



University of HUDDERSFIELD

University of Huddersfield Repository

Simmons, Robin

Civilising the natives? Liberal studies in further education revisited

Original Citation

Simmons, Robin (2015) Civilising the natives? Liberal studies in further education revisited. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 63 (1). pp. 85-101. ISSN 0007-1005

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/22803/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk.

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

Civilizing the natives? Liberal studies in further education revisited

Abstract

This paper uses Basil Bernstein's work on pedagogic discourses to examine a largely neglected facet of the history of vocational education – the liberal studies movement in English further education (FE) colleges. Initially, the paper discusses some of the competing conceptions of education, work and society which underpinned the rise and fall of the liberal studies movement – if indeed it can be described as such. It then draws on data from interviews with former liberal and general studies (LS/GS) lecturers to focus on the ways in which different variants of liberal studies were, over time, implicated in inculcating certain forms of knowledge in vocational learners. Whilst it is acknowledged that LS/GS always represented contested territory and that it was highly variable both in terms of content and quality, the paper argues that, at least and under certain circumstances, liberal studies provided young working-class people with the opportunity to locate their experiences of vocational learning within a critical framework which is largely absent from FE today. This, it is argued, can be conceptualised as an engagement with what Bernstein described as 'powerful knowledge'.

Keywords: *Liberal studies, further education, Bernstein*

Introduction

Technical and vocational education has long been regarded as second best to academic learning, especially in class-conscious England where the elite have always favoured a classical education set within exclusive institutional settings (Hyland and Winch, 2007). Work-related learning has traditionally been seen as more appropriate for working-class people, especially when delivered in colleges of further education (FE¹), whose chief concern has always been providing the knowledge and skills required for everyday employment (Ainley and Bailey, 1997, p. 2). Yet, from the 1950s until the beginning of the 1980s, virtually all English FE colleges included an element of liberal education in the majority of their vocational courses. At the level of the specific programme such provision was referred to as liberal studies (LS), general studies (GS) or general and communication studies (G&CS), although

¹ 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.

terms such as complementary studies or contrasting studies were also used to describe such provision. One reason for this disparate terminology was a lack of agreement about the purpose of such learning and differences in nomenclature reflected competing conceptions of vocational education, and its relationship with broader, more general forms of knowledge (Cantor and Roberts, 1969, p. 68). It would nevertheless be fair to say that LS/GS and similar provision was informed, at least in part, by a belief that vocational learners should develop certain forms of social and cultural knowledge as well as specific work-related skills and abilities. Such ideals had been popular with a certain strand of the English intelligentsia at least since the mid-nineteenth century, and there were, over time, various attempts to provide particular sections of the working class with access to certain forms of liberal education.

Whilst its roots can be traced back much further, liberal studies did not receive official state endorsement until after the end of World War Two when the Ministry of Education's Circular 323 *Liberal Education in Technical Colleges* (MoE, 1957) recommended various ways of liberalising the vocational curriculum in FE, via:

- 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.

Unlike today, the post-war years were characterised by a reluctance to impose direct state control over either teachers or the curriculum (Grace, 2008, p. 210-11), and it was envisaged that colleges would have a substantial degree of discretion both in relation to the content of such provision, and over matters of organisation and delivery (Bailey and Unwin, 2008, p.64). In Bernsteinian terms, then, there was a significant insulating boundary between educational discourses and non-educational discourses as represented by the state (Bernstein, 1977, p. 42) – an arrangement which, as we will see, changed significantly over time. **Later in the paper, Bernstein's (2000) work on pedagogic discourses is used to analyse the changing nature of the LS/GS curriculum and the work of practitioners responsible for teaching different variants of liberal and general studies. Central to the paper is Bernstein's**

