

Liberal And General Studies In Further Education: Voices From The 'Chalk Face'

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Abstract

This paper presents initial findings from research investigating an important but largely neglected facet of the history of Further Education (FE) – the Liberal Studies and General Studies (LS/GS) movement. Drawing on historical documents and interview data from a group of former LS/GS lecturers, the paper provides important insights into some of the key events and initiatives between the 1950s-1980s, which led to the rise and eventual fall of the LS/GS movement, and seeks to capture the voices of those who were involved at the 'chalk face'. Whilst it is acknowledged that the quality and nature of LS/GS was often variable and that the experiences of both teachers and learners were often uneven, the central argument of the paper is that many of the principles of the LS/GS movement were not only ahead of their time, but are perhaps more relevant to FE today than ever before.

Key words: Liberal and General Studies; Further Education.

Introduction

From the 1950s to the mid-1980s, virtually all FE colleges² 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, as we will see, such terms reflected at least some variance in content, style and emphasis, all such provision was 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 FE lecturers taught variants of LS/GS 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 GS 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 LS/GS movement, and describes some of its key features during the 1950s and 1960s. The next section deals with changes that took place from the 1970s onwards which, it is argued, led ultimately to the demise of LS/GS in FE. The third part of the paper presents data from a programme of interviews, conducted during late 2013 and early 2014, with 13 former LS and GS teachers. It focuses on their perceptions of the value of LS/GS to 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;

² The term '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 FE, and specialist institutions which focused on certain subject areas such as art and design, business or construction.

and pedagogic innovation. The paper concludes by arguing that the underpinning principles of the LS/GS movement, although jettisoned by the state over 30 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 post-compulsory education and training in the years after the end of World War Two. Central to this was a belief amongst key figures within national and local government, and organisations such as the National Institute of Adult Education (NIAE) and the Workers' Education Association (WEA), 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, and is exemplified in the NIAE publication *Liberal Education in a Technical Age*:

'[W]e strongly urge that a certain measure of liberal non-vocational study should be included in vocational education...at least one and a half hours during the day should be devoted to non-vocational studies, and that for full-time and sandwich course students such work should represent about one-fifth of their time-table'

(NIAE, 1955: p. 123)

It is against this background that the Ministry of Education's Circular 323 *Liberal Education in Technical Colleges* (MoE, 1957) required FE colleges to include an element of Liberal Studies in the vocational curriculum. Whilst Circular 323 cemented the role of LS in FE and gave impetus to the Liberal Studies movement more broadly, it is also important to recognise that there was little central direction or guidance about the expected form, nature or content of LS; formal assessment of learning was rare and Liberal Studies was, at this time, almost always free from external regulation. Although cultures varied both between colleges and within individual institutions, such arrangements meant that staff responsible for delivering LS and similar provision often had more scope than other FE teachers to develop radical and progressive approaches both to teaching and learning, and curriculum content (Watson, 1973; Gleeson and Mardle, 1980). The development and growth of the Liberal Studies movement at this time was, however, part of a much broader set of progressive educational reforms which took place in post-war Britain. Key advances included the abolition of fees for state secondary schools, the raising of the minimum school-leaving age to 15, and the substantial growth and improvement of all forms of post-compulsory education, led largely by local authorities. These changes, in turn, need to be viewed as part of a wider programme of social, economic and political change, central to which was the establishment of the welfare state and the expansion of a range of public services in the two decades after the end of World War Two.

Having said all this, much of the thinking, which underpinned the post-war growth of the Liberal Studies movement, pre-dated this time significantly. Whilst the genesis of LS is arguably rooted in classical conceptions of education as a social good, many of its key principles, at least in the context of technical and vocational education in the UK, can be traced back to the ideas of the historian, R. H. Tawney and others associated with the Christian Socialist movement of the early 20th century. Whilst the 1908 report *Oxford and*

Working-Class Education (Harrop, 1987) articulated many of the broad ideas associated with Fabian and Christian Socialism at that time, Tawney and colleagues in the WEA and the Oxford University Extension Delegacy were key advocates for the inclusion of liberal education in technical and vocational education. Tawney was also the author of the Final Report of the 1919 Ministry of Reconstruction's Adult Education Committee, which stated that:

'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'

(Ministry of Reconstruction, 1919: pp. 152-153)

Unfortunately, however, such ideals, like those that underpinned the proposed raising of the school-leaving age, the establishment of the day-continuation schools and much else associated with the rhetoric of 'a land fit for heroes' during the inter-war period, were left largely undeveloped in the 1920s and 1930s. It was not until after the end of World War Two that Liberal Studies gained significant momentum in official circles, and began to develop in a meaningful fashion in FE.

