

# **Paper 11.2 Liberal and General Studies in further education: voices from the chalk face**

Robin Simmons, University of Huddersfield, UK

## **Introduction**

From the 1950s to the mid-1980s, virtually all further education (FE) colleges<sup>1</sup> in England included an element of liberal education in the majority of their vocational courses. At the level of the specific programme this was known, at different times, as liberal studies (LS), general studies (GS) or general and communication studies (G&CS). Although such terms suggested at least some variance in content, style and emphasis, all such provision was nevertheless informed by a belief that vocational education should develop certain forms of social and cultural knowledge as well as specific work-related skills – an approach rooted, at least officially, in conceptions of education as a vehicle for broadening minds and developing citizens able to engage in rational debate and well-informed judgement.

Although thousands of lecturers taught variants of liberal and general studies and probably millions of students attended such classes, there is little published research on this important educational movement (although see, for example, Watson 1973; Gleeson and Mardle 1980; Bailey and Unwin 2008). The project upon which this paper is based aims to begin to tackle this deficit. Initiated by former general studies lecturers, and funded by the Raymond Williams Foundation, it seeks to record the experiences and reflections of those involved before they are lost to history. The paper begins with a brief overview of the origins and history of the liberal and general studies movement, and describes some of its key features during the 1950s and 1960s. The next section deals with changes which took place from the 1970s onwards which, it is argued, led ultimately to the demise of liberal and general studies in FE. The third part of the paper presents data from a programme of interviews, conducted

---

<sup>1</sup> FE college is used to describe a range of institutions whose main remit was to provide technical and vocational education and training to individuals over the minimum school-leaving age. During the period upon which this paper focuses these included generalist institutions, often known as technical colleges or colleges of further education, and specialist institutions which focused on certain subject areas such as art and design, business or construction.

during late 2013 and early 2014, with thirteen former LS and GS teachers. It focuses on their perceptions of the value of liberal and general studies to those students who took part in such learning, and deals with three inter-related themes: the development of political awareness and critical thinking; personal and social development; and pedagogic innovation. The paper concludes by arguing that the underpinning principles of the liberal and general studies movement, although jettisoned by the state over thirty years ago and now buried under the performativity of Functional Skills and similar forms of curricular instrumentalism, are perhaps more relevant to FE students today than ever before.

### **Liberal and General Studies: a brief history**

When general education was first introduced into the FE curriculum it was usually referred to as liberal studies and aimed to involve students on vocational and work-related courses in learning material other than that which was central to their main programme of study. The growth and development of such an approach is often associated with the broad consensus which existed amongst those responsible for organising and delivering further education and training after the end of World War Two. Central to this was a belief amongst key figures within national and local government, as well as many college leaders and large employers, that courses which centred chiefly on the acquisition of craft skills and technical abilities should also promote students' social, moral and cultural development. This consensus, though never total, was at its strongest during the 1950s and early 1960s (see, for example, NIAE 1952; NIAE 1955 and the 1957 government circular (323), *Liberal Studies in Technical Colleges*), although there is no doubt that much of the thinking which underpinned the development and growth of liberal and general studies pre-dated this time. Whilst its genesis can arguably be traced back to classical conceptions of education as a social good, many of its key principles, at least in the context of the FE curriculum, were articulated by the 1919 Ministry of Reconstruction's Adult Education Committee:

We are anxious that technical instruction should...be further broadened by the inclusion of studies which will enable the student to relate his own occupation to the industry of which it is a part, to appreciate the place of that industry in the economic life of the nation and the world, and to interpret the economic life of the community in terms of social values . . . especially

because it seems to us vital to provide the fullest opportunities for personal development and for the realisation of a higher standard of citizenship’.

(MoR 1919, pp.152-153)

But, like much else associated with the rhetoric of ‘a land fit for heroes’, such ideals were left largely undeveloped, and it was not until after the end of World War Two that liberal studies gained significant momentum in FE. The immediate post-war era saw a number of progressive developments across the education system - including the abolition of fees for state secondary schools, the raising of the minimum school-leaving age to 15 and the great expansion, led by local authorities, of all forms of post-compulsory education; the flourishing of liberal studies movement at that time can be viewed, at least in part, as part of a set of broader social and political shifts which took place in post-war Britain, not only in education but in social and economic policy more broadly.

