

# Liberal and General Studies: its legacy for curriculum development now

Roy Stafford reports from the L/GS Project (see advert p24)

The fifty L/GS teachers interviewed for the L/GS project were asked a specific question about the potential legacy of their teaching experience and understanding:

Q. 12. Should present-day FHE curriculum design take more account of experience in LS/GS/G&CS?

['G&CS' refers to General & Communication Studies, the compulsory 15% of TEC (Technician Education Council) and then BTEC (Business and Technician) courses which at least initially gave GS teaching some security, but in the longer term was replaced by more instrumental Core Skills and Key Skills.]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, all those who answered the question (some didn't) were positive in saying that there were aspects of L/GS that could and should be re-introduced in current education provision. Also unsurprisingly, given the nature of L/GS practice, there was a very wide range of suggestions as to what the potential legacy might be. In the argument that follows we will look at some of the suggestions and try to assess what contribution the L/GS experience might make in the very different ecology of educational provision for young people in 2018.

## L/GS, education and employment

When the first further (and higher) education colleges began to develop 'Liberal Studies' and other forms of provision that might fall under the heading of L/GS (e.g. English and Social Studies) in the 1950s, the opportunities for young people were very different. The school-leaving age had been raised to 15 in 1947 and the UK was experiencing almost full employment. School leavers could be expected to find employment relatively easily. Male employment opportunities often came with forms of apprenticeships or industry training programmes which might see them attending day-release classes at a local college. Young women could

also easily find employment but not necessarily the same range of opportunities for vocational courses via day release.

The school leaving age was raised again to 16 in 1972 and is now a *de facto* 18 in England (but not the other Home Nations) at a time when unemployment figures are meaningless given the amount of forced self-employment and work on zero hours contracts. The big change in vocational education since the 1980s has been in the direct political involvement in curriculum development of ideologically-driven government ministers, so that it has moved from a 'bottom up' process directed by teachers, advisors and awarding bodies to one of 'top-down' directives by government-appointed and controlled bodies. Politicians have often ignored the findings of government-appointed educational researchers. This is not the place to argue the political case for change, but we must acknowledge that in the current climate government policies have aimed to run down further education provision and to narrow the scope of 14-19 education in schools. Our argument begins from the premise that the current curriculum offer has failed in terms of preparing young people for employment and full participation as citizens in a democratic modern society.

## Interview responses

Some of the typical responses to the Project question about the perceived legacy of L/GS are as follows:

. . . a lot of the softer skills that I think we were probably dealing with are now regarded as key to employability . . . (BF)

the introduction of analytical skills, teaching logic . . . and discussion skills . . . (KH)

. . . the focus of all education should be on making people happy and informed, as well as giving them skills for life and work. (JD)

When I talk to young people, I realise that they would probably, if they were awake, be quite keen to do Liberal Studies, because they were asking a lot of questions that students didn't ask in the 70s and the 80s . . . students are very much more interested in politics than they used to be (BH)

We have to . . . discover fresh means of awakening twenty-first century further and higher education students to the limitations of algorithms; and to give them some insight into those aspects of life which are not readily susceptible to quantitative analysis. (LC)

. . . insofar as the GS curriculum attempted to nurture independent thinking, curiosity, awareness of the implications of technical activity and decision-making then it should be at the heart of the FHE curriculum. (DB)

. . . because we figured out a lot about method and were clearer about our purpose - critical students, change society, develop critical approach . . . this is useful for any students . . . (DC)

. . . the educational experience of those kids then, and - if there are any of them now, still . . . would . . . benefit from a more intelligent . . . approach to teaching methods, strategies, especially in the . . . shift from the passive, the sitting, to something that engaged them more, and made them more active. (BB)

. . . there should be a space that allows people to move beyond contemporary understandings of vocational education and work so that you can develop a fuller understanding of the nature of wage labour in societies like ours . . . (JA)

. . . anything that encourages breadth of the student's thought and which brings them into contact with problems of law and ethics . . . and which enables them to express themselves in far different ways than just the mere use of words . . . (GC)

Without a doubt . . . the only future has to be with the sort of ideas that permeated General Studies . . . about the value of individuals and the values of those individuals coming together collectively with shared experiences and shared aspirations. (KD)

