Richard Pring she says:

(Slide 2) ‘Access to the academic world of ideas can be through vocational interests. Indeed such a mode of entry might challenge the gap between theory and practice which permeates the liberal ideal.’ (Pring)

Her whole point , and indeed Pring's point, is not to dismiss intellectual study but to argue that people have the right to seek ways to integrate intellectual ideas into their every day lives. She also quotes Richard Sennett from his work *Craftsmanship*:

(Slide 3) 'Craftsmanship may suggest a way of life that waned with the advent of industrial society – but this is misleading. Craftsmanship names an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake'. (Sennett)

Her thesis on the academic world of ideas is that it requires a long and difficult apprenticeship in intellectual disciplines inhabiting institutions, universities largely, which are entirely separate (dare I say) from the world of work and every day activities. The problem with this liberal idea is that it actually excludes many, many people and does not give them any form of access into this world. If vocational education can, as it should, create the conditions where the academic and vocational can be integrated (not that the vocational should become more academic, nor indeed should we settle for any sort of diluted version,) then it is possible that we may find a way to engage more of our young people in learning. Indeed the practical pursuit can become the basis for liberal education. Both Coffield and Unwin point to the failure over time to establish dedicated vocational institutions. This brings me neatly on to a speech I was fortunate enough to hear on Thursday 9 September 2010 by the Rt Hon. Michael Gove M.P., Secretary of State for Education. This was without doubt an excellent speech. It was a crafted speech and it outlined the core issue. It drove to the heart of the historical and inbuilt prejudice in the English education system which elevated not the practical and the technical but the purely academic. Without wishing to be political of course this does bring me to Gove's dilemma; how to square the academic with the vocational? The much vaunted English Bacc does indeed put great premium on pure academic learning and does nothing to elevate the practical or the technical. Whilst those in Edge Foundation and Baker Dearing Trust may well working with Mike Tomlinson to approve a Tech Bacc curriculum, there is none the less the same quintessential issue of public perception; academic virtue and value against getting your hands dirty and getting stuck in.

In a telling paragraph early in Michael Gove's speech he says '*Although Britain had been the first country to industrialise and although with the abolition of the corn laws we were poised to benefit from the massive expansion of free trade we were already falling behind other nations in our capacity to inspire and train the next generation of engineers technicians, craftsmen and industrial innovators*'. Michael goes on to say later '*that it is crucial in securing the core base of knowledge that the study of technical and vocational subjects is not an either/or but a both*'. He says that he is absolutely clear that every child should have the option of beginning study for a craft or a trade from the age of 14 but that this should be complimented by a base core academic knowledge. The new generation of University Technical Colleges, by taking students from other schools at 14, will help to secure this route. He committed on the day to a minimum of 12 UTCs with one in each major city. (*Swiftly becoming 13 in a Baker's dozen!*) There is huge demand he says for this kind of institution and Local Authorities and businesses will understand the benefits that this will bring to their community. **UTCs, he says, are a fantastic innovation.**

So what is an UTC? As the name might suggest it involves a university, a further education college and it must have as a prerequisite significant employer engagement and employers who are prepared to sit on the board of the UTC. The bringing together of teachers and educational leaders with industry and FE/HE to deliver a practical and technical curriculum alongside a core academic curriculum including literacy, numeracy, science, languages, history or geography is innovative. UTCs may be regional as Michael has perhaps suggested in his speech and possibly sub-regional - indeed in Essex the concept might easily be for the South Essex UTC (which I am engaged in) to be complimented by a North Essex UTC and indeed in time one might see a Mid-Essex UTC and well... possibly more.....

They are the first institutions that genuinely appear to be bridging the gap and joining the sectors of schools, FE and post 16 with Universities and alongside employers to develop a curriculum that will blend the craft and skill with the knowledge and abstract. That is what is exciting about the UTC concept. It is a learning experience that brings these things together and it will force all involved to focus on learning and personal development for young people and not just on skills and output. As I see it the UTCs could have the power to both transform and challenge current pedagogy and

culture in our state secondary schools and our state secondary education system. Indeed this may have far reaching effects on the age at which children both transfer from institutions, take qualifications, engage in the world of work. It is a catalyst and a powerful resource for change.

