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Further education and the liberal studies movement revisited

“Where their eyes would be opened”(sometimes)

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Careers in education
and youth work



Introduction

- This lecture draws together two areas of contested territory – liberal studies and critical pedagogy – though in a particular context and over a certain time.
- It's central argument is that liberal studies (at least sometimes) offered FE teachers and students the opportunity to engage in critical pedagogy at the 'chalk face' – although undoubtedly such processes were contested, uneven and often problematic.
- Draws on research with former FE liberal studies teachers, funded by the Raymond Williams Foundation.

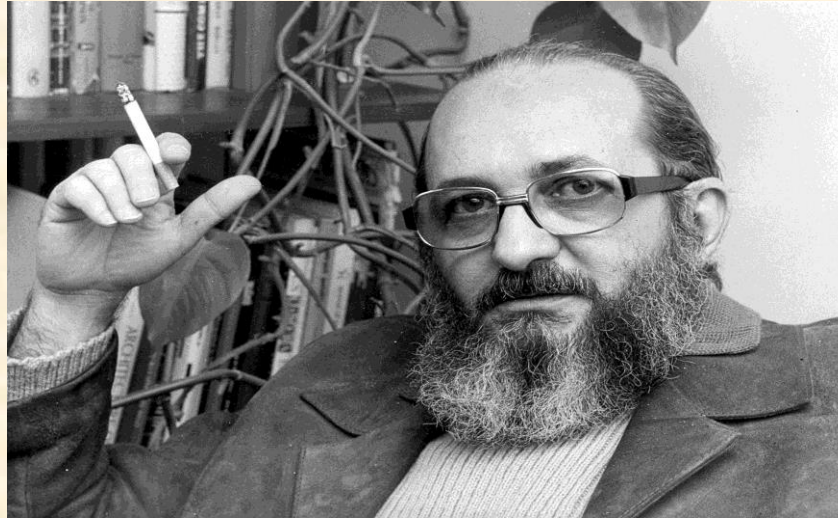
What I want to do today...

- First, I want us to consider some of the central ideas associated with critical pedagogy.
- Then, think about the liberal studies movement in FE, where it came from, its content and purpose(s).
- Finally, present some of my data on teaching and learning in liberal studies, and consider the implications which flow from it.

Critical Pedagogy

- Draws on various traditions, including Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism and postmodernism – but possible to trace it back to the Antonio Gramsci and leading members of the Frankfurt School, especially Jurgen Habermas.
- Leading exponents often associated with the American School of Critical Pedagogy and include Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, bell hooks, Joe Kinchello and Peter McLaren – although many work in other contexts.

Critical Pedagogy



- For Paulo Freire (1970), two of the central aims of CP are:
- To establish shared ground for critical and analytical work.
- To enable students to challenge traditional power relationships, both inside and outside the classroom – to promote *praxis*.

Critical Pedagogy

- A key aim of critical pedagogy is to enable students to locate their learning within an explanatory framework which both promotes an understanding of structured inequality, and champions social justice (Kincheloe, 2008). It aims to foster:
- “[T]hought, reading, writing, and speaking that go beneath surface meaning...dominant myths...to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media or discourse” (Shor, 1992, p. 129).

Critical Pedagogy

- Best promoted when teaching and learning is collaborative and negotiated rather than driven by a set curriculum or other external constraints.
- Requires divisions between teachers and learners to be transcended, and a radically different classroom ethos.
- This, according to Freire, requires both learners to develop their political consciousness and the teacher to undergo the 'Easter experience' of relinquishing control of the content and delivery of the curriculum.

FE today

- Since the late-1980s most students on vocational courses in FE colleges have been required to undertake some form of instrumental/functional learning alongside their main qualification aim.
- Functional Skills is the latest incarnation of such provision which has, at other times, also been known as Key Skills, Common Skills and Core Skills.
- Such forms of learning are underpinned by the notion that all learners should gain certain key transferable skills which will enable them to prosper in the workplace and in life more broadly.

But it was not always this way

- From the 1950s-1980s, FE students – often on day-release from local industry - were required to engage with broader forms of liberal education alongside their vocational studies.
- This provision was known at various times as liberal studies, general studies, complementary studies, general and communication studies.
- Liberal studies (in its various guises) aimed at broadening the educational and cultural horizons of vocational learners and often included sociology; politics; English literature; film studies; current affairs, etc.

So what was liberal studies all about?

- The liberal studies movement can be traced back to the Christian Socialists of the 19th Century and ideas about improving the condition of the working classes – although such gained momentum during the early 20th Century, championed by influential bodies such as the WEA and the NIAE.
- Such sentiments came to the fore at the end of World War Two as part of the spirit of post-war reconstruction that existed during the 1940s and '50s.