. . . the whole concept of being taken out of what you're doing most of the time to have a

look at the world through [a] different perspective is . . . increasingly important . . . (CH)

Do I think that young people should have an opportunity to do things outside the exam curriculum? Absolutely. (MG)

Although this seems like a list of quite varied comments, it's a relatively simple task to group them into easily understood principles for high quality general education. We can recognise the following:

- an emphasis on a broad curriculum;
- communication and expression in the widest sense;
- the importance of combining different kinds of skills and high levels of understanding;
- an awareness of what life-long learning might be:
- concepts of political literacy and understanding of collective endeavour - and what can be learned through wider experience of work and leisure;
- the importance of pedagogy and alternative ways of teaching and learning;
- ideas about 'critical education' and different ways of thinking.

### **Curriculum structures and L/GS philosophy**

The L/GS ideas encapsulated in the principles above took a long time to die, despite attempts to remove them in the 1980s and 1990s. L/GS wasn't the only form of educational practice in which some of these ideas were developed and it's also true that several of them were renewed in some of the curriculum initiatives that appeared as a response to youth unemployment in the late 1970s/1980s and again in the 1990s attempts to restructure the 14-19 qualifications framework. Indeed, it could be argued that the real legacy of L/GS was its influence generally on curriculum development during the re-structuring of further education in the 1990s. Some L/GS teachers found themselves well-equipped to move into managerial roles because of their experience and awareness of the learning needs of young people in the new industrial environment. The writers of new qualifications also found several of the innovations of

L/GS practice to be useful in envisioning new courses.

Overall, however, the L/GS experience tends to have been cherry-picked and innovative ideas have been lost inside structures which have not allowed them to develop. The reasons for this are often concerned with political expediency and ideologies which are instinctively opposed to the openness and flexibility of L/GS practice. We will look at some examples of L/GS practice that would now be seen as anathema by contemporary politicians but first we must recognise the current qualifications framework (a concept that first appeared in the 1990s) and how the prevailing education ideologies have used it (in England in particular) to change ideas about what a 'high quality education' might be.

L/GS ideas were developed at a time when 'post compulsory' general education and vocational education were the responsibility of local colleges democratically run in conjunction with local industries which supplied large numbers of young employees on day-release. L/GS provision was designed first for young workers and only later for full-time 'vocational students' and then 'pre-vocational' or 'general vocational' students. Some of the best ideas about using the curriculum space opened up by L/GS provision were also to be found in secondary education in English/PSHE and Social Studies and in informal education such as youth work. L/GS teachers may have drawn on these other sector practices but mainly the different sectors and the young people involved were kept separate until the 1990s. In the current situation, the artificial divide at 16 is increasingly meaningless and it makes sense to discuss a 14-19 curriculum. On the other hand the expansion of school sixth forms and sixth form colleges has made attempts to devise a coherent 'tertiary sector' for young people very difficult. Government policies have consistently favoured academic models of qualification structures and methodologies at the expense of vocational models.

There are several key issues about L/GS practice which run counter to prevailing education policies. For instance, the insistence on 'measuring outcomes' with 'rigour' has led to a focus on what can be examined rather than what can be taught and what can be learned through interaction between students and between students, teachers and forms of research and extra-classroom experience. Let's look at an example.

### Simulation, groupwork and reflection

Simulation of communication and organisational/social/judicial etc. processes was a popular form of L/GS activity. Examples might include court procedures, tribunals, public enquiries etc. in which students might be asked to prepare cases and argue them out in a formal setting or goal-oriented tasks in which groups

of students must organise themselves to produce something.

... sort of role-play activities where we'd have, I don't know, health and safety work issues and somebody had to be the works managers, somebody the representative of the workforce, and to decide what to do if there'd been an issue at work and so on. (JT)

The purpose of these activities was two-fold. They gave students opportunities to practice a wide range of verbal skills such as presenting a case in a formal context, responding to counter arguments, attempting to persuade listeners and so on. They also involved forms of research, finding out about procedures, possibly interviewing people and reading background documents. But as well as communications work, students might be expected to learn about a specific topic/issue through 'doing' rather than passively receiving information from a teacher.