The question must come then ‘Why should it work?’ ‘Why will it not be a white elephant?’ I think from a personal level because practical learning engages and if I tell you a short story here about one particular student in my own school. I taught this boy myself in year 7 (English as it happens, one of the academic subjects apparently) and the boy Ronnie himself was quite a troubled student from quite a difficult background. His family had no experience of education particularly and very little in the way of money. He had a number of brothers and sisters and his life chances already looked quite bleak. He was not engaged in school but in fact had quite a lively inquisitive and enquiring mind. As he progressed on from year 7 to 8 and 9 he became a much larger boy, he also became far more disengaged in education. By year 9 he was already on a school action plus system, he was already being referred to the Pupil Referral Unit; he was already on a list of students who might be at risk of permanent exclusion before year 11. In year 10 as he began things were not good, Ronnie was very disengaged by school, his behaviour was frankly appalling and he had lost respect for the system and even for people like myself for whom he had once had respect but who he saw perhaps were simply the custodians of a system that sought to fail him and his like. It was at this point, very fortunately, working with Prospects Learning Foundation that we had set up a Construction Centre, on a site at my school, for shared facility between the Brentwood secondary schools. I was able to put this in place very rapidly thanks to the work of the Prospects Learning Foundation and so we were immediately able to lay on professional qualifications; City and Guilds qualifications in bricklaying, in painting and decorating, in carpentry and all three disciplines together formed the City and Guilds Diploma. Ronnie was instantly motivated, he enjoyed bricklaying, he found it was a craft, a skill something he could excel in, something he was good at and he started to smile a lot more. When I went in to see him he would proudly show me his brickwork and indeed his instructor said that he could be one of the best bricklayers in the class. When we had the formal press opening of the Construction Centre it was a photograph of Ronnie that took centre stage, very proud of his brick corner beautifully made. I said he could

come round to my house any time he liked as I might have a few walls that he could point and he laughed at this. In all his other subjects, because of course the construction course only took one day of his week, he began to be more controlled, whilst not necessarily engaged at this stage, he was prepared to accept that he had been given a chance, a chance to succeed and this meant that he did not want to fail. As he moved into year 11 he was smartly dressed, he was in school, and there were no reports of poor behaviour. At the end of year 11 he won the Apprentice of the Year award from Prospects Learning Foundation and went to a ceremony held in a Basildon nightclub, in fact for around 250 young people from across south Essex who had won various awards in their different regions. Ronnie proudly accepted his award from an Eastenders star, whose name I forget, and in his suit he came over and shook my hand. I think that this is just a simple and instructive lesson in how the practical can engage learners. Ronnie has since gone on to follow an apprenticeship and the last I heard he was doing very well. **But** if we had had the UTC Ronnie would have undoubtedly accessed higher level learning earlier - and this is the key - before he turned against the system that was destined to fail him.

James Hemming wrote a book many years ago in 1980 entitled 'The Betrayal of Youth – Secondary Education must be Changed', an ex-teacher himself, he could see quite easily that the system that we had in place was failing literally thousands of young people per year and that something should be done. Here we are in 2011 and perhaps something is being done. The UTC programme has excellent potential. Built around it must be, and I would say ideally, shared provision, shared with local schools for foundation learning and level 1 and 2 core practical and technical skills in relevant disciplines. I say relevant because they need to be relevant to the region, to the area, to the needs and aspirations of the young people concerned. They should not be imposed or prescribed.