argument that different curricula are underpinned by different conceptions of knowledge, each of which is related not only to varying levels of status and prestige, but which Wheelahan (2007) argues also provides learners with access to different degrees of explanatory power. These ideas, it is argued, can be used to critique the increasingly utilitarian conceptions of LS/GS which came to characterise FE from the 1980s onwards, and the changing nature of the relationship between knowledge and vocational learning more broadly. Such processes, according to Bernstein (1999), derive from the increasing incursion of the state into educational policy and practice and have resulted – at least for many working-class students - in a shift away from a curriculum underpinned by singular and regional pedagogic discourses towards a model of learning based upon more generic discourses of knowledge. Or, in the context of this paper, there has, perhaps especially in the case of liberal and general studies in FE, been a movement away from principled, conceptual knowledge towards a curriculum based largely upon ‘everyday’ conceptions of educational practice, knowledge and learning. This increasing incursion of generic discourses into FE is, it is argued, is limiting both socially and educationally and has significantly curtailed the radical and critical potential that, in the past, existed in LS/GS, at least in certain contexts.

We will return to Bernstein later in the paper, but notions of helping the student think for themselves, the realisation of individual potential, and the development of certain forms of citizenship were often part of the liberal studies experience following Circular 323 (TES, 1966, p. 1561). Although such themes were mobilised in significantly different ways at different times and in different locations, liberal studies was sometimes met with scepticism and hostility from vocational learners. Whilst relations varied from college to college, tension between LS/GS lecturers and other teaching staff was also not uncommon, and sometimes liberal studies teachers were accused of being overtly political or subversive in their outlook and practice (see, for example, Carroll 1980). At other times, their work was simply regarded as being a distraction from the main purpose of vocational education – acquiring the technical skills and abilities deemed necessary for the workplace. But, whilst, over the years, thousands of lecturers taught different variants of liberal studies and perhaps millions of students attended such classes, there is little published research on this subject (although see, for example, Watson, 1973; Gleeson and Mardle, 1980; Bailey and Unwin, 2008). This paper aims to contribute to rectifying this deficit.

The paper begins by providing an overview of the origins of the liberal studies movement – if indeed movement is the correct term to describe this phenomenon - and by recounting some of its key features during the 1950s and

1960s. The second section deals with changes which took place from the 1970s onwards, and documents a series of initiatives which, it is argued, led ultimately to its demise. This is followed by a section which presents data from a programme of interviews, conducted during late 2013 and early 2014, with former FE lecturers who worked as LS/GS teachers between the early-1960s and the early-1990s. It focuses particularly on their views about how liberal and general studies could be used to develop political awareness and critical thinking in vocational learners and draws on a Bernsteinian analysis to critically consider the forms of knowledge which those responsible for delivering LS/GS attempted to mobilise. Whilst some of the tensions associated with particular forms of teaching and learning are highlighted, it is argued that, at least in some circumstances, liberal studies allowed vocational learners access to what Bernstein notably described as ‘powerful knowledge’ – or, in other words, principled, conceptual knowledge which provides the possibility to think beyond the immediate and the material, and to challenge social and economic inequality. The paper concludes by highlighting some of the contradictions between the nature of the vocational curriculum today and the supposed relationship between education and the economy which characterises much contemporary discourse. These, it is argued, are rooted essentially in the class-based inequalities which continue to underpin the nature of educational processes in England and elsewhere.

Liberal Studies: a brief history

In England, there has always been a close relationship between education and social class although there have, over time, been attempts to provide at least some relatively privileged sections of the working class with access to certain forms of liberal education - the Working Men’s College, the Workers’ Educational Association and other organisations associated with the Christian Socialist movement of the mid-nineteenth century being closely associated with this spirit (Pellegrino-Sutcliffe, 2014). But, whilst it is likely that the various savants associated with Christian Socialism and the contemporaneous Oxford extension delegacy were informed by a degree of *noblesse oblige*, arguably their actions were as much part of an attempt to disrupt working-class self-organisation in the aftermath of the defeat of Chartism as they were about improving the condition of working people. Arguably, there were certain continuities between the Christian Socialists’ championing of liberal education and the more overt intentions of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge which emerged as an antidote to working-class activism in the 1820s.

But, then again, education for the 'lower orders' has always been associated with social control as much as emancipation (Lawton, 1975).