Simulations were also widely used in forms of media education, another popular element in L/GS programmes. A good example would be the time-bound media production exercise such as compiling a news report. Any kind of media production work provides opportunities to develop social and organisational skills alongside basic technical skills in using media technologies. In a classroom/studio workshop context (and TV studios or portable video equipment were often available in FE colleges from the 1970s onwards) such skill acquisition can be developed further by placing students under pressure to produce something with deadlines and minimum standards.

Sometimes L/GS teachers wrote their own simulations from scratch but this can be a time-consuming practice and often teachers found ways of adapting existing published materials (which might have been borrowed from colleagues in other colleges). *Radio Covingham* was a News Production simulation with materials and teaching notes produced by Kenneth Jones of the Inner London Education Authority's Media Resources Centre in the early 1970s (see Alvarado 1975: 22). This was a set of pre-prepared news stories, press releases etc. that could be 'fed' to student groups which were then charged with ordering and re-ordering the material to produce a news bulletin by a set deadline. This could be adapted as a production exercise so that each group could be asked to record their final bulletin on audio or video recorders.

Jones suggested that students shouldn't 'act' but should carry out designated roles in a radio production team. Some could be 'copy tasters', others would edit material, perhaps more than one would read out items from the bulletin. The teacher should play no role other than providing teams with a stream of news material. The aim of the simulation for Jones was to develop

communication skills as part of a groupwork exercise. This was one of 'Eight Graded Simulations' published by the ILEA. One of the others was Front Page, a similar exercise for a print news layout. *Radio Covingham* could be easily adapted as *TV Covingham* and there were further similar published materials such as *Teachers' Protest*, an exercise in selecting images from coverage of a demonstration.

Jones was not interested in the actual decisions about which stories would be chosen, only in the practice of reading the stories, discussing them and negotiating the order. This was intended as a 'communications exercise'. L/GS and English/media education teachers made it something else. Alvarado (then the editor of *Screen Education*) points out that the shift from 'communication skills' to 'media education' in this context came about by adapting these simulations so that a 'de-briefing' exercise became a constituent part once the bulletin had been completed. This crucial move meant that students would become engaged in a critical analysis of news values and the institutional conventions of news production - a classic example of how the reflexive method of both L/GS and media education practice works when analysis 'follows' practice. The students have made decisions about which stories in what order will go into their bulletin, perhaps intuitively or because of familiarity with broadcast news. Now they will question themselves as to why they made those decisions. Alvarado points out that there are no 'wrong' or 'right' answers here, but it is essential to ask the critical questions. 'News' is 'written' and the meanings that are communicated are 'mediated' by its producers and the institutional context in which it is produced.

To give participants simulated experience in order to develop their communication skills I see as highly problematic for there is the danger of normalising and re-affirming media conventions and current practices and this is not critically confronting their hidden ideology. I would further suggest that if this simulation is used in the way that I have indicated then it provides one of the few means of attacking such issues which in most teaching situations using other methods are, due to their difficulty and subtlety, virtually untouchable. (Alvarado, *ibid* p26)

What Alvarado refers to here as a problem is what was termed the 'imitative' process of reproducing industry practice. This was seen as inimical to both media education and L/GS which intended to interrogate rather than imitate, i.e. to investigate the ideology of news rather than to copy the industry practice. This distinction is arguably even more important in the contemporary context in which access to powerful media technologies is much greater.

What follows from this are a number of issues that run counter to current education practice. We'll ignore for the moment the suggestion that this is an attempt to subvert broadcast practice (which it certainly was). More immediate is the issue that this de-briefing process is very difficult to assess and to measure. It may be producing evidence that students have an awareness of a communication process and that they have certain skill levels but how do you assess and measure understanding? A second issue is that the whole exercise takes a long time.

Contemporary education practice in the assessment of GCSE and A/AS Level qualifications in England demands that the 'outcomes' of student learning be carefully measured against set standards which are specified in the subject content of a validated qualification. This is the most extreme manifestation of the ideologies that also underpin assessment on vocational courses. If something isn't listed in subject content it can't be examined. Whatever is learned outside the subject content is of no value (i.e. can't be credited as learned). Groupwork cannot be assessed as such. Each individual student's contribution can be assessed as long as it can be measured. What this can mean is that the main point of assessment in what was a groupwork exercise would probably be to assess the individual's written communication skills if they have written some form of 'evaluation' of their contribution to the activity or compiled their own 'learning diary'.