However the UTC framework of universities, further education, work based learning providers, employers, teachers and educational leaders, local authorities on a regional and sub regional level **will** be able to determine the curriculum, **will** be able to determine the focus and this **will** develop the true vocational centre dedicated to enabling young people to access the practical and technical learning **which is of direct use to them and at which they can succeed.**

It will also allow them to progress. There will be no dead end, it will simply be a system that can take you as far as you want to go and in whichever direction you want to go whether that be a purely academic, a purely practical or technical or a combination of the two in higher level technical skills and disciplines which we all know are numerous. Never mind the fact that there may be quite a few we haven't yet invented.

Recently a Director from International Financial Data Services, one of our partner companies, remarked during the ever developing UTC proposal: '***This is such a good idea I don't understand why we haven't done it already.***' So why haven't we developed the UTC so far? Well the context of a closing school, Sawyers Hall College in Brentwood, gave rise to a golden opportunity to initiate a dedicated vocational centre. This was a concept worked through the Area Planning Group for 14-19 education (which I Chair) and on the back of our Diploma delivery we worked with the Local Authority and the then Learning and Skills Council to develop a vocational centre. We formulated with Learning and Skills Council that proposal. The approximate cost at that time was £10 million which would include a completely new build on the site as well as the refurbishment of existing provision. It was a grand plan, it had the full support of the Local Authority, Strategic Planning Group, Director of Education and elected members. It had the full support of local Headteachers as a shared provision of shared facilities although at this stage we had not worked out exactly how students would be enrolled and who would take responsibility. Those details we never came because the Learning and Skills Council disappeared down a black hole of debt which at the time we thought was a crisis. Of course nothing had prepared us for what was going to come.

I first became aware of UTCs in November 2008 following a tip off to some Papers published on the internet about the UTC concept. I mentioned this to the then and still Director of Education as something I would like to pursue and indeed I was not discouraged from pursuing it. We continued to talk with the Local Authority about a vocational centre, and the Local Authority developed a plan for 5 regional centres across Essex delivering vocational and skills based learning. We hadn't quite hammered out the detail of this when the next rather larger funding crisis emerged on

the horizon and Lehman Brothers *et al* disappeared in a puff of smoke. What follows I think we are all aware of; funding to develop vocational centres and indeed political pressure on Local Authorities both disappeared and increased at exactly the same moment.

We were left in June/July 2010 with partnerships but no plan. Good partnerships but very little or no money. All along I had felt that the concept of the UTC needed to be more closely defined for our purposes and it was at this stage that I spoke with the Academies Enterprise Trust, a private Essex based organisation and multi-Academy sponsor specialising in generally mainstream schools, often schools in special measures that are then turned around, but who were interested in developing the UTC concept and also had experience of the studio school idea, indeed were sponsoring a studio school within a large comprehensive in Luton. AET's 10 key drivers were perfectly in accord with the UTC proposal.

So partners were still engaged and it seemed like a great possibility. Over the summer of July 2010 we developed a draft Statement of Intent working with Prospects Learning Foundation, Havering College of Further and Higher Education and we hoped Anglia Ruskin University. This came to develop a head of steam and very early in September I was able to speak with Lord Baker and later Peter Mitchell from the Baker Dearing Trust about the possibilities of the UTC proposal, which were warmly welcomed. We felt at this stage that local schools, although cautious of the idea, would in fact see the benefits and buy in but in fact local schools ultimately felt that the UTC was more of a threat than an opportunity.

What followed from September 2010 to now was an ongoing discussion with the LA, the withdrawal of Academies Enterprise Trust from the project around about December time. (Because they felt that on the ground support by schools was necessary for the project to succeed.) The engagement of Essex University as the university sponsor along with major industry sponsors and many meetings with local Headteachers concluding with a final decision by the partners in the UTC proposal that the concept itself is too significant, too important to education, too important to the local economy, growth and the future opportunities that it will secure, to let it fall.

