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The historical experience of liberal studies for vocational learners in further education

Abstract

This paper revisits the liberal studies movement – an important if under-researched episode in the history of education. It examines the lived experience of a set of former vocational students, the great majority of whom eventually went on to teach in further and higher vocational education. All participants had undertaken a course of liberal studies alongside a programme of work-related learning at an English college of further education at some point between the mid-1960s and the late-1980s. The paper presents two key findings: first, whilst participants' experiences were varied and uneven, most seemed quite agnostic about liberal studies in their youth; second, the great majority of those who took part in the research were substantially more positive about their learning in retrospect.

Key words: liberal studies, vocational learning, further education

Introduction

For thirty years after the end of World War Two the passage from youth into adulthood was generally speedy, linear and relatively predictable for most young people in the UK (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2005). The majority found a job soon after finishing school and this was usually followed by leaving home, marriage and parenthood shortly thereafter (Jones, 1995, p. 23). The mass movement of boys from school into local industry was the norm across much of the country and, whilst girls and women suffered overt discrimination in education, employment and elsewhere, millions of women were employed, not only in retail, secretarial and administrative work, but on the production lines of British industry. For working-class boys especially, an apprenticeship was the most sought-after form of employment and, by

the late-1960s, approximately a quarter of all young workers were apprentices (FECRDU, 1978, pp. 34-35). Attendance at a college of further education (FE) – or technical college as they were then known – was usually part and parcel of an apprenticeship, and vocational learning for young people released from their place of employment to undertake work-related education and training remained the ‘core business’ of FE colleges perhaps until the early 1980s (Hyland and Merrill, 2003).

Young people’s relationship with education and work has, however, changed significantly over time, as has the role of FE colleges. The demise of much the UK’s industrial base and the disintegration of the traditional youth labour market mean that employment opportunities for school-leavers have been radically curtailed, especially in terms of access to stable, full-time work. Dimensions of gender, ethnicity and especially social class remain important predictors of life chances, though youth transitions (if transitions remains the right term) appear increasingly individualised and uncertain. For many young people obtaining the traditional signifiers of adulthood has become delayed, disordered or, in some cases, suspended indefinitely (Ainley and Allen, 2010, pp. 40-42). Whilst education, at least for the working classes, has always been associated with social control as much as emancipation, education and training has largely replaced waged labour as the principal form of social and economic control for young people in advanced western societies, such as the UK (Ainley, 2016, pp. 66-67).

Nowadays most FE students attend college on a full-time basis and are required to engage with various forms of competence-based learning which purport to enhance their general employability alongside their main course of vocational study. Currently called Functional Skills, such qualifications focus largely on building operational competencies in English, mathematics and information technology, although similar forms of learning have, over the past twenty years, also been known as Key Skills or Core Skills, and will no doubt be relabelled once again in due course. Either way,

such provision tends to emphasise instrumental performance rather than more holistic forms of learning underpinned by principled, conceptual knowledge. Functional Skills qualifications in English (see Edexcel, 2010) are, for example, essentially about the demonstration of various competencies in speaking, listening, reading and writing rather than the more critical, analytical and creative processes traditionally associated with the study of English language or English literature (Simmons, 2015, p. 97).

Yet there was once a time when vocational learners undertaking work-related qualifications in FE were required to engage with broader debates about politics, mass media, the arts and so forth alongside their main programme of study. Generally, such provision was known as liberal studies or general studies (LS/GS), although it was sometimes called complementary studies or contrasting studies. Differences in terminology reflected changing conceptions of the relationship between vocational learning and more general forms of knowledge but LS/GS in its various forms was essentially underpinned by a belief that vocational learners should engage with at least some form of general education alongside more directly occupational learning (Cantor and Roberts, 1969, p. 68). There is nevertheless relatively little published research on liberal studies in FE, especially in terms of student experiences of LS/GS. This paper begins to address this deficit through the recollections of a sample of former FE students, all of whom experienced liberal studies whilst undertaking vocational qualifications at some fifteen different further education colleges across various parts of England between the mid-1960s and the end of the 1980s. The paper understands learning not only as a cognitive and intellectual endeavour but as a social process through which individuals come to understand themselves and the world around them. It can be seen as part of a growing social history of learners and learning as the research focuses on the views and opinions of the learner rather than teachers, administrators and policymakers, as has traditionally been the case with much educational research (see McCulloch and Woodin, 2010).