By the 1960s, debates about the nature and purpose of liberal studies, particularly its relationship to the vocational curriculum, meant that, over time, such provision began to be known more commonly as general studies (as for example in the 1962 MoE pamphlet *General Studies in Technical Colleges*). A number of other changes were also afoot. Whereas, at least in the initial post-war era, ‘day-release’ to college was largely the preserve of technical apprentices, a growth in the number of craft apprentices and ‘lower-level’ operatives entering FE took place after the 1964 Industrial Training Act (Lucas 2004, p. 17). Alongside this, there was, during the second half of that decade, also the expansion of university education to a broader section of young people. Such trends brought together a new cohort of working-class graduates - who differed significantly in age and educational background both from the majority of those who had previously been liberal studies lecturers, and from most of the rest of the FE workforce - and groups of day-release students, many of whom came from sections of the working class hitherto excluded from post-compulsory education. At the same time, the underpinning philosophy that liberal and general studies should encourage free thought and creativity meant that in, most cases, LS/GS was un-assessed and largely unmediated by the requirements of the state, either directly or via the demands of examining bodies. This, in turn, meant that most liberal and general studies teachers had a greater degree of freedom over curriculum content, pedagogy, and most other matters, than other FE lecturers. Consequently, many colleges experimented with a variety of delivery methods, staffing models and organisational structures. General

studies lecturers were often at the forefront of developing new and innovative approaches to teaching and learning in FE colleges (Watson 1973).

### **From General Studies to Functional Skills**

Following the 1969 Haslegrave Report, significant changes in technical and vocational education began to take place which both aligned it with and helped facilitate the restructuring of industrial production in the UK. Traditionally, first-line supervisory staff, especially in manufacturing industry, were recruited from amongst experienced workers who, where they had gained formal qualifications, did so usually via the system of National Certificates and Diplomas established from the 1930s onwards, or by City and Guilds or similar awarding bodies. From the mid-1970s, however, these workers were increasingly recruited directly from amongst school leavers who, though apprentices, were released onto courses validated by newly-formed awarding bodies such as the Technician Education Council (TEC) and the Business Education Council (BEC). A new variant of liberal education, General and Communication Studies, was introduced as a compulsory element in such courses and, for the first time, there was a requirement that a form of liberal education was to be assessed and graded in at least nominal parity with other elements of vocational courses. But as these new G&CS units were initially devised at the level of the individual college - albeit within a framework regulated by awarding bodies such as TEC and BEC - this allowed general studies teachers to continue to exercise a significant degree of autonomy over what was taught and learnt. General and Communication Studies then, at least for a time, offered a degree of continuity with the traditional ethos of LS and GS but also signalled the beginning of a process by which its content and structure began to be systematically specified and assessed.

Finally, between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s, alternative forms of general education for vocational students began to appear. One of the first such initiatives was the City and Guilds Certificate in Communication Skills (initially known as the C&G 772), which was delivered in most FE colleges run by the Inner London Education Authority; and, from the early-1980s onwards, Social and Life Skills, which became part of newly-created employability training programmes, funded by the Manpower Services Commission, such as the Youth Opportunities Programme and the Youth Training Scheme (YTS). Such provision became a significant feature of the FE sector during the 1980s but staff that had been - and often still were -

general studies lecturers frequently delivered Social and Life Skills and the like. Arguably such initiatives can therefore be seen as constituting a fourth - and up to now final - historical phase of liberal education in FE.

From the late-1980s onwards, the general education element of vocational FE courses passed through a further series of phases it is difficult to which regard as constituting a version of liberal education, and which reflect the restructuring of production, of the workforce and of vocational education and training in line with the de-industrialisation of UK. In the second half of the 1980s, G&CS was replaced in BTEC (formed from the merger of BEC and TEC) programmes by Common Skills/Core Themes/Integrative Assignments, and when General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) were introduced in the early-1990s such provision was, in turn, replaced by Core Skills. In the lead-up to a broader restructuring of the FE curriculum at the turn of the millennium, known as Curriculum 2000, Core Skills were superseded by Key Skills, which have themselves recently been abolished in favour of Functional Skills. Each of these successive incarnations became tied more and more to the perceived needs of business and industry and such provision, like much else in the further education sector, is now highly monitored, measured and regulated - both through external examination and inspection regimes, and via various forms of managerialism and performativity at the level of the individual institution. It is probably fair to say that few, if any, of those teaching Functional Skills in FE today are aware of its descent from the liberal studies movement.