Meanwhile, increasing concerns about economic competitiveness, especially in relation to nations with more developed education systems, challenged traditional English laissez-faire attitudes to schooling, and led to levels of state intervention in education and training which had been absent hitherto. Whilst the 1870 Education Act provided an important step towards establishing compulsory elementary education in England and Wales, the 1889 Technical Instruction Act empowered local authorities to provide technical and vocational education, and signalled the beginnings of what eventually became the country's FE system (MoE, 1951). At this stage, however, the municipal colleges tended to have a narrower, more instrumental, focus than certain voluntary organisations providing vocational education at that time (Pellegrino-Sutcliffe, 2014, pp. 151-152). Going into the twentieth century then, it is possible to identify at least two conceptions of vocational education for the working classes, but the ideas of R.H. Tawney, William Temple and other upper-class Christian Socialists associated with the Oxford extension movement proved particularly influential, with the 1908 report *Oxford and Working-Class Education* articulating many of their ideals (Harrop, 1987). In 1917, set against the backdrop of slaughter and mutiny on the Western Front and revolution in Russia, the Lloyd-George Government established the Ministry of Reconstruction, and, within this, an Adult Education Committee which included Tawney, Balliol College Christian Socialists such as A.L. Smith, and leading members of the YMCA. As well as recommending the use of state funding to support the 'responsible bodies', such as the WEA and the YMCA – so-called in contrast to grass-roots working-class movements such as the Plebs League and the National Council of Labour Colleges – the Committee also suggested including liberal studies in FE:

We are anxious that technical instruction should...be further broadened by the inclusion of studies which will enable the student to relate his own occupation to the industry of which it is a part, to appreciate the place of that industry in the economic life of the nation and the world, and to interpret the economic life of the community in terms of social values. . . especially because it seems to us vital to provide the fullest opportunities for personal development and for the realisation of a higher standard of citizenship'.

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

Despite this, the social and political uncertainties of the inter-war years – including the class-based struggles leading up to the 1926 General Strike and the economic collapse which took place from 1929 onwards - meant that, like the Day Continuation Schools and a number of other proposed educational reforms of the time, the introduction of LS went largely unfulfilled. Either way, it is evident that much of the thinking which underpinned the liberal studies movement was formulated well before Circular 323 was issued (**see, for example, Venables, 1955, pp. 518-522**).

The years after the end of World War Two were associated with a broad consensus amongst key figures within national and local government, as well as many college leaders and large employers, about the development of technical and vocational education. Central to this was a belief that courses which centred chiefly on work-related learning should also promote students' social, moral and cultural development. Although never total, this spirit was at its strongest during the immediate post-war era, and was articulated by National Institute for Adult Education publications such as *Social Aspects of Further Education* (NIAE, 1952) and *Liberal Education in a Technical Age* (NIAE, 1955), the latter document urging that:

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

(NIAE, 1955, p. 123)

These ambitions reflected a broader spirit of educational reform in post-war Britain whereby education was generally conceived as a social good with a mission to strengthen social democracy and help the formation of 'good citizens' (Grace, 2008, p. 11), **and it is worth noting that there were also attempts to use liberal and general studies to broaden the educational experience outside FE and the vocational curriculum (see, for example, Dexter and Rayner, 1964; Harrison, 1986). In order to understand such initiatives though, they need to be located in a more far-reaching 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. It is, however, important not to be naïve about the motives which underpinned the post-war settlement: there were also contemporaneous concerns**

about the power of organised labour set within tight labour markets and many employers, especially those 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, the NIAE approach, rooted as it was in the WEA/Oxford extension tradition, offered a model through which young workers could be taught to accommodate with rather than challenge the status quo.

Whilst all teachers generally enjoyed a significant degree of autonomy in post-war Britain, because liberal studies was not formally assessed for the majority of its existence, LS/GS teachers tended to be able to exercise a greater degree of discretion over matters of content and pedagogy than most technical and vocational lecturers - although cultures varied considerably both between and within individual institutions (Gleeson and Mardle, 1980). It is nevertheless possible to identify certain broad trends in the years following Circular 323. One strand was what A.S. Neale (1966, p. 126) described as a 'moral rescue' model of liberal studies whereby young people were taught to avoid amoral hedonism and become good, honest citizens, a tendency sometimes reinforced by a penchant in certain institutions for employing former schoolteachers, clergymen and other earnest individuals to teach liberal studies. There was, on the other hand, a concurrent trend to make LS/GS the responsibility of particular vocational lecturers, especially those who expressed an interest in such matters – although, in some cases, liberal studies was simply used to 'top up' teaching timetables in order to enable certain staff to fulfil their contractual obligations. Either way, Carroll (1980) argues that both tendencies often led to conservative and individualised practice rather than critically-informed teaching and learning.