The first section of the paper provides a flavour of the nature and function of further education colleges in England. This is followed by a section which charts the rise and fall of the liberal studies movement in FE. There is then an overview of the research project upon which the paper is based, which includes a discussion of some of the strengths and weaknesses of narrative research as a way of understanding the past. The fourth section of the paper presents data from a programme of narrative interviews with twenty former FE students all of whom encountered LS/GS as young people undertaking work-related qualifications in one of five broad vocational areas: business; construction; engineering; hairdressing and beauty; and hospitality and catering. Eventually the great majority of participants found their way into teaching in further and higher education – the implications of which are also discussed in the fourth section of the paper. Data is presented in three inter-related subsections which deal, in turn, with student orientations to liberal studies; the relationship between LS/GS and the vocational curriculum; and the perceived educational value of liberal studies. Comparisons are drawn between findings reported in this paper and those from one of the few existing pieces of published research on learners' experiences of LS/GS – a survey of FE students' attitudes to liberal studies by Pullen and Startup (1979) conducted almost 40 years ago. The conclusion summarises the key findings of the research upon which this paper is based and considers participants' reflections on FE today - an environment now largely devoid of the broader forms of knowledge and skill liberal studies aimed to promote. This, participants argue, is problematic both in terms of the demands of the labour market and young people's social and cultural development.

Further education colleges in England and Wales: a brief overview

The roots of many FE colleges lie in the mechanics' institutes of nineteenth century Britain but local education authorities (LEAs) were largely responsible for their growth and development thereafter. The differing demands of local industry coupled with the

peculiarities of LEA governance meant that FE grew in a varied and uneven fashion, and its pattern remains diverse and eclectic today - although it is still possible to make certain generalisations about FE colleges, their role and remit. Today FE colleges in England offer a wide variety of education and training to almost 3 million learners ranging from basic skills and pre-vocational training through to professional qualifications and, in many cases, courses of higher education (AoC, 2015, p. 2). Their main *raison d'etre* has, however, always been providing the knowledge and skills for everyday employment, whether on the construction site, the engineering workshop or in the office, salon or care home (Ainley and Bailey, 1997, p. 2). It would be fair then to say that FE colleges are similar in some ways to community colleges in the USA and the technical and further education institutes in Australia, although the history and traditions of individual FE colleges vary considerably (Orr and Simmons, 2011, p. 245).

Generally, FE colleges offer a broad range of vocational and work-related learning but specialist colleges catering for art and design, land-based studies and other subjects also exist. Others concentrate on adult learners or those with special educational needs and what remains of local authority adult education services also offer various forms of post-compulsory education. Sandwiched between the high-status universities on one hand and the politically-sensitive school sector on the other, further education has traditionally been a low-profile affair, existing for much of its history in a state of 'benign neglect' and, although the New Labour Governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown did increase funding for further education, at least for a time, college budgets have been savagely cut over recent years. Either way, their chiefly vocational orientation and working-class roots mean that few academics or policymakers have in-depth knowledge or direct experience of further education colleges (Richardson, 2007).

Although further education continues to be driven by the perceived demands of the labour market, there have also been substantial changes in the role and remit of FE colleges over the years (see Bailey and Unwin, 2016). The nature of the FE curriculum has altered substantially over time as childcare, leisure and tourism, and health and social care programmes have largely replaced engineering and construction in the staple diet of most colleges. Largely, this reflects the changing nature of employment in the UK, although there has also been a shift away from vocational education and training based largely on principled, conceptual knowledge towards a curriculum underpinned by more generic conceptions of learning rooted in contemporary discourses of employability (Simmons, 2015). This, in turn, can be connected to Bernstein's (2000) notion of 'trainability' whereby the learner is required to continuously accrue various so-called transferable skills which it is assumed will equip them to engage and re-engage with the constantly changing demands of employers and the labour market more generally.