The most effective form of assessment of something like a *TV Covingham* exercise is if a de-briefing exercise is followed by self assessment and/or peer assessment. Let's assume a group of twenty students are split into three or four groups, each of which produces a news report in the allotted time (the exercise could today work through electronic material delivered to desktops/laptops etc.). During the de-briefing each group reflects on their experience of producing the bulletin and then answers questions from the other groups. Finally groups could score their own group and the other groups according to broadly-set criteria. They might comment on how well organised the group appeared to be, how the group explained their decisions, whether the bulletin worked for an audience etc. Using all the material produced for the exercise and the de-briefing (which could be recorded) the tutors could then decide how to make a final assessment and whether to award marks/grades individually or collectively to the group.

This kind of simulation exercise offers the opportunities for students to learn by doing. It is not 'efficient' or 'rigorous' as an assessment mode, but, more importantly, it allows students to think and act under pressure, practise a range of skills and build understanding of quite complex processes. There will be space for critical reflection on their actions. This is

only an outline of what such an exercise might be. It could be extended, e.g. so that one team is given directives to 'go for audience impact' and another is reminded of Ofcom's regulatory powers and the need to conform to public service broadcasting etc. However it is utilised, this kind of teaching and learning environment is central to a broader curriculum with more chance of extending students and emphasising critical reflection.

### Critical reflection

For a significant number of L/GS practitioners the concept of critical reflection was key to their aims for successful work with students. What they meant by this could vary. Here are a few of the comments by the teachers interviewed:

[on hopes for students] . . . to be able as far as possible to critically analyse their situation and the society they lived in, to establish an empathy and sympathy for the plight of others (MT)

I wanted to make sure that people did have an understanding that politics wasn't just something about government and distanced from them but that it was something that affected all their lives and that the distribution of wealth and power was something that people should understand and know how to change really. (VT)

I actually believed it was an important space in the curriculum for young working-class men and women to be able to challenge, I think we used the phrase at the time, 'common sense notions' of the world. And, you know, to take a critical look at the world. (PG)

So that was worthwhile. If you felt, you know, you open people's eyes a little bit to different points of view, and they just say, you know, "No, I don't agree with that particularly". So I didn't necessarily mind if someone disagreed with me, you know, that was . . . as long as you helped them, or they marshalled their arguments. That was important to me. So giving different perspectives was important. (SS)

When I started teaching A level Sociology, I used to say to the students at the beginning of the year, "Your parents want me to get you an A Level, But I want you to become a critical and questioning person". And I would say the same thing applied to Liberal Studies - the way I did it

anyway - because I rather hoped that people would question, and argue, and, yeah, as a result of swapping of ideas, gain a slightly broader approach to everything . . . (TB)

I think there was quite a strong set of strategies . . . characterised by student-centred learning, characterised by discussion, characterised by stimulus material. And those materials were sort of conundrums, quite often, or sets of questions that would get students thinking about particular topics, where you would try to challenge them with alternative or contradictory points of view - and of stuff from the news, kind of contemporary things. I think discussion was a key thing. Discussion, debate, argument, trying to get the students to express their point of view. And to talk with one another. (JS)

Although these quotes refer to slightly different strategies, they are all concerned to oppose the idea of a student passively absorbing a body of knowledge. Instead they focus on student engagement and questioning. The quote which refers to 'challenging common sense notions' is representative of a number of approaches that focused on the student's understanding of the world when they first came to their L/GS class. The L/GS teacher would often have a scheme of work planned out, but what was more important was to encourage the student to engage with their existing understanding and this might mean adjusting the scheme if students showed interest in particular topics. Two phrases common at the time were "starting where the student is at" and "making strange the familiar". The approach was indeed 'student-centred'. Students confronting their own beliefs then discovered that there were other ways of looking at the same issues and were usually more willing to explore further than they would have been if simply told that "this is the way to look at it". Following on from this, it might be useful then to consider one of the main areas of concern about the behaviour and general understanding of their world as expressed by young people in 2018.