From Liberal and General Studies to Functional Skills

In the immediate post-war period many students attending FE, or technical colleges as they were then commonly known, could be regarded as constituting something of the 'aristocracy' of the working class. Many were higher-level technicians and apprentices on day-release National Certificate programmes and the like, and attended college in order to 'better' themselves (Bailey and Unwin, 2008, pp. 62-63). Moreover, many attended institutions which eventually became part of the higher education sector². Before the creation of the new polytechnics, and when going

² 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

to university was still comparatively rare, especially for working-class people, this, combined with the availability of employment consistent with most school leavers' expectations, meant that a large proportion of FE students were high achievers. Although there were also students on part-time evening courses taking lower-level qualifications, such young people also tended to be 'a cut above' most of their contemporaries (Venables, 1967). Patterns of participation were to change significantly over time, however. One trend was a significant growth in overall student numbers: in 1947, 147, 500 young people in England and Wales were released from their workplace to attend FE colleges (MoE, 1949, p. 40); ten years later there were over 400,000 day-release students (MoE, 1958, p. 26). Whilst much of this growth was driven by the increased demand for skilled workers associated with the long post-war economic boom, there was also by the end of the 1950s a feeling that more students were of modest ability, attending college merely as a condition of employment (Bailey and Unwin, 2008, pp. 62-63). Meanwhile, there was a marked growth in the number of craft apprentices and 'lower-level' operatives going onto day-release programmes after the 1964 Industrial Training Act (Lucas, 2004: p. 17). At the same time liberal studies began to be referred to more commonly as general studies and, although LS and GS were often used interchangeably, arguably this relabeling was also part of a conceptual shift and represented the first of a series of changes which eventually lead to the replacement of liberal studies with far more instrumental, bounded and codified forms of learning such as Key Skills and Functional Skills. This, in turn, was linked to a perceived lack of academic ability amongst many students and certain deficiencies in basic communication skills:

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)

Meanwhile, there was during the 1960s, an expansion of university education to a somewhat broader section of young people than hitherto and, towards the end of the decade, a newly-qualified cohort of graduates, many of whom came from working-class or lower middle-class backgrounds – especially those with social science and humanities degrees - then made their way into further education colleges to teach LS/GS (Watson, 1973, pp. 45-46). This new generation

incorporated into colleges of advanced technology, polytechnics and other HE institutions, most of which eventually became designated as universities.

of often Left-leaning lecturers, differing significantly in age and outlook both from the majority of those who had previously taught liberal studies and the rest of the FE workforce, then came face-to-face with groups of 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 trade union activism and growing self-assertion by young working-class 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. The following quotation, taken from an interview with one of the participants in the research is illustrative of such processes.

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.

Following the Haslegrave Report (DES, 1969), significant changes in technical and vocational education began to take place in order to realign FE with the restructuring of industrial production in the UK. One consequence of this was the creation of the Technician Education Council (TEC), an awarding body in whose courses a new variant of liberal education, General and Communication Studies, was introduced. This brought with it a more overt emphasis on functional 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 liberal studies, 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). More bluntly, Carroll (1980, p. 31) argues such objections merely cloaked the self-interest and indolence of some LS/GS lecturers. Either way, although set within an externally-regulated framework, G&CS units were still devised at the level of the individual college and practitioners were therefore able to continue to exercise a significant degree of autonomy both over what was taught and how such provision 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 Certificate in Communication Skills, initially delivered in institutions run by the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). The brain-child of ILEA's Director of Further and Higher Education, Eric Bourne, the 772 was a 'free-standing' qualification focused on reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, isolated from social, cultural or vocational content, and was intended to replace LS/GS, especially in the case of day-release craft apprentices. Then, from the end of the 1970s, Social and Life Skills was introduced as part of newly-created training programmes funded by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), such as the Youth Opportunities Programme and the Youth Training Scheme (YTS). Although basically introduced in response to the collapse of the traditional youth labour market, Bailey and Unwin (2008, p.71) argue that Social and Life Skills was underpinned by the assumption that an increasing number of school leavers lacked the personal and social skills necessary to obtain and retain paid employment (see also FEU, 1979). But, whilst Social and Life Skills was clearly intended to be more instrumental than established forms of LS/GS, those responsible for delivering such provision 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 a fourth and perhaps final historical phase of liberal education in FE.