### **Liberal and General Studies: voices from the chalk-face**

This section of the paper draws on data from a programme of semi-structured interviews with 13 former LS/GS/G&CS lecturers. Those interviewed consist mainly of former FE teachers who are themselves participants in the project, and others known to them as ex-colleagues, many of whom were trade union activists and campaigners in the liberal and general studies movement during the 1970s and 1980s. It cannot, therefore, be claimed that the respondents constitute a representative sample from which we can generalise about the views and opinions of all those formerly involved in teaching liberal and general studies across the FE sector. The data is, however, drawn from a collection of individuals who were involved in delivering different variants of liberal and general education to a broad range of students on vocational programmes. These included motor mechanics, hairdressers, caterers and other day-release

students on construction, art and design, and business studies programmes, as well as young people undertaking YTS and other pre-vocational programmes. In total, the interviewees taught in 25 FE institutions across different parts of England between 1962 and 1991 - although many continued working in the further education sector for a number of years thereafter. The data therefore offers some valuable insights into this important part of the FE curriculum during that time.

Questions focused on themes such as the participants' career history; the organisation, management and delivery of liberal and general studies; and approaches teaching and learning. Whilst some of these issues will be the subject of future publications, the remainder of this paper focuses on interviewees' views and opinions about the value of liberal and general studies to those students who experienced this provision. Broadly, responses related to three inter-related themes: the development of critical thinking and political awareness; personal and social development; and creative pedagogy, such as the promotion of student-centred learning and other forms of increased student engagement.

### *Critical thinking and political awareness*

It would be fair to say that LS and GS as a discipline – if indeed discipline is the right term - and liberal and general studies teachers in particular were often regarded with both scepticism and suspicion by other FE teachers, and perhaps especially so by some of those teaching craft and technical subjects in construction, engineering and similar areas of vocational education (Gleeson and Mardle 1980). Whilst some of this may have related to the perceived lack of relevance of LS/GS to the vocational curriculum, the more open culture and the expressive nature of learning which tended to characterise liberal and general studies was also often viewed as problematic. Undoubtedly, some LS/GS teachers were also regarded as ideologically and politically subversive. Some of the data below illustrate how respondents tried to get students to engage critically with a range of social and political issues.

*Barry:* There were two types of worthwhileness and value. Let's take one with the students: developing a critical education, how you can look at things like immigrants' calls on employment, and begin to critically analyse that...

...enabling them how to look, for example in an art department, how art is created, manufactured, has its

filters and gatekeepers – unless you have an agent, whether it's Saatchi or [inaudible] or somebody, it's unlikely you'll get out. It's all those other sorts of filters, those political barriers, which you need to overcome. So enabling them to have a critical fix and perspective on – and be able to overcome – what they would see as barriers...

I was passionate about students knowing about the history of their city and Liverpool has got a particularly rich history and the buildings on this street were effectively built on the proceeds from the slave trade. But it gave an opportunity to explore architecture in a more sociological way or art in a more political way. So that was worthwhile.

*Eric:* And I think there were also times when I think we did raise subjects that perhaps the students may have never touched upon, and, you know, you felt you'd opened a door, perhaps.

There is little doubt that many of those who took part in this research saw raising students' political consciousness as central to their remit. Watson (1973), however, describes a number of tensions associated with this activity. One of these, he argues, is the danger that the GS teacher becomes almost a missionary, or a purveyor of pre-packaged cultural capital to the lower orders - processes at which the following quotation hints.

*David:* I think it was – and I hope this is not patronising – opening doors to students and giving them access to places like this (the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool) to art, music, literature, film and all of that. I mean I feel uneasy but, at the time, it's like civilising the natives and it's not meant to be, and it wasn't really like that but it can have that feel at times. So it was opening doors to possibilities but also giving students some of the skills to argue with the world and to explore the world a bit.

Although tensions sometimes existed between LS/GS teachers and other members of staff it is important to recognise that many vocational

students were also reluctant to engage with either the content or ethos of general education. Whilst, as Watson (1973) argues, general studies was a liberating and highly positive experience for many students, others could be resistant and sometimes truculent. Whilst this may, in part, have derived from long-standing and deep-rooted tensions between the academic and the vocational which are such a marked feature of education, especially in England (Hyland and Winch), the quotation captures some of these processes in vivid fashion.