Curriculum Change, the restructuring of the labour market and far greater numbers of young people entering post-compulsory education have, over time, acted in synergy with growing levels of state intervention, the imposition of quasi-market competition and serial funding cuts – the combined effects of which have driven FE 'downwards' (Simmons and Thompson, 2008). Whilst FE colleges traditionally catered mainly for relatively privileged sections of the working class, nowadays their intake typically includes significant proportions of disadvantaged and marginalised learners. This, in part, relates to the collapse of the traditional youth labour market (Ainley, 2016), but many prominent FE institutions have, over time, been lost to the higher education sector. The colleges of advanced technology, the polytechnics and the colleges and institutes of higher education, virtually all of which eventually became universities, were all created through promoting leading FE colleges into the ranks of higher

education. Thus, much of further education's most prestigious work has been successively annexed by HE (Simmons, 2014, pp. 65-67).

Liberal studies for vocational learners

The origins of the liberal studies movement can be traced back to the Christian Socialists, the Oxford extension delegacy and other attempts to improve the condition of the working classes once popular amongst sections of the intelligentsia in Victorian Britain (Pellegrino-Sutcliffe, 2014). Historical debates about the role and purpose of different forms of education were given fresh impetus by industrialisation and the social and economic upheavals of nineteenth century England (Silver and Brennan, 1987, pp. 4-6) - and arguably early proponents of liberal studies were motivated by concerns about economic competitiveness and the dangers of working-class activism as much as any sense of *noblesse oblige*. Either way, the notion of providing at least a section of the working class with access to liberal education had entered the political mainstream by the early-twentieth century. Such ideas gathered a degree of momentum after the Great War. R.H Tawney, A.L Smith and other leading proponents of liberal studies were appointed to the Ministry of Reconstruction's Adult Education Committee, which recommended that:

[T]echnical instruction...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...to interpret the economic life of the community in terms of social values. (Ministry of Reconstruction, 1919, pp. 152-153)

The inter-war period was then a time of intense debate about the relationship between technical education and 'humane' studies, and the social, economic, moral and spiritual role of education more generally (Silver, 1983). Whilst the growth of

liberal studies was somewhat attenuated by the political and economic crises of the 1920s and 1930s, longstanding concerns about the narrowness of technical education returned after the end of World War Two (Venables, 1955, pp. 518-519) – with both the 1956 White Paper *Technical Education* (MoE, 1956) and the Crowther Report, 15-18 recommending the inclusion of liberal studies alongside programmes of technical and vocational education (MoE, 1959). There was, however, also a degree of consensus between government, trade unions and many large employers keen to broaden the horizons of young workers – as well as concerns about teaching young people to avoid the amoral temptations of youth, and worries about the rise of political extremism across Europe (Simmons, 2015, pp. 88-89). Consequently, there was a fashion, at least for a time, for using ex-servicemen, clergy and other sober types to teach liberal studies (Neale, 1966).

In 1957, the Ministry of Education Circular 323 recommended to LEAs that all technical colleges provide vocational learners with a degree of liberal education (see MoE, 1957), although colleges were allowed a significant degree of discretion about how to develop, implement and deliver such provision. Nevertheless, from the late-1950s until the early-1980s, literally millions of budding chefs, engineers, hairdressers, accountants and so on then undertook a course of LS/GS alongside a programme of vocational education as they attended hundreds of FE colleges across England and Wales. Despite this, little has been written about their experiences of liberal studies or the influence that LS/GS may have had on them – either as nascent apprentices starting out on their working lives or as adults reflecting on the longer-term effects of their learning.

Typically, the dominant culture of most technical colleges was somewhat ‘industrial’ and liberal studies was, sometimes viewed with a degree of antipathy by vocational staff and students. Such feelings were informed, at least to some extent, by comparisons between the ‘content-heavy’ vocational curriculum and the more

amorphous nature of LS/GS – which, for much of its existence, was unassessed and largely unmediated by the state. The content, style and delivery of LS/GS also varied substantially, not only from college-to-college, but also according to the interests and abilities of different teachers working within the same institution. It is difficult then to see liberal studies as a unified or consistent project and undoubtedly the nature, style and function of LS/GS varied considerably across dimensions of time, space and place. It is nevertheless possible to discern particular models of liberal studies, each of which was more or less orientated or related to the vocational curriculum. These range from a ‘servicing’ model of LS/GS featuring a significant degree of compromise with the demands of vocational education through to much more laissez-faire arrangements characterised by a flexible ‘free-flowing’ curriculum and discourses of student-centred learning, catering to young people’s interests, empowerment and so forth (Gleeson and Mardle, 1980, pp. 109-110).