From the late-1980s onwards, a further series of phases which it is difficult to regard as constituting a version of liberal education took place, beginning with the replacement of G&CS by Common Skills/Core Themes/Integrative Assignments in BTEC programmes (BTEC being formed from a merger of the Business Education Council and TEC). Then, when General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) 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 many practitioners, and especially activists associated with Colin Waugh's campaigning journals *General Educator* and *Post-16 Educator*, fought a prolonged rear-guard battle against such changes, each successive incarnation of what was formerly LS/GS** became more closely tied to the perceived needs of business and industry. 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 controlled and regulated both through external examination and inspection regimes, and via various forms of managerialism at the level of the individual institution. Either way, it is unlikely that many of those teaching Functional Skills are aware of its genesis in liberal studies.

Civilising the natives?

This section of the paper draws on data from a programme of semi-structured interviews with 13 former LS/GS lecturers. Nine men and four women took part in the research, most of whom were social sciences or humanities graduates; almost all had formal teaching qualifications, although only two participants trained specifically to teach liberal studies; and some found their way into LS/GS after teaching other subjects, sometimes in schools. Whilst, in some ways, participants could be seen as reflecting 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 the size of the sample, many of those who took part in the research were involved in organisations which campaigned on behalf of the liberal and general studies movement in the 1970s and 1980s, including the Association for Liberal Education, the General Studies Workshop, and the General Studies Section of the college lecturers’ union, NATFHE. **Some participants continue to be involved in various debates contained within this paper through *Post-16 Educator*.** Data is, however, drawn from practitioners involved in delivering different variants of liberal studies to a broad range of students on vocational programmes. These included motor mechanics, hairdressers, caterers and other day-release students on construction, art and design, and business studies courses, as well as young people undertaking YTS and other pre-vocational programmes. In total, participants taught in 25 different FE institutions across England, including colleges based in cities including London, Manchester, Liverpool and Sheffield; industrial towns such as Barnsley, Middlesbrough and Wolverhampton; and others in locations including Kent, Berkshire, Norfolk and Worcestershire. Participants delivered various forms of LS/GS between 1962 and 1991, although some continued working in FE for some time thereafter. All but two taught variants of liberal studies for more than ten years.

It would probably be fair to say that liberal studies and LS/GS teachers were often regarded with suspicion, and the more open and expressive culture of learning which tended to characterise liberal studies could be viewed as problematic by other staff (Macfarlane, 1993, p. 53). Some participants had particular views about what liberal and general studies was for:

Eric: I went into all of this because 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...

[T]here were times when you could have a brilliant discussion, and you felt something had moved and people had engaged with something that perhaps they hadn't thought about before. . .where their eyes would be opened up. . .and the students were active and engaging with each other, and engaging with something...quite theoretical and difficult, politically interesting.

Others were less clear, however:

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 to be asked because, 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 experiences were varied and uneven, and respondents also talked about the emancipatory effects of LS/GS for some young people.

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.

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, and they stop you in the street...And they say to you 'without you I wouldn't have done this or gone there'. 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.

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

Gareth: Basically it was to encourage students to think about topics which wouldn't normally enter their range of decision-making or knowledge...It sounds conceited perhaps but to encourage students to think beyond their normal range...but there is a very narrow divide between...chipping away their prejudices and brainwashing them with my own or other people's prejudices. It's a very fine line.

