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# “What are we doing this for?” Liberal studies in vocational education

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## Introduction

Technical and vocational education has always been regarded as second best to academic learning, especially in England where work-related learning has traditionally been seen as more appropriate for the lower classes, particularly when delivered in colleges of further education (FE<sup>1</sup>) (Hyland and Winch, 2007). Yet, from the 1950s until the 1980s, all FE colleges included an element of liberal education in the majority of their vocational courses, known at different times as liberal studies (LS), general studies (GS) or general and communication studies (G&CS). To some degree, differences in terminology reflected competing conceptions of vocational education, and its relationship with other forms of knowledge but it would be fair to say that such provision was informed, at least partly, by the principle that vocational learners should develop certain forms of social and cultural knowledge as well as specific work-related skills. Such notions had been popular within the English intelligentsia since the nineteenth century, and there were, over time, attempts to provide sections of the working class with access to particular forms of liberal education, but LS did not receive official approval until the Ministry of Education’s Circular 323, *Liberal Education in Technical Colleges* (MoE, 1957) required all FE colleges to include an element of liberal education in the vocational curriculum. Unlike today, however, colleges were allowed substantial discretion in the organisation and delivery of LS/GS so, in Bernsteinian terms, there was a significant insulating boundary between educational discourses and non-educational discourses as represented by the state (Bernstein, 1977, p. 42). This, as we will see, changed significantly over time but notions of independent thinking and cultural enrichment were usually central to liberal studies following Circular 323 (TES, 1966, p. 1561). But, whilst thousands of lecturers taught variants of liberal studies and probably millions of students attended such classes, there is little published research on this subject (although see, for example, Gleeson and Mardle, 1980; Bailey and Unwin, 2008).

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<sup>1</sup> The term FE college is used to describe a range of institutions which have always been multi-functional but whose main remit has traditionally been providing technical and vocational education and training to individuals over the minimum school-leaving age. During the period dealt with in this paper 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. Whilst international comparisons are not straightforward, FE colleges have a number of broad similarities with community colleges in the USA and the TAFE institutes in Australia.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the origins of liberal studies in FE and by describing some of its key features during the 1950s and 1960s. It then deals with the 1970s onwards, and the series of initiatives which eventually led to its demise. This is followed by a section which presents data from interviews, conducted during 2013-14, with former FE lecturers who taught LS/GS between the early-1960s and the early-1990s. This section draws on Basil Bernstein's (2000) work on pedagogic discourses and argues that, at least under some conditions, liberal studies allowed vocational learners access to what Bernstein famously described as 'powerful knowledge' – or, in other words, knowledge which affords the possibility to think beyond the immediate and the material, and to contest social and economic inequality. The paper finishes by highlighting some of the contradictions between FE today and dominant discourses about the relationship between education and the economy. These, it is argued, are essentially rooted in the class-based inequalities which continue to underpin the nature of education and training in England, and elsewhere.

### **Liberal Studies: a (very) brief history**

In England, there has always been a close relationship between education and social class, although there have also been attempts to provide at least relatively privileged sections of the working class with access to certain forms of liberal education - the Christian Socialist movement of the mid-nineteenth century being closely associated with this spirit (Pellegrino-Sutcliffe, 2014). But, whilst those associated with Christian Socialism and the synchronous Oxford extension delegacy may have been motivated by *noblesse oblige*, education for the 'lower orders' has always been associated with social control as much as emancipation (Lawton, 1975), and arguably there were continuities with the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge which developed as an antidote to working-class activism in the 1820s. Going into the twentieth century, upper-class Christian Socialists associated with the Oxford extension movement became particularly influential and when the Lloyd-George Government established an Adult Education Committee within the Ministry of Reconstruction, prominent members included Christian Socialists such as R.H. Tawny, A.L. Smith, and leading lights in the YMCA and WEA. The Committee stated that:

We are anxious that technical instruction...be further broadened by...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...

(MoR, 1919, pp. 152-153)

The social and political uncertainties of the inter-war years meant that, like many proposed reforms of the time, the introduction of LS went largely unfulfilled but it is nevertheless evident that many of the ideas which underpinned the liberal studies movement were formulated well before Circular 323.

