

Continental Classroom

All things considered, Sputnik 1 has to get the credit for breathing life into the *Continental Classroom*, the NBC-TV series that ran from 1958 to 1963. Sometime after Sputnik spurred aloft on October 4, 1957, NBC's director of public affairs and education, Edward Stanley, was coming back from Europe. He read that New York's commissioner of education, the late James Allen, was planning a refresher course for science teachers in the state. Probable cost: \$600,000. Stanley thought that "for not a great deal more than that you could reach every science teacher in the country." And, he thought further, "we could do the whole damn thing."

Although Sputnik may have catalyzed *Continental Classroom*, two people, more than any others, made it work. Ed Stanley had the institutional punch and the moxie to argue and lead at a level essential for a venture of this scope. And Dorothy Culbertson, executive producer of the public affairs department, brought intelligence and persuasiveness to both the critical fundraising and direct management of the project.

Assembling the series amounted to a kind of benevolent brokerage by Stanley and Culbertson. At his suggestion, she talked to the Fund for the Advancement of Education about using the NBC-TV network for college credit courses. They were "excited." At almost the same time, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) approached NBC tentatively. Would it put up \$25,000 to study how TV could be used to improve teacher training? "I thought it was a helluva good idea," recalls Stanley. But his vision was broader: Would they be interested in something considerably bigger? Indeed they would, they said. This became vital in the funding arrangements that were to follow.

It seemed apparent that NBC alone could not float the concept. And so, after appeals to the Ford Foundation, it finally agreed to put in \$500,000, a major share of the first year's expected cost. Then, following beguiling calls from Culbertson, increments of \$100,000 apiece came in from a number of large corporations. As a practical matter, the funds all went to AACTE, which paid NBC for its facilities, at cost.

By then, the apt series title had been locked up, as an outgrowth of a conversation between Stanley and noted educator Dr. James Killian, then science advisor to President Eisenhower. "What you'd have here," Stanley explained, "would be a continental classroom." Dr. Killian liked the idea, and the term stuck.

On October 6, 1958, the daily broadcasts began on the NBC network. That first year, the topic was "Atomic Age Physics," a college-level course 165 lessons long. Says Stanley, "Physics was the subject that was in trouble then. Many people teaching it had received their degrees before atomic energy was invented." The man to teach these lessons was Dr. Harvey White, professor of physics at the University of California at Berkeley. Joining the NBC project, he lined up a veritable "Who's Who" of American scientists as guest lecturers. There's probably never been another national refresher course quite like it.

White and other *Continental Classroom* teachers had to do 130 lectures of their own in a year's time, five per week. They were under fantastic pressure, working from outlines rather than from prepared scripts. NBC tried to let their talent go into the studio when they wanted. Largely, this meant afternoon sessions. A four-hour stretch of studio time allowed for camera blocking, a dress rehearsal, and tape recording.

NBC's audience-research specialists estimated that 400,000 people viewed "Physics," while 600,000 tuned in to "Chemistry," in the second year. But at no time during the five-year span of *Continental Classroom* did more than 5,000 sign up for actual credit in a course. Even so, to Lawrence McKune of Michigan State, that first series on physics was unique:

For the first time in the history of education, 4,905 students . . . in all parts of the United States, studied precisely the same course with the same teacher at the same hour, using the same outlines and the same texts.

In the second year, NBC repeated physics at 6:00 in the morning, then ran its new chemistry course at 6:30. Physicists began watching chemistry, and the chemists brushed up on their physics, a neat refresher switch.

By 1960, the mathematicians were asking for a course. This time, a new approach was tried. The first half of the year was devoted to algebra; John Kelley of Berkeley taught three days a week, and Julius Hlavaty took Tuesdays and Thursdays. Then, in the second "term," Frederick Mosteller, chairman of statistics at Harvard, carried the main load on lessons in probability and statistics, while Paul Clifford of Montclair State College did the "applications" on Tuesdays and Thursdays. By that term, as many as 320 colleges and universities were granting credit for the course. Stanley notes that "few of them were giving probability in those days."

At that point, the Ford Foundation decided to cut off its financial support. And even though a number of corporate sponsors stuck with the project, Stanley began to feel a budget squeeze (a cutback to two TV cameras instead of the normal three). Regardless, Stanley still managed to come up with a star performer for that fourth year—the late Peter Odegard, then chairman of the political science department at Berkeley and former president of Reed College. Was it successful? Stanley says that Odegard's "American Government: Structure and Function" had an audience of 1.5 million. The League of Women Voters, he recalls, "were convinced we did this especially for them!"

But then *Continental Classroom* folded. Why? "Money," says Stanley. "The company did lose a little, and wasn't willing to take a chance on raising some money the next year." The series budget—it ran between \$1.2 million and \$1.5 million annually—was "not a helluva lot for a network, not really." But NBC must have thought so. "American Government" was rebroadcast in the fifth year, and *Continental Classroom* ended officially on May 17, 1963.

Adapted from Robert D. B. Carlisle, *College Credit Through TV: Old Idea, New Dimensions* (Lincoln, NB: Great Plains National Instructional Television Library, 1974).