Simmons (2015) describes something of a chronological movement from the rather conservative approaches of the 1950s and early-1960s, through to the increasingly politicised nature of LS/GS in the 1970s, and more applied versions of liberal studies which came to the fore towards the end of that decade. These more instrumental forms of LS/GS tended to emphasise literacy, language and generic life skills, and first emerged on the City and Guilds Certificate in Communication Skills, vocational courses run by the Technician Education Council and employability programmes funded by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC). Repackaged as General and Communication Studies (GCS) or Social and Life Skills, such provision was largely predicated upon the assumption that young people lacked the necessary skills, aptitudes and abilities to secure and retain employment – claims, in turn, linked to a broader discourse which effectively blamed Britain’s relative economic decline on the inability of existing forms of education and training to meet the demands of industry (see Callaghan, 1976). The MSC went so far as to stipulate that socio-economic context should be excluded from communications sessions when the Youth

Opportunities Programme was introduced towards the end of the 1970s (see Manpower Services Commission, 1978). Unlike previous iterations of liberal studies, GCS and the like were also formally assessed and, whilst some practitioners continued to smuggle critical and creative forms of pedagogy into these programmes, such provision was undoubtedly meant to be more 'practical' and instrumental than established forms of LS/GS. At the end of the 1980s, General and Communication Studies, Social and Life Skills *et cetera* were then replaced by Common Skills, Key Skills and other forms of competency-based provision, all of which were much more tightly tied to the perceived needs of industry and commerce (Hyland, 1994). Effectively, this signalled the end of any recognisable form of liberal studies in FE (Simmons, 2015, pp. 92-93).

Liberal studies in FE: uncovering the past

There is some published research on liberal studies in further education. This includes work on different approaches to the organisation and delivery of LS/GS (see *inter alia* Neale, 1966; Watson, 1973); the relationship between liberal studies and the vocational curriculum (see, *inter alia*, Gleeson and Mardle, 1980); and on connections between the changing political context and different forms of LS/GS (see *inter alia*, Carroll, 1980; Bailey and Unwin, 2008). There is also more recent research which examines the experiences of former liberal studies teachers (see Simmons, 2015; 2016), although there is still little on the experiences of learners. The exception to this is the aforementioned Pullen and Startup (1979) who surveyed the views and opinions of over 600 students taking liberal studies in eight FE colleges across various parts of England and Wales, at a time of significant change for LS/GS but when identifiable forms of liberal studies were still intact. Now, almost 40 years on, this paper revisits learners' experiences in retrospect.

Fifteen men and five women took part in the research upon which this paper is based – a programme of narrative interviews conducted between late-2016 and early-2017. Most interviews lasted between 40 minutes and an hour, although some participants were interviewed more than once as they recalled key incidents or experiences sometime after their first interview – as is sometimes the case with research of this nature. Interviews took place in participants' homes and workplaces. All those who took part were, at the time they experienced LS/GS, undertaking a programme of study in one of the five broad vocational areas highlighted in the introduction. The names of those who took part have been anonymised, and the identities of other individuals or institutions which arose during the research have been removed. The majority of participants attended college on a day-release basis whilst in employment, often as an apprentice, although four of those who took part were full-time students undertaking vocational training before entering the labour market. Most went to college in an industrial town or city in the north of England, although three participants attended FE institutions in the West Midlands, the South-East and South-West of England respectively. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and hand-coded according to the three themes contained within Pullen and Startup's (1979) paper:

- Student orientations to liberal studies
- Student perceptions of the relationship between liberal studies and the vocational curriculum
- Student perceptions of the educational value of liberal studies

Whilst these themes guided the research process, the interviews were semi-structured and largely informal in nature. Participants were encouraged to engage in an open and reflective dialogue about their experiences of liberal studies, both as young students attending college and as mature adults looking back at the past.