### L/GS practice and teaching about social media

L/GS was developed and then declined before the widespread adoption of digital media and communication technologies in the late 1990s and certainly before the embrace of social media 'applications' ten years later. Yet in some ways the L/GS principles associated with the statements of practitioners presented at the beginning of this article

seem potentially useful in tackling the range of issues raised by social media which have led to a form of 'moral panic' about harm to young people through cyber-bullying, invasion of privacy, fake news etc.

'Moral panics' have been identified on several occasions since the invention of the 'teenager' post 1945 and the development of youth culture and its associated consumer markets. Comic-books, rock 'n roll, new fashions, drug-taking, videogames etc. have all prompted reactions from establishment bodies and have in turn led to calls for forms of regulation and accompanying education programmes. In many cases the education initiatives appear to have been based on the same ideas as the moves towards regulation and legal prohibition and restriction i.e. to control and restrain activity.

Social media use and abuse involving young people is seen as an important issue for Ofcom, the UK regulator for communications. Unfortunately the response from Ofcom and other agencies has been mainly in the form of what media educationists would tend to see as 'inoculation' approaches. This implies an attempt to warn young people of the dangers but not to encourage them to engage and explore what actually happens in social media engagement and what the meanings of social media practice might actually be. Inoculation strategies are not properly student-centred and may have little impact on student behaviour. Ofcom was often consulted by government departments and education agencies in the early 2000s in pursuance of ideas about 'media literacy' - Ofcom has a statutory duty to research and promote media literacy set out in the 2003 Communications Act. Its main contribution now is to monitor and survey media use by children, young people and adults (most recently in 2017/18). Since the Brexit vote and Trump's election victory in 2017, various commentators and agencies have called for 'media literacy' teaching to be included in school curricula. At the same time, changes in the National Curriculum in England have removed media literacy from English orders for schools and the focus on STEM subjects has also had a negative impact on the numbers taking GCSE Media Studies.

At this point, it is important to be cautious. Students today are the product not just of personal use of digital media from a very young age in the home but also from IT (Information Technology) and then ICT (Information Communications Technology) programmes in schools and colleges. Some young people have developed high order skills in programming/coding and have become very attractive to employers and, in some cases, themselves successful entrepreneurs at a young age. However, the majority of young people have learned to be users or 'consumers' of digital media and their ICT education has primarily focused on learning about applications

of branded software. The 2013 Department for Education orders for KS3 (12-13) and KS4 (14-16) in England include the following 'Aims' for 'computing programmes':

The national curriculum for computing aims to ensure that all pupils:

- can understand and apply the fundamental principles and concepts of computer science, including abstraction, logic, algorithms and data representation
- can analyse problems in computational terms, and have repeated practical experience of writing computer programs in order to solve such problems
- can evaluate and apply information technology, including new or unfamiliar technologies, analytically to solve problems
- are responsible, competent, confident and creative users of information and communication technology.

What's interesting about this is that computing is said to have 'deep links' with mathematics, science, and design and technology. No mention is made of communication studies (though reference is made to communications technology), media studies, sociology, political literacy etc. The implication here is that young people need computing skills to 'solve problems' and are effective users of communications technology. An L/GS teacher might suggest that it would be good to learn how to 'pose problems', i.e. to think about the questions to be asked about digital technologies. In particular it might be a good idea to learn what the impact of digital technologies might be on individual users and on society as a whole. In addition, they might learn about the inequality of access to communication and the unequal distribution of the benefits accruing from the widespread adoption of these technologies. There is certainly a role for the L/GS principles of critical education set out at the beginning of this paper.

From the L/GS perspective there is a 'lack' in ICT programmes but this should lead to co-operation with ICT staff rather than antagonism. In another part of the L/GS Project, interviewees were asked about their working relationships with vocational teachers which varied considerably. L/GS practice could be enhanced or it could be diluted and undermined. We don't know what future co-operation might bring if approached positively by both sides.