By the 1960s, a number of shifts in the nature and purpose of Liberal Studies meant that over time such provision began to be known more commonly as GS (as, for example, in the 1962 DES pamphlet *General Studies in Technical Colleges*). Although tentative, concerns about the purpose and utility of LS/GS, particularly its relationship to the vocational curriculum, were becoming evident:

'The first need of the students in both the technical and general elements of their course is to develop their communication skills. They must be able to make themselves understood in speech and writing...Success in their technical subjects will directly depend on mastery of these skills...'

(DES, 1962: p. 2)

A number of other changes were also afoot. In the initial post-war era, most young workers attending college were higher-level technicians and apprentices, and many of the institutions they attended became, over time, part of the Higher Education (HE) sector – although many students on part-time evening courses at that time took lower-level qualifications at local colleges, the descendants of which form the core of FE today. Either way, both of these groups would have had relatively high levels of prior attainment and could, in many ways, be viewed as the 'aristocracy of the working class' (Simmons, 2008a). This situation began to change during the second half of the 1960s when, after the 1964 Industrial Training Act, a growth in the number of craft apprentices and 'lower-level' operatives entering FE on 'day-release' programmes took place (Lucas, 2004: p. 17). Alongside this, there was, during the second half of that decade, the expansion of university education to a broader section of young people. A section of the latter – especially those who gained social science and humanities degrees – then, in turn, made their way into FE as GS teachers (Watson, 1973: pp. 45-46). Such trends drew together a newly-recruited cohort of working-class graduates and groups of day-release students, many of whom came from sections of the working class hitherto excluded from post-compulsory education (for example, young people from African-Caribbean backgrounds). This new generation of GS teachers differed significantly in age and educational background, not only from most of the rest of the FE workforce, but also from the majority

of those who had previously been Liberal Studies lecturers – staff from a wide variety of backgrounds, many of whom were simply required or prepared to accept teaching LS as part of their workload.

In GS classes, then, a new cohort of students who were, in many ways, unlike those from those in the 1950s, and lecturers who were different both from Liberal Studies lecturers and from vocational staff came together, in a social context characterised by a tight labour market, high levels of union activity, and growing self-assertion by young working-class people in fields like music, fashion and sport. In the resulting curricular space, students frequently pushed lecturers into reciprocal, mutual and dialogic modes of teaching and learning normally excluded from formal education. At the same time, the underpinning philosophy that LS/GS should encourage free thought and creativity meant that in most cases LS/GS remained 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 LS/GS teachers had a greater degree of freedom over curriculum content, pedagogy, and other matters, than other FE lecturers. GS teachers were therefore 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 (DES, 1969), 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 through the system of National Certificates and Diplomas established from the 1930s onwards, or via 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 (G&CS), was introduced as a compulsory element of such courses and, for the first time, there was also a requirement that a form of GS was to be assessed 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 GS teachers to continue to exercise a significant degree of autonomy over what was taught and learnt. So, whilst the introduction of G&CS signalled the beginning of a process by which content and structure of general education began to be systematically specified and assessed, at least for a time, G&CS also offered a degree of continuity with the traditional ethos of LS/GS.

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. This was intended to be a free-standing qualification focused on reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, isolated from social, cultural or vocational content, and was used as a replacement for more established forms of GS, especially with day-release craft apprentices. From the early 1980s onwards, Social and Life Skills 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). Although introduced largely in response to the collapse of the traditional youth

labour market, Bailey and Unwin (2008: p. 71) argue that the introduction of Social and Life Skills and the like was essentially informed by a deficit model whereby it was assumed that an increasing number of school leavers lacked the necessary personal and social skills to obtain and retain paid employment (see also FEU, 1979). Either way, such provision became a significant feature of the FE sector during the 1980s but, whilst it is clear that it was intended to be more instrumental than its predecessors, GS lecturers were frequently responsible for delivering such provision, and many were able to use these qualifications, at least to an extent, as a vehicle to pursue broader, more liberal forms of teaching and learning. 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, LS/GS passed through a further series of phases, which it is difficult to regard as constituting a version of liberal education, and which reflect the restructuring of the workforce and of vocational education in line with the de-industrialisation of the UK. In the second half of the decade, G&CS was replaced by Common Skills/Core Themes/Integrative Assignments in BTEC programmes (formed from the merger of BEC and TEC), 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. Although the content and ethos of all such initiatives were broadly similar, each of these successive incarnations became tied more and more tightly to the perceived needs of business and industry. In contrast to the free-form culture often associated with LS/GS, Functional Skills and similar provision, is now, like much else in the FE sector, highly monitored, measured and regulated – both through external examination and inspection regimes, and via various forms of managerialism at the level of the individual institution. Either way, it is probably fair to say that few, if any, Functional Skills teachers 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 with substantial experience of teaching LS/GS. Most were graduates with social sciences or humanities degrees, although a few came from Business Studies or other disciplines. Although almost all had formal teaching qualifications, interestingly only two participants had trained specifically to be LS/GS teachers and most found their way into LS/GS after teaching other subjects, sometimes outside FE. Many of those who took part in the research were involved in organisations, which lobbied or campaigned on behalf of the LS/GS movement in the 1970s and 1980s, including the Association for Liberal Education, the General Studies Workshop, and the General Studies Section of the college lecturers’ union, the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education. For these and other reasons we, therefore, cannot claim the interviewees constitute a representative sample from which we can generalise about the views of all former LS/GS lecturers. The data is, however, drawn from a collection of individuals who were involved in delivering different variants of LS/GS education to a broad range of students on vocational programmes across the FE sector. 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 FE for a number of years thereafter. All but two taught LS/GS, or a variant of LS/GS, for more than ten years. The data therefore offers some valuable insights into this important part of the FE curriculum during that time.