The years following the end of World War Two saw a broad consensus amongst policymakers, college leaders and many large employers about the development of vocational education. Central to this was the belief articulated by the National Institute for Adult Education (NIAE) that work-related learning should also promote students' social, moral and cultural development:

[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 necessary, however, to locate such ambitions within a broader social, economic and political project central to which was the establishment of the welfare state and the expansion of a range of public services from the end of the 1940s onwards. But it is also necessary to realise that there were concurrent concerns about organised labour set within tight labour markets and many employers, especially in highly-unionised industries, saw the need to provide workers with a degree of social and moral education, as well as technical instruction. In this climate, arguably the NIAE model, rooted as it was in the WEA/Oxford-extension tradition, offered a vehicle through which young workers could be taught to accommodate with rather than challenge the status quo.

## **From LGS to Functional Skills**

Although cultures varied considerably both between and within individual institutions, it is nevertheless possible to recognise certain trends in the teaching of liberal studies following Circular 323 - one being the 'moral rescue' model of liberal studies (Neale, 1966, p. 126) whereby young people were taught to become good, honest citizens. This was sometimes reinforced by employing former schoolteachers, clergymen and other earnest individuals to teach liberal studies, a tendency which often led to conservative and individualised practice rather than critically-informed teaching and learning (Carroll, 1980). In the immediate post-war period the FE student population was both relatively small (147, 500 day-release students in 1947 (MoE, 1949, p. 40)) and many FE students were high achievers attending institutions which eventually became part of the higher education sector<sup>2</sup> (Bailey and Unwin, 2008, pp. 62-63). But the nature of both the student body and LS/GS was soon to change. One trend was increased student numbers: by 1957 there were over 400,000 day-release students (MoE, 1958, p. 26), but there was also a feeling that more students were of modest ability (Bailey and Unwin, 2008, pp. 62-63). At the same time liberal studies began to be known more commonly as general studies and, although LS and GS were often used interchangeably, arguably this was the first a series of changes which eventually lead to the replacement of liberal studies with far more instrumental forms of learning such as Key Skills and Functional Skills.

Meanwhile, there was an expansion of university education to a somewhat broader section of the population and, towards the end of the 1960s, a newly-qualified cohort of graduates, many of whom came from working-class backgrounds – often with social science and humanities degrees - made their way into further education to teach LS/GS (Watson, 1973, pp. 45-46). This new generation of often Left-leaning lecturers, differing both in age and outlook from the rest of the FE workforce, then came face-to-face with day-release students, many of whom came from sections of the working class previously excluded from post-compulsory education (Carroll, 1980, p. 30). Against a background of growing self-assertion by young people in music, fashion, sport and so forth, LS/GS teachers were frequently pushed into reciprocal, mutual and dialogic modes of teaching and learning rarely found in formal education.

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<sup>2</sup> Certain establishments which, in the years immediately after the end of World War Two, were generally regarded as being part of the FE system were eventually drawn into the higher education (HE) sector when, over time, they were incorporated into colleges of advanced technology, polytechnics and other HE institutions, most of which eventually became designated as universities.

*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... discussions that occurred – even though it was often quite difficult and bruising – were essential and crucial.

From the end of the 1960s, significant changes in vocational education began to realign FE with the industrial restructuring of the UK. One consequence of this was the creation of the Technician Education Council (TEC), an awarding body which introduced a new variant of liberal education, General and Communication Studies, characterised by a greater emphasis on literacy and language skills and also meant that, for the first time, a form of LS/GS became formally assessed in at least nominal parity with the vocational curriculum. Although many practitioners contended that formal assessment ran contrary to the 'free-thinking' tradition of LS/GS, there was also a counter-argument that assessment helped motivate students to engage more fully with learning outside their immediate vocational area (Watson, 1973, pp. 15-17). Either way, G&CS units were still devised at the individual college level and so practitioners continued to exercise significant autonomy both over what was taught and how it was delivered. So, whilst the introduction of General and Communication Studies signalled the beginning of a process of systematic specification and assessment, there was also a substantial degree of continuity with earlier forms of LS/GS. There were nevertheless, from the mid-1970s onwards, a number of other initiatives which significantly changed the agenda. One of these was the City and Guilds 772, a 'free-standing' qualification focused on reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, isolated from social, cultural or vocational content, intended to replace LS/GS, especially for craft apprentices. Then, from in the late-1970s, Social and Life Skills was introduced as part of newly-created training programmes such as the Youth Opportunities Programme and the Youth Training Scheme (YTS). But, whilst Social and Life Skills was intended to be more instrumental than other forms of LS/GS, those responsible for delivering it were often able to use it as a vehicle to pursue more progressive forms of teaching and learning (Gleeson, 1989). Arguably, such initiatives can therefore be seen as constituting perhaps the final historical phase of liberal education in FE.

