

Liberal Studies for vocational students in FE: a learners' retrospective

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For thirty years after the end of World War Two the passage from youth into adulthood was relatively predictable for most young people in the UK. The majority found a job immediately after finishing school, usually at the age of 15 or 16, and this was normally followed by leaving home, marriage and parenthood soon thereafter. The mass movement of youth into the factories, mines and mills which dominated local labour markets across the country was commonplace and, for working-class boys especially, an apprenticeship was often the most sought-after form of employment. Attending a local FE college - or a technical college as they used to be known - was, at least until the collapse of the youth labour market in the 1980s, often part and parcel of an apprenticeship, and literally millions of budding engineers, accountants, hairdressers and other young workers went to college, often on 'day release' from their place of work. 'Sandwich courses', 'block release' and other patterns of attendance also existed but the basic idea was that these young workers would go to 'tech' to accrue various work-related skills and abilities. Typically, then, students spent most of their time developing various forms of knowledge and skill deemed necessary to function effectively within a particular business, trade or industry. But this is not the full story. For many years, most vocational students also undertook a course of liberal studies alongside their main programme of learning. Or, in other words, nascent technicians, artisans and other young workers were required to engage with debates about politics, literature, the mass media and so forth, alongside their main programmes of vocational learning.

Liberal studies was sometimes known as general studies, contrasting studies or complementary studies, and later rebranded as general and communication studies. Such differences in terminology reflected changing conceptions of the relationship between work-related knowledge and more general forms of learning but arguably all forms of liberal and general studies (LS/GS) were underpinned by a broad belief that vocational learners should engage with at least some form of

general education alongside various types of more directly work-related learning. It is possible to trace different trends over time, and generally liberal studies became more and more closely tied to the vocational curriculum during the 1970s and '80s, before eventually being replaced at the end of the 1980s with more overtly instrumental forms of learning such as Key Skills and Core Skills (currently known as Functional Skills). For much of its existence though, LS/GS was largely unmediated by the demands of the state and it was, unlike the vocational curriculum, usually unassessed. Consequently, liberal studies teachers often had more latitude and discretion than vocational lecturers, although the content, style and ethos of liberal studies varied substantially, not only from college-to-college, but also according to the interests and abilities of different teachers within the same institution. Whilst the way that LS/GS was enacted was varied and uneven, some practitioners basically regarded liberal studies as a vehicle through which to challenge power and inequality, not only in education and employment but across society more broadly. Undoubtedly, such a stance was controversial and the nature and purpose of LS/GS was the subject of much debate, not only among teachers students and employers but also in various policy forums.

Yet, despite all this, there is little published research on the liberal studies movement and that which exists focuses largely on either the changing policy context or the experiences of former LS/GS teachers. Indeed, many readers and contributors to this journal are involved in ongoing research on the latter aspect of the liberal studies movement. Research on the views and opinions of former LS/GS students is less common - Philip Pullen and Richard Startup's (1979) survey of vocational learners' experiences of liberal studies in eight colleges across England and Wales being one of the few examples of this. This article revisits Pullen and Startup's work, and compares and contrasts their findings with those from recent research I have been doing with former vocational students, all of whom undertook a course of liberal studies

alongside a programme of vocational learning at some point between the mid-1960s and the end of the 1980s.

Pullen and Startup's research took place in the late 1970s, a time when the state was attempting to realign LS/GS more closely with the vocational curriculum. Central to this was a belief that FE students would find an 'applied' model of learning more engaging and relevant to their career aspirations than a more abstract or academic approach to liberal studies. Consequently, communications, personal finance, careers guidance and so on became increasingly central to LS/GS, although Pullen and Startup also found that politics, sociology and current affairs was still part of the liberal studies curriculum in the colleges they surveyed. Either way, Pullen and Startup's study revealed a significant discrepancy between students' perceptions of liberal studies and those of vocational teachers in the colleges they surveyed. The majority of staff who took part in the research claimed that young people basically found LS/GS boring and a waste of time but over half of the 662 learners who responded to the survey said that they enjoyed at least some aspect of liberal studies, and most were more equivocal than hostile to LS/GS. Furthermore, most of the things students disliked about liberal studies related to teaching accommodation, unfavourable timetabling and other routine - though not unimportant - matters. Pullen and Startup found that the biggest influences on student attitudes were the perceived ability of the LS/GS teacher and the way that topics were presented rather than the content of the curriculum itself.

My own research consisted of a programme of narrative interviews with twenty former FE students, all of whom encountered liberal studies as vocational learners undertaking a course of study in one of five areas: engineering; business studies; hairdressing and beauty; and hospitality and catering. Existing social contacts were used to identify an initial group of participants who then introduced colleagues to the project and they, in turn, agreed to take part in the research. In total, fifteen men and five women participated in the interviews which took place in late 2016 and early 2017. The majority of those who took part went to college on a day-release basis, although four of the group were full-time students. Most attended an FE college in the north of England, although three of those who participated in the research went to college in the West Midlands and the South-East and South-West respectively.

