

Robin Baker
President
George Fox University

Pen Making and Change

This morning my “inbox” had another piece from Inside Higher Education about a college that was responding to the changes in higher education by cutting more than 30 positions, ending numerous majors, in order to “chart” a path to the future. I have come to the point where I prefer not to read the latest news on our industry. We are living in a time of unprecedented change and it seems that there are far more questions than answers.

I am part of a profession, history, where we have been taught to “see” cultural changes happen in a society but we always “see” when the results are relatively clear. Predicting what shifts in cultural practice will have long term affects in the present is a much more difficult task. We do not see either the present or the future clearly because it is clouded with our own experience and expectations. For many reasons it would appear that humans are risk averse and, I think, we seek continuity and believe that the future will be like the past.

When my wife and I travel I often look for “experiences” that would enhance my own patterns of life. I am a collector of pens, a hobby that fewer and fewer people find interesting. When asked and I tell people that I collect “pens” I am most often greeted with curious looks and responses that are more like “you mean the kind of pins you wear on your lapel? No, you mean writing instruments? I did not know anyone used those any longer.”

Writing by hand is becoming increasingly a practice of the past. Indeed, as we were traveling by train in England I would use the time to write letters and notes to people in the United States. Two men in their thirties sat down across the table from us at one stop and they looked curiously at me. At one point, they finally made a statement to me: “I have not seen anyone write notes since my father did that when I was a child!” I was not sure how to respond. I do not see myself as old but at 61 years I definitely could have been the father of the two business men sitting across from us. The practice of writing letters has always been part of my own communication style with family and the broader community. Their comment made me think that the world had changed around me and I had barely noticed.

The irony was that we were traveling to Birmingham to do two things: 1) visit Cadbury World for my wife who loves chocolate and 2) visit a unique pen manufacturer that creates sterling silver pens and pencils. For a culture that has ceased to value “writing” it is hard to communicate why you would want to collect hand-crafted pens that are more the tools of a culture pre-1960.

Birmingham was once the center of pen manufacturing for the world. Now there are just a few businesses left who are engaged in this craft and we were trying to find the main one: Yard O Led. In fact, even though we had the exact address, Google maps could not help us find the business location. (After a later email we discovered that the location was down an alley and behind a series of doors. It was hard to know how you would actually find it!) What we did stumble on to was the “Pen Museum.”

Since we could not find our pen shop the museum seemed like a great replacement and it was. The Pen Museum provided a interesting learning opportunity and an excellent history of pen manufacturing in Birmingham. The “quill” was the primary writing tool used in Europe for more than a thousand years. It enabled people who were trained to use it to craft letters and documents with relative ease and beauty. At the same time, it was difficult to maintain and sharpen. In the 1820s John Mitchell and Jason Mason developed the metal nib which displaced quills in a matter of a few short years. The new metal nibs were less expensive and made the practice of writing easier and more efficient. Mitchell and Mason’s innovation led to a new industry in Birmingham where, eventually, thousands of crafts men and women were employed in the new art of penmaking.

Unlike the quill pen, the new pen industry did not last for one thousand years. In the mid-1930s, Jewish-Hungarian journalist László Bíró, needed a writing instrument that he could use in writing about the changes going on in Europe. Because of the dangers ever present with the emergence of the new Fascist powers in Europe, he had to have something that would enable ink to flow but also be transported and stored easily. Biro invented in 1938 the ballpoint pen which, in a matter of just a few years, completely eliminated the metal nib industry and it became the new tool of the industrial world. Birmingham’s factories closed and, the town, until recently, proved unable to adapt to the post-WWII economic world.

When you travel, there are always opportunities for learning and this was one of them. Humans have always lived in times of “change” but the shifts occurring in our culture are happening more rapidly than at any point in the past. Even our basic methods of communicating with each other – writing – is being displaced by our interaction with machines. I certainly lament the passing of writing and continue to hold on to my own commitment to write letters in an “old” form (and collect pens

made by craftsmen). But, no matter how I feel about it, writing is “passing.” Accurately “predicting” the future is probably not possible but I was encouraged by Mr. Biro. He did not set out to revolutionize writing but to solve a problem he had in his own work. The same was true of Mitchell and Mason. The people most successful in creating the future seemed to be those most willing to experiment with the practical problems in front of them.

I think, at times, those of us who make higher education our profession, view accreditation as a barrier to change. Accreditors enforce agreed upon rules and measures of quality but do not help envision a different future. I have been very encouraged in recent days by our new executive director and President, Dr. Sonny Ramaswamy, and the rest of the staff at the Northwest Commission who see the organization as a partner with institutions in finding new ways to prepare students for the future. As our educational environment shifts, it bodes well that our accreditor is interested in experiments that will advance student learning and create sustainable colleges and universities.