### Strategies for learning about social media use

As we've noted, young people (i.e. post-14) in English education may have quite varied experience of digital media generally and social media in particular. We aren't going to create a specific activity here in detail because we would need to know much more about the student group and the specific course they were following. But we can suggest ways in which L/GS approaches might help in teaching and learning about social media. (The kinds of activities discussed here have probably already been tried in many different contexts. There is no claim to originality here - only an attempt to think through possibilities using an L/GS approach.)

The aim of an activity would be for students to reflect critically on their own social media use and to explore the impact of their actions on others. Ideally, a large scale group project/simulation would need a significant amount of time and access to resources, especially teaching resources. L/GS practice often made use of team teaching and in this case it would be useful to bring together the nearest modern equivalents to the former L/GS practitioners with ICT specialists and others such as staff with experience of PHSE in schools. As preparation it might be useful to focus on a case study, perhaps of the use of personal data in *targeting social media users* during an election or a marketing campaign. Students might attempt to log the kinds of personal data they have in the past been willing to provide to Google, Facebook, Twitter etc. and to search for examples of promotional messages that might have been sent to them - or they might want to investigate what kinds of campaigns might be planned by political parties or specific campaign groups. Could an exercise like this be simulated? Students might be assigned a campaign and asked to come up with a strategy. How would they interest segmented audiences (i.e. defined by age, gender, religion etc.) in supporting or opposing specific campaigns? They wouldn't necessarily have to create campaign messages but they would be required to make a presentation of their ideas with examples of the kinds of media messages and strategies they might use and then answer queries about their ideas from staff and other student groups.

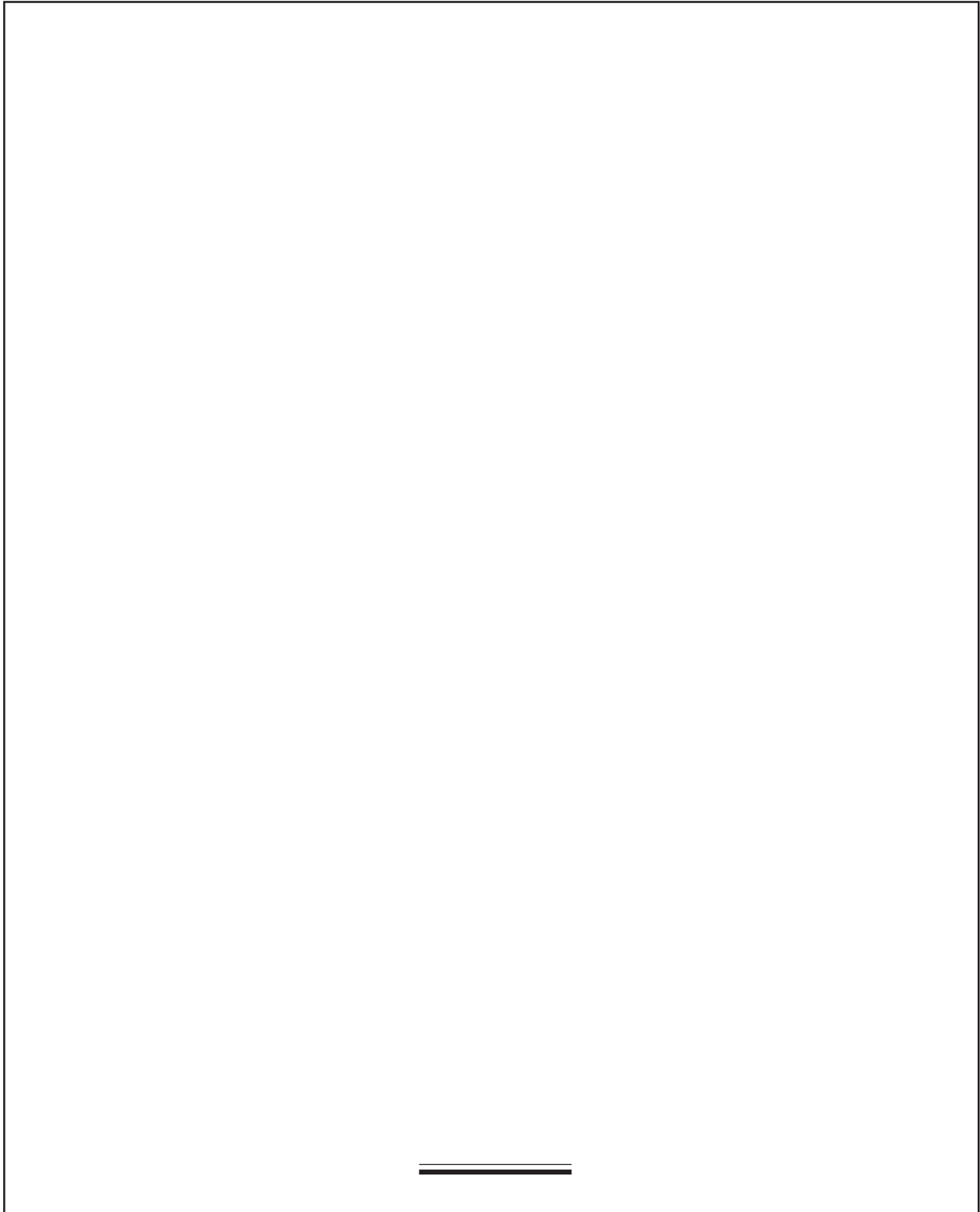
One of the major concerns about individual social media use is about the potential emotional and psychological damage caused by deliberate or unthinking messaging, commentary, posting of images, video etc. There are several ways of approaching this and developing some form of critical reflection. The first and most controllable is a case study of a well-known celebrity who has featured in a specific case of social media exposure. Many such cases are of North American celebrities but there are likely to be British