A snowball sample was used to gather the sample of participants. Existing social contacts were used to identify an initial core of informants who, in turn, introduced us to other participants through their own networks - although care was taken to recruit participants from a range of vocational backgrounds in order to represent something of the diversity and variety of FE. It would, however, be inappropriate to describe those who took part in the research as 'typical' FE students or to attempt to generalise about the experiences of all former LS/GS students from the findings presented in this paper. Over time, the majority of participants undertook extensive further study and most eventually found their way into teaching in further or higher education, usually after a number of years working in business and industry. Some went on to take up senior positions in colleges and universities thereafter. It might therefore be reasonable to surmise that the participants were, as a group, perhaps more diligent students than many of their classmates – or at least that they became so over time. It is moreover quite possible that the career trajectories of those who took part in the research shaped their views and opinions about their earlier educational experiences, to some degree. More generally, it is important to acknowledge the socially-constructed nature of reality and to note that particular events can be interpreted in a variety of ways by different individuals and groups – although it should also be recognised that oral and narrative research can still play an important role in helping us to understand social change by allowing us 'get close' to individual perceptions, thoughts, feelings and emotions (Roberts, 2002).

Interviews which rely on memories of historical events can, it is acknowledged, be flawed in various ways, not least due to the passage of time – and some of those who took part in the study were recounting events which occurred forty or fifty years ago. Oral history can, however, perhaps best be understood as a way of helping us unearth narratives of the past rather than as a method which will produce 'hard' facts or an indisputable truth (see Batty, 2009, pp. 110-112). Either way, data is drawn from a range of participants all of whom experienced different versions of LS/GS across a

variety of FE institutions over a considerable period of time. Participants were engaged in a range of vocational studies at different levels including City and Guilds Levels 1, 2 and 3, National Diploma and National Certificate courses. All experienced liberal studies for a minimum of two academic years, although almost half of those who took part in the research undertook LS/GS for either three or four years. The data presented therefore provide valuable insights into the views and opinions of former liberal studies students, both as young people attending college and as adults reflecting on their experiences many years on.

Findings

Perhaps unsurprisingly, participants reported varied and uneven experiences of liberal studies, in terms, for example, of different approaches to pedagogy and subject content, as well as teachers' attitudes and dispositions. This partly reflects the shift over time from a broad general curriculum to the more applied versions of liberal studies described earlier in the paper – although most participants experienced a combination of both general and applied learning even where certain forms of knowledge were favoured. There was also some evidence of the rather loose, laissez-faire approach identified by Gleeson and Mardle (1980). For Nick, liberal studies was very liberal:

[T]he teacher would say 'I've got nothing planned'...You could come and go as you please...once we went out and had a snowball fight during a general studies lesson. The teacher stayed inside and ten of us...threw snowballs at each other (Nick, former construction student).

Such practices were not typical though and, for almost all participants, LS/GS consisted of a regular, timetabled slot each week. Sometimes it also entailed visiting

museums, council chambers, courts of law, and so on. In some cases, trips to factories, collieries, power stations and other site visits also took place but, for the most part, liberal studies was classroom based – although, in most instances, a broad range of teaching and learning strategies were employed. Typically this included the use of debates, discussion groups, role play, film, photography and news media, as well as more teacher-led methods. **Concurrent** vocational studies were described as much more didactic. Invariably, participants saw liberal studies teachers as more ‘laid-back’ than their vocational lecturers. Joanne remembered that:

[I]t was quite a tight ship in hospitality and catering and all the tutors at that time were called Mr or Mrs but the general studies tutors used first names and it was much more casual...freedom of speech was more open in those lessons...(Joanne, former catering student).

The data suggests that participants responded to liberal studies in a variety of ways and here it is useful to compare and contrast my findings with Pullen and Startup’s research. Brevity means it is not possible to include the words of all participants but those selected are illustrative of the general pattern of informants’ views and opinions about the key themes raised by Pullen and Startup almost forty years ago.

Student orientations to liberal studies.

According to Pullen and Startup, most vocational teachers claimed that the majority of students regarded liberal studies as a waste of time, and undoubtedly some vocational learners responded negatively to LS/GS (see Simmons, 2016). Yet over half the 662 young people who responded to Pullen and Startup’s survey stated that they enjoyed at least some aspect of liberal studies, and overall they found that respondents were actually more equivocal than hostile to LS/GS. Moreover, most of the things they disliked about liberal studies related to unfavourable timetabling, poor teaching rooms, and other prosaic (though not unimportant) matters rather than the

content, culture or ethos of LS/GS itself (p. 43). In fact, Pullen and Startup (1979, p. 38) found the single most significant influence on student attitudes to liberal studies was the perceived ability of the teacher and the way in which topics were presented. Or, in other words, pedagogy rather than subject content was seen as most important.