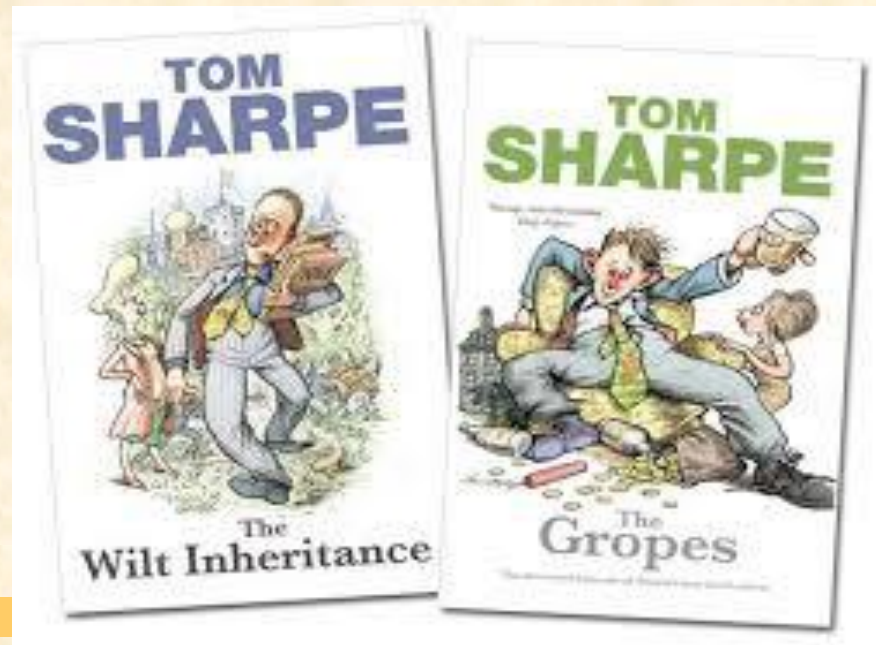
[L]iberal non-vocational study should be included in vocational education...at least one and a half hours during the day should be devoted to non-vocational studies...for full-time...students [it] should represent about one-fifth of their time-table. (NIAE, 1955, p. 123)

So what was liberal studies all about?

- The inclusion of liberal studies in the vocational curriculum finally became an official requirement at the end of the 1950s when the MoE Circular 323 required FE colleges to provide vocational learners with an element of liberal studies in their studies.
- Colleges were, however, given significant discretion in terms of the exact nature and form which liberal studies took.
- In almost all cases it was unassessed and largely unmediated by the state – at least until the 1980s.

So what was liberal studies all about?

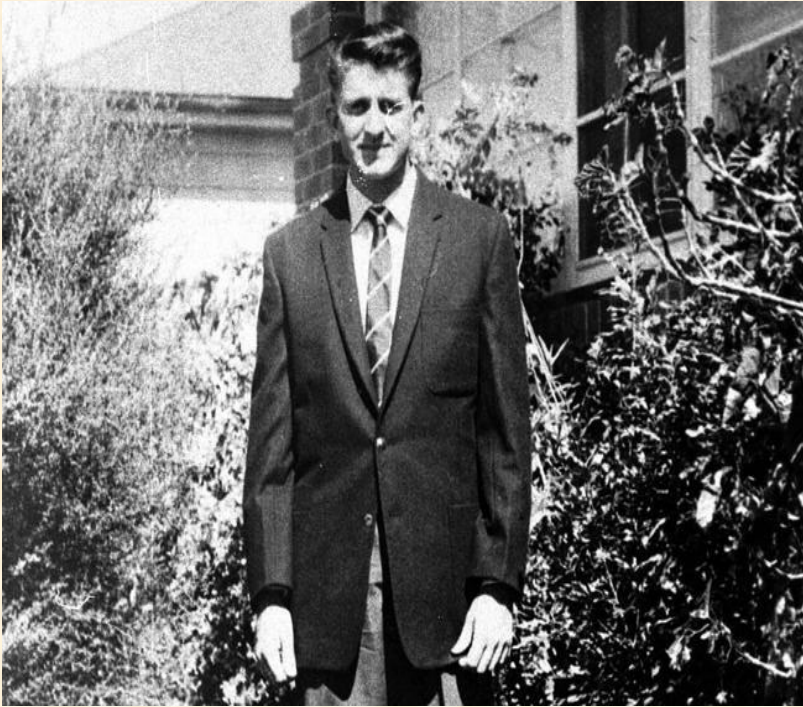
- This meant is that provision was hugely variable both between and within colleges (Simmons, 2015).
- There were different models of liberal studies from the 'moral rescue' model, to the overtly political, through to free-wheeling anarchists (Gleeson and Mardle, 1980).



So what was liberal studies all about?



So what was liberal studies all about?