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 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...

It is possible to interpret liberal studies as an attempt to impose middle-class values and cultural norms on working-class students, and many LS/GS teachers may not have had a coherent intellectual touchstone for their work. Given the background of the participants who took part in this research it is, however, likely that most were critically informed, although there are various ways in which they may have conceptualised their practice - for example, through the lens of 'really useful knowledge' (see Johnson, 1988), or as challenging what Gramsci (1971) described as cultural hegemony. But Basil Bernstein's work on pedagogic discourses also offers a powerful way to critically analyse the nature of LS/GS, its content and purpose. Bernstein (2000, pp. 32-33) – who started his teaching career working with day-release vocational students at City Day College, Shoreditch - identifies three types of pedagogic discourse which he, in turn, 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 tells us, associated mainly with traditional academic subjects such as English, history, the natural sciences and so on, whereas the regional mode is often found in contemporary forms of quasi-professional training, such as for nursing or teaching. Those preparing to work in more prestigious occupations, for example, in law, dentistry 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 tend to be placed everyday experiences of work and life, rather than conceptually-based disciplinary knowledge, at the centre of the educational process. This, Bernstein argues, is problematic in both in terms of the social status associated with such forms of learning and the explanatory power offered by different modes of knowledge. Generic modes which, according to Bernstein (1999, p. 169), are generally reserved for those deemed to be 'less able', were first introduced into mainstream education by external agencies on MSC-funded initiatives such as the YTS, and are now found across the FE curriculum more broadly (Simmons, 2009). Meanwhile, singular and regional modes of knowledge are increasingly confined to more high-status institutions and reserved for relatively privileged learners (Bernstein 2000, xxi).

It is possible to link Bernstein's ideas to the changing nature of LS/GS, and to use his work to compare certain forms of liberal studies to some of the provision which, over time, superseded it. Arguably, some variants of liberal studies always contained elements of what Bernstein might have regarded as a generic mode of knowledge – indeed many participants in the research upon which this paper is based ran sessions based on everyday topics, such as managing personal relationships or how to apply for a mortgage. Meanwhile, the inclusion of current affairs, industrial relations and other topical or 'newsworthy' items could perhaps be seen as representing a regional mode of pedagogy. But there is also evidence that, in many instances, liberal studies provided vocational learners with access to English literature, history, politics, and other subjects they may not otherwise have had the opportunity to pursue in any coherent or sustained fashion. Such forms of knowledge broadly reflect Bernstein's singular modes of pedagogic discourse and, whilst these are normally associated with academic learning, it is important to recognise that the value of such knowledge is not solely related to social status. Bernstein (1999) argues that principled, conceptual knowledge constitutes what he describes as a *vertical discourse* of knowledge – or, in other words, it provides access to 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 contained within vertical discourses

provide ‘the crucial site of the yet to be thought’ (Bernstein, 2000, p. 31). This, for Bernstein, is the place where powerful, perhaps dangerously 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 – unless you have an agent, whether it’s Saatchi or somebody, it’s unlikely you’ll get out. It’s all those other sorts of filters, those political barriers, which you need to overcome. So enabling them to have a critical fix and perspective on – and be able to overcome – what they would see as barriers.

In contrast, Bernstein regards generic modes of pedagogy as representing a *horizontal discourse* – where learning is 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, whilst such notions are popular amongst many policymakers, for Bernstein, (2000, p. 59) ascribing what are essentially social processes to the individual denies ‘the dynamic interface between individual careers and the social or collective base’, and effectively places a socially empty concept at centre of education (Thompson, 2009, p. 48). 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 outcome of struggle between different social groups, the outcome of which is projected by the state. The intention is that such identities become embodied in teachers and learners, creating ‘a particular moral disposition, motivation and aspiration, embedded in particular performances and practices’ (Bernstein, 2000, p. 65). Interestingly, Michael Young (2008, p. 156) has described Key Skills and the like 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. Functions Skills qualifications in English are, for example, isolated both from social or

vocational context and based upon the demonstration of various competencies in speaking, listening, reading, and writing (see, for instance, Edexcel, 2010). An examination of either the relationship between language, power and inequality which is central to the academic study of English language or the systematic analysis of creative and cultural processes associated with English literature are both conspicuous by their absence. Such narrow and highly-regulated 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