Data from the research reported in this paper does, however, show that, in a few cases, participants were openly hostile to LS/GS as young people - although again it should be noted that their ire was largely directed at teaching staff rather than a resistance to liberal studies *per se*.

[O]ne was a young thin lad...we soon got rid of him. And then we got a vicar...he was on a hiding to nowt...didn't seem to be there for long. But there was one guy who used to wear this brown tweed jacket...we had him for a long time...we used to give him a real hard time (Ivan, former engineering student).

[W]henever there was any trouble...it was always in general studies...the teachers went through hell. The trade lecturers had our respect but they also had authority...whereas the general studies tutors didn't always have control of the group (Neil, former construction student).

There was, however, also an element of regret and a general shift in attitude among these participants over time:

I wish I had engaged with it...I'd probably be a better person now...it would be quite interesting to see what the vicar – because I have a faith now – and the graduate or whatever...brought to the table. I

mean they weren't welcomed but perhaps they should have been...(Ivan).

It is also important to recognise that intense negativity towards liberal studies or liberal studies teachers was not the norm. In fact, some of those who took part in the study remember being quite positive about LS/GS during their time at college:

I came away...with a wider understanding of what was going on in the world...it gave us the big picture...I wasn't reliant on going to my parents to ask for information. I think it gave me self-confidence in my own abilities to go out into the world (Murad, former business student).

I think we enjoyed it and I'm still in touch with some of the other students so it would be interesting to know what their memories of it were...We had discussions in class about everybody else's background and what makes people, and I think it did impact on us (Patricia, former hair & beauty student).

It would, however, be fair to say that the majority of participants were actually quite mixed in their views about liberal studies, in their youth. Justin's response was quite typical:

I'm not sure...we came and we sat down and we did what we were told in a respectful way. But is that engagement? Everybody engaged with the activities but what their emotional acceptance of it was I don't know (Justin, former construction student).

Others saw liberal studies mainly as a relief from the vocational curriculum:

[T]he technical aspects of our main course...all those chemical compositions...you would be sat there and thinking 'I need a break from this'. And general studies was often seen as a good break...although some people got more out of it than others...(Pierce, former engineering student).

What is clear is that the majority of participants were not radically opposed to liberal studies as young people. The most frequent complaint was that the role and purpose of LS/GS was never properly explained to them – although, for most participants, the relationship between liberal studies and vocational learning became more apparent over time.

The relationship between liberal studies and the vocational curriculum

Pullen and Startup's (1979) study took place at a time when LS/GS was being redirected to align more closely with the vocational curriculum. This shift was based, in part, upon the assumption that a more applied model of liberal studies would be more engaging for vocational learners - although this did not appear to be the case for those who took part in Pullen and Startup's survey. The experiences of those who took part in the research upon which this paper is based reflect the broad shift over time from an abstract to a more applied model of LS/GS. Generally, those who experienced liberal studies in the 1960s and 1970s tended to be exposed to a curriculum drawing largely on politics, sociology and other 'academic' subjects (although not usually described as such by their tutors), whereas participants who studied LS/GS in the 1980s usually experienced a more generic curriculum dealing largely with communications, personal finance, sexual health and so forth, as well as more vocationally-orientated knowledge and skills. The words of Denise and Philippa provide an insight into the latter approach.

[W]e did something called 'conversational French' which I thought was so sophisticated...then we did flower arranging which sounds very twee but these are skills that I still use to this day. And the third one was window dressing and we had to be able to understand the importance of...that window being enticing to a client (Denise, former hair & beauty student).

[A] lot of it was very much linked to what we were learning in our vocational course...things like changing a plug or changing the washer on a tap. So quite basic things you would need to do to run a salon (Philippa, former hair & beauty student).