Liberal Studies in FE

- *Barry:* An awful lot of what I did, I suppose...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...
- *Val:* [W]orking as a group, using various games or role-plays...or things like films or speakers, where it was more issue-based. And the main work was discussion-based...occasionally...we used to get general studies students using film - video as it then was...role play
- *David:* I taped “Boys from the Black Stuff”, I found a documentary on Thalidomide...

Liberal Studies in FE

- *Val: [A] lot of modern teaching...classroom interactions, activities devised for students... have been informed by what we did. Many of the things that I think we pioneered in liberal studies...have become the accepted pedagogic model for doing things...*
- *Lorraine: 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... [O]nce the students thought they could have some kind of say [they] were much more open than if I'd said 'Right, we're doing this'. . .*

Liberal Studies in FE

- *Fiona: [I]t's exciting when you spark something in a person's mind and they do things for themselves and...and they are all enthusiastic and you know you've done that . . .*
- *Eric: [T]here were times when...you felt something had moved and people had engaged with something that perhaps they hadn't thought about before. . .where their eyes would be opened. . .and the students were active and engaging with each other, and engaging with something...quite theoretical and difficult, politically interesting.*

Liberal Studies in FE

- Val: [I]t very much depended on the students. We would get lots of students for whom it was the best thing in the week...But because of the challenges, I think, there was a tendency, then, to turn it into entertainment...Hence the reliance on film...the old Concorde films, and feature films...I was slightly worried about what we were doing there.
- Bob: 50 % of the students had closed minds ...impossible to teach...The other 50%, yes, it's exciting when you spark something in a person's mind and ... they say to you 'without you I wouldn't have done this or gone there'...But the other half – the nightmare half – no.

Liberal Studies in FE

- *Val: [T]eaching in the building department...I found very uncomfortable, because they were very challenging, and really did feel that here was a middle-class person...wishing to discuss all these airy fairy ideas...and they'd take you on, and that could be...quite scary...because you almost felt under attack.*
- *[T]hings could get out of control...they weren't necessarily going to buy what you said, and there was always that edge to it...where they wouldn't cooperate, and they wouldn't do it. I remember a Friday afternoon session which was really tough and you had to really pull things out of the bag.*

Liberal Studies in FE

- *Keith: [T]here was massive resistance...sometimes it would take the form of just mucking about or throwing stuff at you but...the same people...you might spend an hour after class standing on the stairs passionately discussing some issue that had arisen in the lesson.*
- *Mike: 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...it was the exchange between those two groups...And the discussions that occurred – even though it was often quite difficult and bruising and so forth – were essential and crucial.*

Liberal Studies in FE

- Anthony: *I wanted to be discussing politics and literature with working-class students - looking back that might have been a naïve concept – to consider educating the working class to become politically active...*
- David: *I think it was – and I hope this is not patronising...giving them access to places like this [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...*

So what happened to liberal studies?

- There was, over time, a feeling that liberal studies needed to become more ‘work-related’ and less free-wheeling – and undoubtedly there were concerns about the ‘political’ nature of some LS/GS.
- Bob: *[Liberal Studies was] to give students a critical understanding of the world, a way of becoming more politically, media, socially-literate, a political corrective to the types of commonsense notions and falsely obvious stuff...*

So what happened to liberal studies?

- Series of curriculum initiatives began to shift the agenda – eg. CGLI 772 Cert in Communication Skills for craft apprentices, and Social and Life Skills on YOP programmes.
- From mid-1970s onwards, rise of mass youth unemployment, break-down of the traditional apprenticeship model and far fewer ‘day-release’ students coming into FE from local industry.
- Rise of new forms of provision aimed at promoting employability skills eg. YOP, TOP, YTS and similar programmes.

So what happened to liberal studies?

- Successive incarnations of what was once liberal studies became more and more tightly tied to the employability agenda (Simmons, 2015):
- Liberal studies – general studies – general and communication studies – core skills – key skills – functional skills...
- Initially many FE teachers were able to subvert new, provision but this became more difficult, over time, and critical pedagogy was squeezed and replaced by a more instrumental, ‘skills-based’ agenda.

So what was liberal studies all about?

- *Val*: there was a lot of politics going on. . . and there was a concern... that what we should be doing is helping the students to communicate better. You know...it was the safer option, so then let's go for communication! And then we had a coordinator come in... who was buying that because he felt we would become more acceptable to the rest of the college, to the vocational people, if we did communication, and you could see that was the mood.

So what happened to liberal studies?

- Arguably, such processes effectively deny working-class learners access to relational understanding and the capacity to generate new knowledge, and therefore contribute to their continued marginalisation and disadvantage (Wheelahan 2007, p. 648) .
- Also run contrary to dominant discourses about the ‘knowledge economy’ and the supposed demand for flexible, creative, innovative workers (Simmons, 2015).
- But, as Ron Thompson (2009, p. 40) argues, education systems are not just an expression of economic need, they are also a reflection of a country’s broader culture and values.

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