Whilst participants came from a range of vocational backgrounds and attended a variety of institutions (15 in total), it is difficult to generalise

about the experiences of all FE students from the findings of the study. Many of those who took part in the research undertook extensive further study later in life and the majority eventually found their way into teaching in further or higher education. It might then be assumed that they were more committed students than some of their contemporaries and participants' career trajectories may have shaped their views and opinions about their earlier experiences, at least to some extent. Most interviews lasted between 40 minutes and an hour, and took place in participants' homes or at their workplace. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, although it is recognised that the data must be treated with caution. Interviews which rely on historical memories can be flawed, not least due to the passage of time - and we must remember that some participants were recounting events which took place forty or fifty years ago. Taken together though, they nevertheless provide a range of valuable insights from a set of former liberal studies students, both as young people and as adults reflecting on their experiences many years after undertaking LS/GS.

In some ways, data from my own research reflect Pullen and Startup's findings inasmuch as the majority of participants recalled being somewhat agnostic about liberal studies in their youth. However, roughly a quarter of those who took part remembered being quite positive about liberal studies as young people. This stemmed, in part, from comparisons between the rather formal, 'content heavy' nature of the vocational curriculum and the more relaxed, easy-going culture of liberal studies. The words of Joanne and Pierce below provide some flavour of this:

It was quite a tight ship in hospitality and catering . . . tutors were called 'Mr' or 'Mrs' but the general studies tutors used first names and . . . freedom of speech was more open in those lessons . . . (Joanne, former catering student).

The 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 seen as a good break (Pierce, former engineering student).

Some also talked about the varied and interesting nature of the curriculum, and a number of participants reported gaining a range of positive skills and abilities from LS/GS:

[W]e enjoyed it and I'm still in touch with some of the other students . . . 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 and beauty student).

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

There were, however, another four or five participants who were quite negative towards liberal studies in their youth, although their hostility was mainly directed towards those responsible for teaching LS/GS rather than deriving from any deep-rooted hostility to liberal studies *per se*.

[T]he people that delivered general studies had an awful time . . . we engaged to a certain extent but for other groups it was purgatory for the teacher and all they did was police incidents . . . and it lost its credibility . . . (Neil, former construction student).

[A] young thin lad . . . soon got rid of him . . . then we got a vicar . . . he was on a hiding to nowt . . . he 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 . . . I think they tried to be quite learner centred . . . but I'm not sure that it worked . . . (Ivan, former engineering student).

It is quite possible that the anti-intellectual culture which characterised some colleges at the time also hindered the cause of liberal studies, and those responsible for teaching it:

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

I remember our trade lecturer telling us . . . 'right, that's the chance for you to mess about because . . . we've got some general studies for you . . . it's a break in the curriculum' . . . I didn't even know what the word 'curriculum' meant but I remember that

distinct phrase . . . 'break in the curriculum'. So there was never any sense that it was a valuable lesson (Neil, former construction student).

It is, however, worth noting that there was an element of regret among those who had been resistant to liberal studies as young people:

I wish I had engaged with it . . . I'd probably be a better person now . . . It would have been 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 . . . it could have been stimulating but it wasn't, although I wouldn't want to take a load of eighteen-year-old skinhead apprentices and teach them (Ivan).

Perhaps the key finding from the research was that those who took part in the study were, almost without exception, significantly more positive about their experiences of LS/GS in retrospect, whatever their initial attitudes and opinions were. It is recognised that participants can sometimes be influenced by the dynamics of the interview process, as well as social and cultural expectations more generally, but the following data are nevertheless noteworthy:

You 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 . . . (Ron, former engineering student).

I don't think you are fully *compos mentis* about how education benefits you until you get significantly older (Pierce, former engineering student).

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

Justin's words hint at a further theme which arose from the data: a general belief that today's FE curriculum is too narrow and instrumental, and that some form of LS/GS would be more beneficial to students than Functional Skills and other forms of learning with which they are required to engage.

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

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).

At the same time, participants realised that the return of liberal studies is highly unlikely under current circumstances. This they believed is due partly to time constraints caused by a reduction in teaching hours, an increasingly crowded curriculum, and more and more pressure to deliver demanding performance targets. Many participants also recognised a more general opposition to the spirit and ethos of LS/GS, both among policymakers and some FE managers. This, they argued, was rooted in a resistance to providing young people with broader forms of general knowledge likely to promote critical dialogue and debate. It is, however, important to remember that the neoliberal reforms which have now infiltrated virtually all sections of the education system are part of an ideological project which aims to train, control and mould the working classes to the demands of capital rather than equip them with the knowledge and skills to challenge such forms of oppression.

References

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



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