stories as well. The speed with which stories develop and then 'die' is quite bewildering for teachers but it should be possible to devise a simple set of tasks for students collecting examples that can be applied whenever a new story breaks. There has been a great deal of research in cultural studies and media studies into celebrity and fan cultures and this may provide ideas for structuring analysis and thinking about what might be acceptable behaviour for social media commentary. Students will also be aware that social media is also widely used to promote all forms of media performance and to raise the profile of celebrity figures.

Awareness of the range of behaviour of social media users might be addressed by asking students to compile a 'User Charter of Acceptable Behaviour'. This refers to ideas about 'netiquette' and there are many attempts to do this online. Most of these are American and tend to be written in that inoculatory way, full of imperatives about 'Don't do this' or 'Read that'. More appealing to students might be something like 'Wittertainment's Code of Conduct in the Cinema' devised for the Mark Kermode and Simon Mayo film programme on Radio 5 Live (see [http://www.bbc.co.uk/5live/films/code\\_of\\_conduct.pdf](http://www.bbc.co.uk/5live/films/code_of_conduct.pdf)). This is similarly a listing of 'don'ts' - but presented in a far more entertaining and engaging way. Could a student group agree a Code of Conduct for social media use? An attempt to do this is likely to reveal a range of positions once individuals start to think about it and how it might affect them. This is the crucial objective - to ask ourselves, how do we want others to interact with us?

The obvious temptation is to set up some form of simulated social media activity to see how some of the ideas above work out in practice. Great care needs to be taken and a simulation would need to be 'closed' on some form of intranet (a network only accessible within an organisation) which would require the full co-operation of ICT staff. Students might be assigned character names and profiles and then allowed to participate in some form of social media forum. Interactions in this forum could then be recorded and analysed by student groups. One specific activity related to this idea might be to create a number of such characters who develop profiles and who are then required to apply for jobs, university entrance, personal loans etc. which involves an interview panel with access to the profiles created through social media. What is it acceptable to use from publicly available social media profiles in order to decide who is an eligible job candidate?

Alongside such exercises it is also going to be important to ask students to undertake some basic research regarding equality of access to online services and what this means for participation in democracy. There are many myths about digital media use and access but, increasingly, aspects of everyday life are



becoming less accessible to those who lack physical access or cannot afford access to online services. For example, many transport services and banking services are more expensive to use for those without broadband access. The aim of L/GS in the activities outlined above is to encourage students to question the digital communication environment in which they find

themselves through research, analysis and critical reflection on their own actions.

**Reference**

Alvarado, Manuel (1975) 'Simulation as Method', SEFT: *Screen Education* No 14