The majority of participants though used terms such as 'stand-alone' or 'bolt-on' to describe the relationship (or lack thereof) between liberal studies and the vocational curriculum. For some, this was reinforced by a perception of low status and a general lack of respect for LS/GS within the college:

[S]ome of the motor vehicle teachers derided general studies and they let us know...They saw general studies as taking time off of their subject. So the general studies teachers had their own curriculum area and they were brought into an engineering area and they left as fast as possible (Joe, former engineering student).

I remember our trade lecturer telling us...everything we would be doing...he mentioned Wednesday afternoon and he said 'right that's the chance for you to mess about because...we've got some general studies for you and if I'm honest with you it's a break in curriculum'...I didn't even know what the word 'curriculum' meant but I remember that distinct phrase 'it was a break in curriculum'.

So there was never any sense that it was a valuable lesson (Neil, former construction student).

This was sometimes reinforced by the physical separation of liberal studies and vocational learning, and the differing learning cultures within the college:

[I]t were across the road in an annex...So, looking back on it now, it [LS/GS] wasn't valued because you were put over there in this antiquated building that really weren't fit for purpose...

I know you said that some people called it liberal studies and I can understand why...because it were so liberal. I would class the three tutors who taught us as hippies; I can't say they had long hair but they...gave you that impression (Dean, former construction student).

The more relaxed nature of LS/GS was not necessarily seen as problematic if there was a perception of some co-ordination or liaison between those responsible for different aspects of their learning:

[O]ur vocational tutors would always check if we'd attended our general studies sessions and there would be some discussion in the general studies classes to make sure that we were doing alright with our vocational course. I think, as a teaching team, they worked very well together (Brundby, former engineering student).

Student perceptions of the educational value of liberal studies

Perhaps the key finding from the research is that, almost without exception, participants were more positive in retrospect about the value of liberal studies,

whatever their initial attitudes and opinions were. It is, of course, recognised that informants can sometimes be influenced by the personal dynamics of the interview relationship, as well as by broader social and cultural expectations (Hobsbawm, 1997). The words of Justin, Ron and Pierce are nevertheless telling:

At the time I would have complained...and I would have questioned its relevance because I was that kind of person but...my perspective would have changed enormously and I would value a much more liberal approach to further education (Justin, former construction student).

[I]t broadened my view of the world...I don't think you are fully *compos mentis* about how education benefits you until you get significantly older. I am now comfortable in a debating situation whereas when I was at school I was the little shy boy...when I went to college it was a different environment and much more acceptable (Pierce, former engineering student).

[Y]ou don't recognise the value until a lot later. It's only when other things occur in your life and you start to reflect and you realise that what you learnt all that time ago is actually useful...the value of liberal studies comes a long time after actually studying it in class (Ron, former engineering student).

Many participants contrasted their own learning experiences with those of FE students today, criticizing the contemporary vocational curriculum as too narrow and instrumental. Opinions such as those expressed by Brundby and Joanne were not uncommon:

I think it [liberal studies] is...better than what is going on now. I think it gave you a more rounded education rather than just trying to attain maths and English...we were taught skills that we might need in life and in employment (Brundby, former construction student).

Something needs to be done because there is more to education than just being a motor vehicle or construction person. I do think there is a need for something...I don't think people listen to the news (Joanne, former catering student).

Such views are perhaps influenced by popular perceptions about how young people engage with the world in general, although a related theme also arose from the data. That is, roughly half of those who took part in the study believed that there should be a place for liberal studies in FE today. The rationale for this appeared to relate both to the perceived social and cultural benefits of LS/GS, and certain beliefs about work-related skills and knowledge.

The students...have very little idea when they arrive here on how to cope outside of college...we try to help them within the course but a specific course on general studies would help and benefit them and give them more self-confidence (Paul, former construction student).

[T]oday it is important that general studies should be included in the curriculum...You cannot just be a decorator or a builder...because you work for customers and you have to know how to talk to them...(Patrick, former construction student).

[T]here is a problem...those softer skills that employers are saying is missing, general studies is the ideal vehicle for doing that. But we've become a tick-box nation...where did it all go wrong? (Denise, former hair and beauty student).