*Mick:* It was the dialogue between people from a working-class background who had gone to university and people from a broadly similar background who had become apprentices and who had therefore not entered higher education, and maybe stopped all formal education much earlier on - and so it was the exchange between those two groups, I think. And the discussions that occurred - even though it was often quite difficult and bruising and so forth - were essential and crucial.

### *Personal and Social Development*

Although FE has always been a multi-faceted, multi-purpose sector, it is essentially a working-class endeavour and its 'core business' has always been providing students with the knowledge and skills for everyday employment (Ainley and Bailey 1997, p. 2). The teaching and learning of various technical and craft skills has therefore traditionally been its central concern. Oral and written communication is, however, also crucial to the world of work and such skills and abilities - or at least a certain technicist version of them - have been central to the rise of Key Skills, Functional Skills and similar curricular initiatives. Communication and the development of a range of personal and social skills was, however, also a key feature of liberal and general studies, as is illustrated below.

*Julie:* [G]iving students the opportunity to be confident, to talk about virtually anything, to investigate things, to be able to articulate what they thought about them, to be able to express themselves.



*Karl:* I think the girls in the hairdressing courses did gain a lot from working through some of those communication assignments...they realised they were good at organising things and planning things and that they had other skills than just doing hairdressing. And it made them more confident and they did presentations and there was that slight sense that it empowered some of them partly because it broadened their understanding and it built on things that they already knew and probably developed their personal skills and professional skills in a wider way...

...The other thing that I did develop, with some of the motor vehicle students and also with the ex-steelworkers, was looking at CV writing and presenting yourself and mock interviews which we started to do with video cameras. . . . they absolutely hated it but by showing them what they were doing and getting the other students to make comments on what they could see they were doing wrong and they were starting to develop reflective skills both for themselves and in giving positive feedback to their peers. All sorts of things like that that they'd never done before.

*Helen:* Personal education was good – gender politics, political studies was useful – many people had no idea how laws were made, etc. Gen ed often had bits that are said to be lacking from the school curriculum – relationships, managing your life, what employers want etc.

### *Student-centred learning*

Many of today's FE colleges have their roots in the mechanics institutes of the nineteenth century, where the assumption was that subject expertise rather than educational knowledge and skills was the chief determinant of the quality of teaching and learning (Harkin 2005, p. 166). Traditionally, many FE teachers regarded themselves chiefly as engineers, builders or

hairdressers who happened to teach; some were reluctant to engage with new educational ideas, and much teaching was didactic, could be dull and uninspiring (Bristow 1970; Venables 1967, p. 220). In contrast, further education is today replete with rhetoric about the supposed importance of pedagogy. But whilst such discourses are rooted, at least partly, in certain discourses of creativity and the demands of the so-called knowledge economy (Simmons and Thompson 2008), liberal and general studies teachers were often at the forefront of classroom innovation, and pioneered student-centred learning in FE.

*Lorraine:* What I thought was most worthwhile was . . . to give the students a chance to have a say about their own education. They'd been told what to do all their lives. Some of them had hated school, and it was a chance for them to actually think about what they did want to know, and what they did need to know, and would they be prepared for new experiences. I found that once the students thought they could have some kind of say [they] were much more open to doing things than if I'd said 'Right, we're doing this' . . .

*Barry:* An awful lot of what I did and, I suppose, the technique I picked up was very much project based and letting the students decide what the problem was; and then to decide the ways in which to explore that problem and the ways in which their solutions to that problem could be reported back...

In a period for most of which there was a tight labour market, students, the majority of whom were released by employers onto part-time college attendance, were placed in a position of strength which effectively forced lecturers to concede forms of reciprocal, mutual and dialogic teaching and learning which have otherwise rarely been developed in further or higher education. Innovative approaches to pedagogy were often linked to and helped mobilise some of the broader political and cultural aims of liberal and general studies.

*Fiona:* Yes, it's exciting when you spark something in a person's mind and they do things for themselves and they stop you in the street and they talk to you and they are

all enthusiastic and you know you've done that . . . because otherwise they would have just come into the college and just done their little area of work and just spent a year or two years just putting bricks onto other bricks or just cutting a piece of cloth.

A particular feature of pedagogy in LS and GS was the creative use of the media – film, music, literature, and a range of audio-visual aids – to involve students in a range of topics and debates in which they may not ordinarily have been engaged, or to examine familiar subjects in new and innovative ways.