Why do we feel so strongly? Because I think the vision for the UTC is a high quality educational organisation that enables young people to access a well supported specialist curriculum in financial services and the built environment drawing on expertise from our partners as I have mentioned: Essex University, Havering College, Prospects College, but also partner employers, significant financial industry players and the Financial Skills Partnership, formerly the Sector Skills Council. The curriculum will be designed to integrate literacy, numeracy, science and languages, it will include significant work related experience and a work place component; curriculum courses will be formed around the Tech Bacc and will include professional and industry standard qualifications. The UTC will build on vocational provision already on the school site and will develop and extend opportunities for learners to progress to higher education and employment. The South Essex UTC will offer a unique learning experience and innovative progression routes for a wide range of learners whose needs are not met by the conventional school curriculum. The potential exists to develop a North Essex UTC to compliment the work of South Essex and further imbed and sustain this approach to high level practical and technical learning.

We feel that the South Essex University Technical College will be at the heart of and possibly manage a broader campus including wider vocational sporting and community opportunities shared with local schools, voluntary organisations, community groups and existing users including Adult Community Learning.

There is a strong possibility through the University of Essex to develop a centre on the site to provide continuous professional development opportunities for teachers and other education staff and this to include a local leadership centre linked to teaching schools. There is also existing Adult Community Learning provision on site and a link through into the big society agenda is obvious. If the site is lost to an alternative use it is difficult to see how it will be possible to accommodate the future vocational opportunities so badly needed or to protect and expand a range of additional resources for the community this proposal will generate. The development of the South Essex UTC is very significant to the immediate Brentwood community and beyond in meeting the sector skills gap and providing those essential progression routes for children and young people as well as ensuring a valuable resource for the local area.

Our proposals are entirely in line with the Essex strategy for 14-19 phase of education and training; clearly in that strategy all 14-19 year olds will benefit from high quality impartial advice and guidance and have access to a full range of appealing and appropriate provision which meets their needs and entitlement. The UTC proposal contributes significantly to this aspiration.

It is vital that young people can access a choice of high quality and engaging programmes. It is important for us to bring in the investment and most importantly the resource and expertise that the South Essex UTC will provide and in particular that we can engage with schools across South Essex to ensure that learners have a full spectrum of choice whether that be within the conventional school curriculum, which of course we know from the Wolf Report needs to be modified to include a 20% vocational content, or whether that be in the more specialised environment of a University Technical College or indeed the additional provision around that UTC core which will allow learners of all abilities and aptitudes to access the learning of their choice.

So the South Essex University Technical College would be located on the site of Sawyers Hall College in Brentwood Essex. It will specialise in financial services and the built environment. It will exploit the synergies between financial specialisms and the professional service aspects that work with the built environment.

There is a clear vision in this development, there is a clear community benefit to the entire proposal and there is a golden opportunity to create something durable and sustainable for the long term future of both Brentwood and South Essex.

Wider though than the South Essex Technical College, wider than this particular project and perhaps to return to the core text: UTCs a manufacturing renaissance? Or are they elevating the practical and the technical in the broadest sense? Or are we seeing the restoration of a programme for educational learning?

If the UTC concept can be broadened to allow a full range of qualifications and employability skills, apprenticeships and academic disciplines, then I feel that we will have truly created centres of learning. If we narrow or restrict the offer too much then the appeal and therefore the golden opportunity may be lost. There will be detractors, of course, along the way so we must be clear of purpose but on one final footnote I would like to add - one final story. I have on my staff a bronze Olympian, a bronze Olympic medal winner. He won it in the European Culinary Olympics for his craftsmanship, for his skill. It has taken 6 years to get him close to qualified teacher status. (Now of course the Wolf Report may allow me to get him in through the FE qualified route) but it is six years, maybe seven now, since he took a 50% pay cut, a 50% sat cut in his salary as a top London chef to pursue his vocation, teaching. He is an excellent and passionate teacher who can inspire, motivate and challenge.

My footnote is that we must not forget or neglect our practitioners because whatever our policy they are the people who will make it happen on the ground every day.

I recommend that we take the opportunity to help them this time - and in doing so help our children and young people to learn and succeed.

Thank you.

(36 minutes)

References:

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Sennett, R (2008) 'The Craftsman' London: Allen Lane
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