G&CS was replaced by Common Skills in BTEC programmes (BTEC the result of merger of the Business Education Council and TEC) in the late-1980s. Then, when General National Vocational Qualifications were introduced in the early-1990s such provision was, in turn, superseded 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

supplanted by Key Skills, which were themselves then replaced with Functional Skills. Although each of these initiatives was quite similar, each became more closely tied to the perceived needs of business. In contrast to the free-form culture often associated with liberal studies, Functional Skills and similar provision, is now, like much else in FE, highly regulated both through external examination and inspection regimes, and via various forms of managerialism at the level of the individual institution.

### **Civilising the natives?**

This section of the paper draws on data from a programme of interviews with 13 former LS/GS lecturers (Nine men and four women, most of whom were social sciences or humanities graduates). Whilst perhaps many participants reflected the 'typical' profile of a liberal studies lecturer, it cannot be claimed that they constitute a representative sample from which we can generalise about the views of all former LS/GS lecturers. Leaving aside sample size, many of the interviewees were involved in organisations which campaigned on behalf of the liberal and general studies movement in the 1970s and 1980s, including the General Studies Section of the trade union, NATFHE. Data is, however, drawn from practitioners who delivered different variants of liberal studies to a wide range of students on vocational programmes. These included motor mechanics, hairdressers, caterers and students on construction, art and design, and business courses, as well as young people undertaking YTS and similar programmes. In total, participants taught in 25 different colleges, including institutions based in major cities, industrial towns, and various other locations. Participants taught various forms of LS/GS between 1962 and 1991, and all but two taught variants of liberal studies for over ten years. Some participants had clear views about what liberal and general studies was for:

*Eric:* I wanted to get involved in some kind of political or social literacy...I decided to go into FE, as I say, believing that you could change the world through education [laughs] – and so what I would be doing was engaging with students and helping them develop themselves...

Others were more equivocal:

*Martin:* The worst experiences I've ever had in teaching were when somebody would say 'what are we doing this for?' and I found that a really debilitating question...in all honesty, sometimes I didn't have a very good answer.

It is perhaps unsurprising that many participants had difficulties engaging with students whose attitudes and opinions ran contrary to those they wished to promote – although respondents also talked about the emancipatory effects of LS/GS for some young people.

*Bob:* I think that fifty per cent of the students had closed minds...and were impossible to teach...The other fifty per cent, yes, it's exciting when you spark something in a person's mind and they do things for themselves...So part of it was incredibly exciting and wonderful because you realised that you'd help that person grow and developed them...But the other half – the nightmare half – no.

[T]here were times when you...felt something had moved and people had engaged with something that perhaps they hadn't thought about before. . .and the students were... engaging with something...quite theoretical and difficult, politically interesting.

Meanwhile, Watson (1973) argues that, in some cases, the LS/GS teacher could become almost a missionary, purveying pre-packaged cultural capital to the lower orders. Such tensions are evident in the following quotations.

*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 – it seems rather condescending now.

*David:* I hope this is not patronising...giving them access 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...

Basil Bernstein's work on pedagogic discourses can help us to arrive at an alternative understanding. Bernstein (2000, pp. 32-33) – who taught day-release students at City Day College, Shoreditch - identifies three types of pedagogic discourse which he links to different forms of knowledge. These discourses Bernstein classifies as singular and regional modes which are associated with high-status forms of learning and a generic mode which, he argues, is both more recent and of lower status. The singular mode is, Bernstein argues, associated mainly with academic subjects such as English, history, the natural sciences and so on, whereas the regional mode is often found in quasi-professional training, such as for nursing or teaching. Those preparing to work in more prestigious occupations, for example, in law or architecture, usually have access to a combination of both singular and regional modes. In contrast, generic modes are commonly located in more lowly-regarded forms of learning and place every-day experiences of work and life, rather than conceptual knowledge, at the centre of the educational process. This, Bernstein argues, is problematic both in terms of the status associated with such learning and the explanatory power offered by different modes of knowledge. Generic modes which, according to Bernstein (1999, p. 169), are generally reserved for the 'less able', were first introduced into mainstream education initiatives such as the YTS, but are now found across the FE curriculum more broadly (Simmons, 2009). Meanwhile, other modes of knowledge are increasingly confined to high-status institutions and reserved for relatively privileged learners (Bernstein 2000, xxi).

