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# From Liberal Studies to Functional Skills

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## Employability, Knowledge and Vocational Learning

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Careers in education  
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**HUDDERSFIELD**

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# Backdrop to session

- In England, since the 1950s, most vocational FE students have been required to undertake some form of general education alongside their main qualification aim.
- Today this is known as Functional Skills but similar provision has, since the 1990s, 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, according to official discourse, will enable them to prosper in the workplace and in life more broadly.

## Backdrop to the session

- In some ways, it is difficult to argue with such a discourse.
- Most employment requires a certain degree of ability in English, mathematics and ICT, and the possession of such skills is obviously applicable to a range of other social and cultural spheres.
- So, Functional Skills must be a good thing....

# Backdrop to the session

.... In this session I argue that:

- a) The 'functional skills' movement, which has been dominant in since the 1990s, limits the forms of knowledge available to vocational learners, and can, in some cases, contribute to or reinforce disadvantage.
- b) Other broader forms of general education found in FE from 1950s-1980s, known variously as liberal studies, general studies, complementary studies, etc. – exposed FE students to forms of knowledge with both greater explanatory power and emancipatory potential.
- c) Such processes can be understood using Bernstein's (2000) work on pedagogic discourses.

# Bernstein's pedagogic discourses

- Bernstein (2000) identifies 3 pedagogic discourses:
- *Singular mode*: high status, mainly associated with academic subjects – English, history, natural sciences, etc.
- *Regional mode*: often found in quasi-professional training, eg. nursing, teaching, social work
- *Generic mode*: low status, focus on 'everyday experience' rather than principled, conceptual knowledge.

# Bernstein's pedagogic discourses

- For Bernstein, different forms of knowledge relate not only to social status but differ in terms of explanatory power.
- Arguably generic modes of learning deny learners access to the capacity to generate new knowledge (Wheelahan, 2007, p. 648).
- Functional Skills and the like can arguably be seen as 'a device for the political control of knowledge'. (Johnson, 1991, p. 82).



## But it was not always this way...

- Liberal studies (in its various guises) aimed at broadening the educational and cultural experiences of vocational learners and often included sociology; politics; English literature; film studies; current affairs, etc.
- In other words, LS/GS attempted to provide vocational learners with access to what Bernstein would have described as regional and singular modes of knowledge.



# So what was liberal studies all about?

- The inclusion of additional subjects
- Broadening the treatment of technical and scientific subjects.
- Increased use of college library, of seminars, discussion groups, directed study periods and project assignments; and in general the fostering of a tutorial relationship between teaching staffs and students on the lines used in the universities.
- The encouragement of corporate life in the college and the development of extra-curricular activities.
- The establishment of contacts with institutions abroad.  
(Ministry of Education, 1957)

## So what was liberal studies all about?

- In reality, provision was hugely variable both between and within different colleges (Simmons, 2015).
- Different versions of liberal studies existed at different times and in different locations ranging from the 'moral rescue' model of LS/GS, to the overtly political, through to free-wheeling anarchism (Gleeson and Mardle, 1980).
- Either way liberal studies in all its guises was in almost all cases unassessed and unmediated by government – at least until the 1980s.
- Or there was, in Bernsteinian (1977) terms, a significant insulating boundary between educational and non-educational discourses as represented by the state.

## So what was liberal studies all about?

- It is important, however, not to be uncritical about the way that liberal studies was experienced at the 'chalk face'
- Keith: *I mean, there was massive resistance from the students...sometimes it would take the form of just mucking about or throwing stuff at you but...the same people who were doing that, you might spend an hour after class standing on the stairs passionately discussing some issue that had arisen in the lesson.*
- 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.*

## So what was liberal studies all about?

- Although there are other ways of interpreting classroom practice, even if it could sometimes be adversarial.
- 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... 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.*

## So what was liberal studies all about?

- Either way, it is clear that, for many practitioners, LS/GS was about exposing vocational learners to what Bernstein described as 'powerful knowledge' – even if they did not necessarily conceptualise it exactly this way.
- Gareth: *Basically it was to encourage students to think about topics which wouldn't normally enter their range of decision-making or knowledge...to encourage students to think beyond their normal range...*
- 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...*



## So what was liberal studies all about?

- David: *I think it was...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 but it can have that feel...*
- Bob: *There were times when you...felt something had moved and people had engaged with something that perhaps they hadn't thought about before...something quite theoretical and difficult, politically interesting.*

## So what was liberal studies all about?

- Barry: [E]nabling them to look, for example...how art is created, manufactured...its gatekeepers...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.
- Fiona: *[O]therwise they would have just come into the college and done their little area of work, and just spent a year or two years putting bricks onto other bricks or just cutting a piece of cloth.*



## 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.

*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, p2)*

## So what happened to liberal studies?

- 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 generic employability skills eg. YOP, TOP, YTS and similar programmes.
- 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.

# So what happened to liberal studies?

- Some practitioners fought a rearguard action through the Association for Liberal Education, the General Studies Workshop, and the General Studies Section of the college lecturers' union, NATFHE.
- But, over time, established conceptions of LS/GS were squeezed out of the curriculum, and replaced by a more instrumental, 'skills-based' employability agenda (Bailey and Unwin, 2008).
- Liberal studies – general studies – general and communication studies – core skills – key skills – functional skills...

## So what happened to liberal studies?

- For Bernstein, principled, the *discursive gap* between conceptual knowledge and 'everyday knowledge' affords the crucial site of the 'yet to be thought' (Bernstein, 2000, p. 31)
- For Wheelahan (2007, p. 648), denying working-class learners access to relational understanding limits the capacity to generate new knowledge, and therefore contributes to their continued marginalisation and disadvantage.
- Also run contrary to dominant discourses about the demands of the 'knowledge economy' and the supposed demand for flexible, creative and innovative workers (Simmons, 2015).

## So what happened to liberal studies?

- But, as Ron Thompson (2009, p. 40) reminds us, education systems are not merely an expression of economic need, they are also a reflection of a country's broader culture and values
- FE colleges are, after all, institutions better suited to 'other people's children' (Richardson, 2007, p. 417)



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