Questions focused on a range of areas including participants' career histories; the organisation, the management and delivery of LS/GS in the institutions in which they taught; and the challenges and opportunities offered by different approaches to teaching and learning in LS/GS. 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 LS/GS to those students who experienced this provision. Broadly, responses relate 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/GS as a discipline – if indeed discipline is the right term – and LS/GS teachers in particular were often regarded with both scepticism and suspicion by other FE teachers, perhaps especially so by some of those teaching craft and technical subjects in construction, engineering and similar areas of vocational education (Macfarlane, 1993: p. 53). Whilst some of this may have related to a perceived lack of relevance to the vocational curriculum, the more open culture and the expressive nature of learning, which tended to characterise LS/GS, was also often viewed as problematic. Undoubtedly, some LS/GS teachers were also regarded as ideologically and politically subversive (Gleeson and Mardle, 1980). 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.

Whilst there is little doubt that many of those who took part in the research saw raising students' political consciousness as central to their remit, education for the working classes has also often been bound up with particular forms of paternalism and social control (Simmons, 2008b: p. 424). Watson (1973) argues that, in some cases, the GS

teacher could become 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.

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 liberal and general education. As Watson (1973) argues, GS was a positive experience for many students; others could be resistant. 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, 2007), the following quotation captures some of these processes well.

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 traditionally been a multi-faceted, multi-purpose sector, its 'core business' has always been providing students with the knowledge and skills for everyday employment (Ainley and Bailey, 1997: p. 2). Oral and written communication is a crucial part of this, and such skills and abilities – or at least a certain technician version of them – have been central to the rise of Key Skills, Functional Skills and similar initiatives. Communication and the development of a range of personal and social skills was, however, also a key feature of LS/GS, as 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.

Karen: 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 19th century, where the assumption was that subject expertise rather than educational knowledge and skills was the principal determinant of the quality of teaching and learning (Harkin, 2005: p. 166). Traditionally, many FE teachers saw themselves chiefly as engineers, builders or hairdressers who just happened to teach, rather than as professional teachers *per se*. Some were reluctant to engage with new educational ideas, and much teaching was didactic, dull and uninspiring (Bristow, 1970; Venables, 1967: p. 220). In contrast, FE is today replete with rhetoric about the supposed importance of pedagogy. But whilst such notions are rooted, at least partly, in certain discourses of creativity and the demands of the so-called knowledge economy (Simmons and Thompson, 2008), LS/GS 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...

Although, at least in the initial post-war period, LS/GS tended to take the form of a traditional classroom-based weekly slot bolted onto course timetables, over time, individual lecturers and course teams experimented with a variety of delivery methods and approaches, including student conferences, residentials, project-based learning and a range of other approaches to pedagogy rarely found in FE at that time. Innovative teaching and learning often helped to mobilise some of the broader political and cultural aims of LS/GS.

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 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 early-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, it was undoubtedly experienced unevenly by different individuals and groups, and it is unlikely that all LS/GS teachers 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 LS/GS movement was not only ahead of its time but also in advance of much of what constitutes the contemporary FE curriculum. In an era where it is likely that young people will be required to change occupations and develop new skills throughout their lifetimes, education and training, at least for young working-class people, 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. In March 1957 the WEA paper *The Development of Technical Education*, warned that:

'Technical education must not be too narrowly vocational or too confined to one skill or trade. We must teach people to be adaptable for swift change...We cannot afford to neglect spiritual and human values'.

Before going on to argue that:

'It is not only a question of adding arts and social studies courses to the stock in trade of the technical college. It means producing and encouraging teachers who are able to enthuse technical students with an interest in the English language and the Liberal Studies in general. And it means giving both teachers and students the time and the facilities to achieve this'.

(WEA, 1957: p. 10)

The promotion of this spirit in FE today would not only help prepare young people for the world of work but also empower working-class students to develop the capacity to analyse and challenge inequality, and question the broader social and economic matrix in which they are located.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the Raymond Williams Foundation for funding the research upon which this paper is based.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.5920/till.2014.6132>