*Eric:* [W]e...watched films and stuff, and...there were times when you could have a brilliant discussion, and you felt something had moved and people had engaged with something that perhaps they hadn't thought about before that was significant. . . But equally there were some very, very worthwhile discussions, very worthwhile game-playing things, some things like 'what do people earn?' and those sorts of things, where their eyes would be opened up . . . and the students were active and engaging with each other, and engaging with something that could be quite theoretical and difficult, politically interesting.

*Julie:* I think all of them were worthwhile – in different ways . . . things like the kind of numeracy, financial understanding, the understanding of law, political literacy, and then, of course, the whole issue around media education which became very quickly the central focus of what I was doing.

*Mick:* I also think that is why the students encouraged us to develop those kind of conceptual materials (referring to problem-solving exercises discussed earlier). I put some trust in their conception of what they should be doing and, therefore, that process was what was most valuable.

## **Conclusion**

Whilst, until the 1970s at least, virtually all FE colleges provided vocational students with a programme of general education alongside their other studies, little external direction about what should be taught and learnt and usually no formalised assessment of such provision existed. This led to variability both in content and quality, not only between different colleges but also within individual institutions (Gleeson and Mardle 1980), and it is therefore important not to romanticise the past. Whilst many students gained considerable personal and intellectual development from LS and GS, there is also no doubt that it was experienced unevenly by different individuals and groups, and that not all of those involved in its delivery were as committed or as enthusiastic as those practitioners interviewed during the course of the project upon which this paper is based.

It can also, however, be argued that, in many ways, the general studies movement was ahead of its time. In an era where it is likely that young people will be required to change occupations and develop new skills, not only in their youth but throughout their lifetimes, education and training increasingly focuses somewhat contradictorily on the atomised and the instrumental. In contrast, the core principles of LS and GS – creative learning, the development of analytical and communicative skills, and the promotion of critical thinking – chime with capacities which are increasingly necessary both at an individual and collective level in contemporary society. The promotion of such skills and abilities in the FE curriculum could act as vehicle not only to prepare young people for the world of work but also to empower working-class students to develop the capacity to analyse and challenge the broader social and economic matrix in which they are located.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the Raymond Williams Foundation for providing the funding without which it would not have been possible to carry out the research upon which this paper is based. I would also like to thank my co-investigators, Mike Hopkins, Liz Perry, Roy Stafford and Colin Waugh.

## References

- Ainley, P. and Bailey, B. (1997) *The Business of Learning: staff and student experiences of further education in the 1990s* (London: Cassell).
- Bailey, B. and Unwin, L. (2008) Fostering 'habits of reflection, independent study and free inquiry': an analysis of the short-lived phenomenon of General/Liberal Studies in English vocational education and training, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* Vol. 60, No. 1, pp. 61-74.
- Bristow, A. (1970) *Inside Colleges of Further Education* (London: Department of Education and Science/Stationery Office)
- MoE (Ministry of Education) (1962) *General Studies in Technical Colleges* (London: MoE)
- Gleeson, D. and Mardle, G. (1980) *Further Education or Training? A Case Study in the Theory and Practice of Day-Release Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).
- Harkin, J. (2005) Fragments stored against my ruin: the place of educational theory in the professional development of teachers in further education, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* Vol. 57, No. 2, pp. 165-179.
- Hyland, T. and Winch. C. (2007) *A Guide to Vocational Education and Training* (London: Continuum)
- Lucas, N. (2004) *Teaching in Further Education: new perspectives for a changing context* (London: Institute of Education, University of London).
- MoE (Ministry of Education) (1957) *Liberal Education in Technical Colleges* (Circular 233) (London: HMSO)
- MoR (Ministry of Reconstruction) (1919) *Final Report of the Adult Education Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction* (London: MoR)
- NIAE (National Institute of Adult Education) *Social Aspects of Further Education* (1952) (London: NIAE)
- NIAE (1955) *Liberal Education in a Technical Age* (London: NIAE)
- Simmons, R. and Thompson, R. (2008) Creativity and performativity: the case of further education, *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 5, pp. 601-618
- Venables, E. (1967) *The Young Worker at College – A Study of a Local Tech* (London: Faber and Faber)

Watson, J. (1973) *Liberal Studies in Further Education: an informal survey* (Windsor: NFER)