Some variants of liberal studies always contained elements of what Bernstein's generic mode of knowledge and everyday topics, such as managing personal relationships or how to apply for a mortgage were often part of LS/GS sessions. Meanwhile, the inclusion of current affairs or 'newsworthy' items could perhaps be seen as representing a regional mode of pedagogy. But liberal studies also provided vocational learners with access to English literature, history, politics, and other subjects they may not otherwise have pursued in any coherent or sustained fashion. Such forms of knowledge broadly reflect Bernstein's singular modes of pedagogic discourse and it is important to recognise that the value of such knowledge is not solely related to social status. For Bernstein (1999) principled, conceptual knowledge affords an explanatory power which everyday knowledge is not able to provide. For him, the 'distance' or *discursive gap* between everyday situations and the theoretical concepts and general principles provide 'the

crucial site of the yet to be thought' (Bernstein, 2000, p. 31). This, for Bernstein, is the place where powerful knowledge is produced. Here, two of the research participants, provide some insight into these processes:

*Bob:* [LS/GS 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...

*Barry:* [E]nabling them how to look, for example in an art department, how art is created, manufactured...its filters and gatekeepers...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.

In contrast, Bernstein regards generic modes of pedagogy as directed towards immediate goals and embedded in 'common-sense' knowledge. This, in turn, is connected to the notion of *trainability* whereby the individual will supposedly accrue various transferable skills, through which it is assumed they will be able to continuously re-engage with the constantly changing circumstances of work and employment. But, for Bernstein, (2000, p. 59) such processes effectively deny 'the dynamic interface between individual careers and the social or collective base', and effectively places a socially empty concept at centre of education. By removing generic practices from their original contexts the power relations and inequalities inherent within work and life are moreover excluded, and the possibility of understanding and critiquing such processes is removed. As Bernstein tells us, the promotion of particular forms of pedagogic identity is, after all, the result of struggle between different social groups, the outcome of which is projected by the state. The intention is that such identities create 'a particular moral disposition, motivation and aspiration, embedded in particular performances and practices' (Bernstein, 2000, p. 65). Michael Young (2008, p. 156) has described Key Skills as representing an example of generic mode of pedagogy and Functional Skills, the current incarnation of such learning, is, as its name implies, highly utilitarian and built almost entirely upon generic modes of knowledge, based upon the demonstration of various competencies isolated both from social or vocational. Such forms of provision can arguably be seen as what Richard Johnson once described as 'a device for the political control of knowledge' (Johnson, 1991, p. 82). Either way, the contrast between Functional Skills and its antecedents in LS/GS is clear - even if, admittedly, the liberal studies movement was never a unified project, and its content often inconsistent.

## Conclusion

Initial post-war conceptions of liberal studies were arguably linked to earlier discourses of paternalism and social control, the changing nature of the FE student body during the 1960s, combined with the entry of a cadre of largely Left-leaning LS/GS teachers, resulted in diverse but often radical practice. Whilst, over time, liberal studies became increasingly codified and mediated by the requirements of the state, practitioners were often able to smuggle progressive and critical practice into the curriculum (Gleeson, 1989) - even as provision increasingly became 'a relay of patterns of dominance external to itself' (Bernstein, 1977). This, it is argued, provided many young people with the opportunity to think critically about their experiences of work and society more broadly, and whilst many resisted or rejected such processes, the value of LS/GS was essentially rooted in attempts to provide working-class students with access to 'powerful knowledge'.

*Fiona:* [O]therwise 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.

Access to singular and regional modes of knowledge allow the accounting technician to relate her role not only to company strategy but also to economic policy and the wider political environment; the apprentice plumber can contextualise his work, both in relation to other construction trades, and to architectural and aesthetic principles, as well as to ethical considerations about the built environment more broadly. In contrast, competency-based and de-contextualised learning provides little opportunity to make connections between work-related practices and their social and political context. This, Wheelahan (2007, p. 648) argues effectively denies working-class learners access to relational understanding and the capacity to generate new knowledge, thus reinforcing to their marginalisation and disadvantage.

The exclusion of working-class learners from knowledge which allow them to challenge inequality and oppression is problematic in many ways, even if one accepts dominant discourses about the supposed relationship between education and social and economic wellbeing. The rigors of the 'knowledge economy' will, we are told, mean that young people are required to develop new forms of knowledge and skill throughout their lifetimes. Yet education and training, at least for the working-classes, increasingly excludes creative, critical and analytical learning (Simmons

and Thompson, 2008) – the very capacities deemed necessary to compete in a globalised knowledge economy. But education systems are not just an expression of economic need, they are also a reflection of a country's broader culture and values – and FE colleges are, after all, institutions better suited to 'other people's children' (Richardson, 2007, p. 417).

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