Some participants talked about how liberal studies might help contemporary FE students to engage in a more thoughtful fashion with the media and debates about identity, social change, and the democratic process. Ron's words below are illustrative of such sentiments:

Just getting people to recognise and value democracy and our right to vote, and to be more willing to participate and engage with discussion. I think there is an awful lot...but it would have to be some carefully chosen subjects that are relevant to today (Ron, former engineering student).

Arguably such views were shaped, at least in part, by the fact that many of those who took part in the research now work in FE, although there was also recognition that any revival of liberal studies was highly unlikely under present constraints. Some participants talked about a lack of space in the curriculum and the significantly reduced contact hours for FE students:

[W]e might have had a couple of sessions a week but... this was in the '70s and the culture was so different. If you were a full-time student you were a full-time student and, sadly, I think that is something that we've lost. A full-time student now is thirteen hours (Denise, former hair and beauty student).

Others talked about the dominance of Functional Skills, the Prevent agenda (statutory duties relating to the prevention of terrorism and other forms of extremism) and other government initiatives producing a more and more crowded curriculum.

Conclusion

It is evident that those who took part in the research experienced liberal studies in a variety of ways although, in some cases, participants' memories were hazy. This is perhaps unsurprising given the passage of time, which was significant in all cases. It is nevertheless possible to discern certain key patterns or themes which arose from the data. Very few participants recalled their experiences of LS/GS as being either highly negative or very positive. Approximately two-thirds of those who took part in the study expressed mixed views about their experiences of liberal studies as young people. Whether LS/GS was conceived as 'abstract' or 'applied' seems to have had little influence upon participants. Relationships between students and teachers and between vocational lecturers and liberal studies staff appear to have been more important factors influencing the way informants viewed LS/GS in their youth. What is clear, however, is that almost every participant was substantially more positive about their experience of liberal studies in retrospect, and most recognised the positive long-term effect it had upon them, in at least some way.

Data from this project suggest that the ability and orientation of individual LS/GS teachers could have a significant influence on student perceptions of liberal studies. Clearly though, there was a section of liberal studies teachers who regarded LS/GS primarily as a vehicle for raising political consciousness among young people – and, for some participants, liberal studies consisted largely of politics, sociology and related subjects. But, for most of those who took part, LS/GS covered everything from

buying car insurance, visiting museums and career planning through to learning about film, theatre, music and the legal system. The words of Pierce are illustrative of this:

I certainly remember things like going to the courts and...we went to the cinema and we watched films within the college...we would talk about what TV programmes...and try and understand how the programme was put together to entertain the general population. It's interesting when you've got different views of those sorts of things (Pierce, former engineering student).

Either way, over time, much of the critical and creative potential was, as we have seen, flushed out of liberal studies and although some practitioners – especially activists associated with the General Studies Workshop and the General Studies Section of the teaching union, NATFHE – fought a rear-guard action against the increasing intervention of the state, successive incarnations of LS/GS became ever more tied to the perceived needs of business and industry (Simmons, 2015, p. 93). Eventually this shift led to the rise of Functional Skills and similar forms of competency-based provision, a movement which Richard Johnson famously described as 'a device for the political control of knowledge' (Johnson, 1991, p. 82). Others have argued that the exclusion of working-class students from forms of knowledge which equip them to challenge inequality and oppression only serves to reinforce their continued marginalisation and disadvantage (Wheelahan 2007). Liberal studies, in contrast, provided the space where young people were, at least in some cases, were encouraged to relate their experiences of education and work to broader patterns of social, economic and cultural change - even if, for many, it appears to have taken some time to recognise the benefits of such learning.

A significant proportion of those who took part in the research thought that some form of liberal studies would benefit today's vocational learners – although they also recognised that this was not likely, at least in the foreseeable future. This, participants argued, is problematic in at least two ways. On one hand, some believed that certain variants of LS/GS would help students cope more effectively both with the rigors of the contemporary workplace and the social world in general. Others talked about the significant disjuncture between the increasingly performative nature of the FE curriculum and the supposed need for flexible, creative, imaginative workers, the demand for soft skills and so associated with dominant discourses about the knowledge economy. It is, however, important to remember that education systems are not merely an expression of economic need; they are also a reflection of a country's broader culture and values – and different forms of knowledge have traditionally been seen as more or less suitable for those from different social backgrounds (Thompson, 2009, p. 40).

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