There were, as we have seen, always tensions about the relationship between LS/GS and the vocational curriculum and whilst, over time, liberal studies became increasingly codified and mediated by the requirements of the state, evidence suggests that 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). It is, however, important not to romanticise the past and to recognise that there was considerable variability both in content and quality, not only between different colleges but also within individual institutions (Gleeson and Mardle, 1980). But, although the student experience was undoubtedly uneven, many young people gained considerable personal and intellectual development from engaging with liberal and general studies (Pullen and Startup 1979). Whilst initial post-war conceptions of liberal studies were arguably linked, at least in part, to earlier discourses of paternalism and social control, shifts in the nature of the economy and the make-up of the student body in FE during the 1960s, when combined with the entry of a new cadre of largely Left-leaning LS/GS teachers, resulted in diverse but often radical practice. This, it is argued, provided many young people with the opportunity to think critically and analytically about their experiences of work and society more broadly, and whilst many resisted or rejected such processes, **this paper argues that** 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.

Barry: I was passionate about students knowing about the history of their city and Liverpool has got a particularly rich history, and the buildings on this street were effectively built on the proceeds from the slave trade. But it gave an opportunity to explore architecture in a more sociological way, or art in a more political way. So that was worthwhile.

Access to holistic forms of knowledge rooted in singular and regional modes of pedagogic discourse 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 (Thompson, 2009, p. 42). In contrast, the learning experience of many vocational students is now based largely upon much narrower forms of competency-based and de-contextualised learning, providing little opportunity to make connections between work-related practices and their social and political context. The replacement of LS/GS with Key Skills, Functional Skills and similar forms of provision is perhaps emblematic of what Simmons and Thompson (2008) describe as the ‘downward’ trajectory of further education, and the redefinition of the FE curriculum along utilitarian and instrumental lines. This, Wheelahan (2007, p. 648) argues effectively denies working-class learners access to relational understanding and the capacity to generate new knowledge, and therefore contributes to their continued marginalisation and disadvantage.

The exclusion of working-class learners from forms of knowledge which allow them to challenge inequality and oppression is obviously problematic for those interested in notions of education and social justice, but an increasing emphasis on the atomised and the instrumental is awkward 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 repeatedly change occupations and 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 survive and prosper in a globalised knowledge economy (Avis, 2009). 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 – and, in England, FE colleges are, after all, institutions better suited to 'other people's children' (Richardson, 2007, p. 417).

References

Ainley, P. and Bailey, B. (1997) *The Business of Learning: staff and student experiences of further education in the 1990s* (London, Cassell).

Avis, J. (2009) Further education: policy hysteria, competitiveness and performativity, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30 (5), 653-662.

Bailey, B. and Unwin, L. (2008) Fostering 'habits of reflection, independent study and free inquiry': an analysis of the short-lived phenomenon of General/Liberal Studies in English vocational education and training, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 60 (1), 61-74.

Bernstein, B. (1977) *Class, Codes and Control*, vol. 3, *Towards a Theory of Educational Transmissions* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul)

Bernstein, B. (1999) Vertical and horizontal discourse: an essay, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 20 (2), 157-173.

Bernstein, B. (2000) *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique*. Revised edition (Oxford, Rowman and Littlefield).

Cantor, L. and Roberts, I.F. (1969) *Further Education in England and Wales* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).

Carroll, D. (1980) Am I communicating? An examination of the rise of "communication skills" in further education, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 4 (1), 26-40.

DES (Department of Education and Science) (1962) *General Studies in Technical Colleges* (London: HMSO).

DES (1969) *Report of the Committee on Technician Courses and Examinations* (London: HMSO) [the Haslegrave Report].

Edexcel (2010) *Functional Skills Specifications: English, Entry Levels 1, 2 and 3* (Mansfield: Edexcel Ltd).

FEU (Further Education Curriculum Review and Development Unit) (1979) *A Basis for Choice* (London: FEU).

Gleeson, D. (1989) *The Paradox of Training: making progress out of crisis* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press).

Gleeson, D. and Mardle, G. (1980) *Further Education or Training? A Case Study in the Theory and Practice of Day-Release Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).

Grace, G. Changes in the classification and framing of education in Britain, 1950s to 2000s: an interpretive essay after Bernstein, *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 40 (3), 209-220.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London, Lawrence and Wishart).

Harrison, C.J (1986) *Essays on the History of Keele* (Keele, Keele University).

Harrop, S. (Ed) (1987) *Oxford and Working-Class Education*. Department of Adult Education (University of Nottingham, Nottingham).

Hyland, T. and Winch. C. (2007) *A Guide to Vocational Education and Training* (London, Continuum).

Johnson, R. (1988) 'Really useful knowledge' 1790-1850: memories for education in the 1980s. In Lovett, T. (ed.) *Radical Approaches to Adult Education: a reader* (London, Croom Helm).

Johnson, R. (1991) My New Right Education, in Education Group (CCCS) *Education Limited: Schooling and Training and the New Right Since 1979* (London, Hutchinson).

Lawton, D. (1975) *Class, Culture and the Curriculum* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul).

Lucas, N. (2004) *Teaching in Further Education: new perspectives for a changing context* (London, Institute of Education, University of London).

Macfarlane, E. (1993) *Education 16-19 in Transition* (London, Routledge)

MoE (Ministry of Education) (1949) *Education in 1948* (Circular 323), Cmnd 7724 (London, HMSO).

MoE (1951) *Education 1900-1950* (London, HMSO).

MoE (1958) *Education in 1957* Cmnd 454 (London, HMSO).

MoE (1962) *Education in 1961* Cmnd 1737 (London, HMSO).

MoE (1957) *Liberal Education in Technical Colleges* (Circular 323) (London, HMSO).

Ministry of Reconstruction (1919) *Final Report of the Adult Education Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction* (London, HMSO).

Neale, R.S. (1966) On liberal studies, *The Vocational Aspect*, 28 (41), 206-224

NIAE (National Institute of Adult Education) (1952) *Social Aspects of Further Education: a survey of local education authority action* (London, NIAE).

NIAE (1955) *Liberal Education in a Technical Age* (London, NIAE).

Pellegrino Sutcliffe, M. (2014) The origins of the 'two cultures' debate in the adult education movement: the case of the Working Men's College (c. 1854-1914), *History of Education*, 43 (2), 141-159.

Pullen, P. and Startup, R. (1979) Liberal studies in further education: the student view, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 3 (3), 30-43.

Rayner, N.C. and Dexter, E.G. (1964) *Liberal Studies: an outline course*, Volume 1 (Oxford, Pergamon Press).

Richardson, W. (2007) In search of the further education of young people in post-war England, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 59 (3), 385-418.

Simmons, R. (2009) Entry to employment: discourses of inclusion and employment in work-based learning for young people, *Journal of Education and Work*, 22 (2), 137-151.

Simmons, R. and Thompson, R. (2008) Creativity and performativity: the case of further education, *British Educational Research Journal*, 34 (5), 601-618.

TES (Times Educational Supplement) (1966) Muddled Crusade, 30th December.

Thompson, R. (2009) Creativity, knowledge and curriculum in further education: a Bernsteinian perspective, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 57(1), 37-54.

Venables, E. (1967) *The Young Worker at College – A Study of a Local Tech* (London, Faber and Faber).

Venables, P. F.R. (1955) *Technical education: its aims and organisation and future development* (London, Bell and Sons).

Watson, J. (1973) *Liberal Studies in Further Education: an informal survey* (Windsor, NFER).

Wheelan, L. (2007) How competency-based training locks the working class out of powerful knowledge: a modified Bernsteinian analysis, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28 (5), 637-651.

Workers' Educational Association (1957) *The Development of Technical Education* (London, WEA).

Young, M.F.D. (2008) *Bringing Knowledge Back In: From Social Constructivism to Social Realism in the Sociology of Education* (London, Routledge).

Word count, including references: 6, 962