

The phasing out of Liberal Studies

Article version of a talk given by Colin Waugh at meetings of the Teacher Education in Lifelong Learning (TELL) organisation on 19/11/18 at Oxford College and 7/3/1919 at Lincoln College.

The Liberal and General Studies (L/GS) Project was Initiated in 2013 by former practitioners of L/GS. The only funding it has had is £300 in 2013 from the Raymond Williams Foundation. The Project has recorded interviews with fifteen women and 43 men who were former L/GS practitioners. Between them, these interviewees taught L/GS at 64 institutions across England. 19 of them started teaching it in the 1960s, 32 in the 1970s, and seven in the 1980s. Each interview took the form of an oral history-style conversation structured round twelve questions. What, then, was Liberal and General Studies?

'Liberal Studies' and 'General Studies' were the terms most widely used to refer to a curricular element that existed across UK further - and some higher - education institutions between the early 1950s and about 1990. Thousands of teachers and hundreds of thousands of students took part in this curricular element. It characteristically consisted of a one or one-and-a-half hour slot in the college day of young people 'released' from work on one day a week (or the equivalent by block release) to follow technical (or other vocational) courses. The remainder of these students' college time was spent on work-related material taught by specialist vocational staff. However, L/GS itself was nearly always taught by arts or social science graduates. A typical L/GS teacher's timetable could consist of 22 or more one-hour classes with different groups per week. Exam boards required principals to certify that students had taken part in L/GS classes but, for much of the period, most L/GS was not formally assessed, let alone examined. This situation often pushed L/GS lecturers into radically experimental practice, and, sometimes, thinking.

The Project interviewees were overwhelmingly positive about L/GS. Typically, they saw it as: offering students something different from what was normal for them; making things available to students that they wouldn't otherwise have access to; broadening students' outlook; allowing students to get out of their comfort zones; helping students to become more confident and articulate; providing students with 'the opportunity to discuss issues outside the scope of their vocational training'; communicating economic and political education to students; changing how students

related to one another and/or to other people; prompting students to reassess their own assumptions and beliefs; equipping students to think more critically than hitherto; providing students with an alternative model of student/teacher interaction; and fostering students' individual and collective capacity to change themselves.

From the mid 1970s, L/GS was subject to a number of changes. One of these changes affected what were then called craft-level students. These students were employed as, for example, lathe operators, fitters, turners, mechanical engineering workers in such industries as mining or textiles, sheet metal workers, welders, garage mechanics, wood-machinists, hairdressers, nursery nurses, certain categories of office workers, catering workers, carpenters, bricklayers, plumbers, gasfitters, and heating and ventilation engineers.

In the first half of the 1970s, a movement developed within the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) further education service aimed at replacing the GS that had up till then been done with craft level students with courses in communication skills. This movement was promoted strongly by the ILEA FHE inspectorate. In the mid-1970s the main exam board responsible for craft-level qualifications, the City and Guilds of London Institute (CGLI), piloted a Certificate in Communication Skills (initially called CGLI 772) that was based on this practice within the ILEA. This certificate was assessed via centrally set and marked assignments and a multi-choice test. Eventually, GS with craft students in most ILEA colleges was replaced entirely by 772. The General Education Department of CGLI then marketed this qualification across the whole country. From the late 1970s, then, GS depts and practitioners everywhere were faced with a dilemma as to whether to stick with old-style GS with craft students, or to adopt 772, or what? The 772 certificate was widely adopted.

A second change to L/GS in the 1970s affected what were then called technician-level students. This referred to apprentices who were being prepared for supervisory roles, or for other jobs requiring a certain amount of theoretical as well as practical expertise. Following the 1969 Haslegrave Report, a body called the Technician Education Council (TEC) was set up, and

this organisation adopted an over-arching curricular framework that was based on the taxonomy of educational objectives in the psycho-motor, cognitive and affective domains that had been developed by the US psychologist Benjamin Bloom. TEC also renamed GS as 'General and Communication [my emphasis. CW] Studies' (G&CS). They made this compulsory, and required that it should occupy 15 per cent of students' course time. It was also subject to graded assessment, and students were required to pass it to get their overall technician qualification. However, TEC also put in place a system by which G&CS units were college-devised and college-assessed, subject to moderation by a TEC moderator responsible for the vocational programme of which these units formed part (mainly programmes within specific branches of the engineering, building and science sectors). College staff devising G&CS units were required to express them in behavioural objectives in the cognitive and affective domains, and to submit them to the relevant TEC panel for approval or otherwise. TEC courses, including G&CS, were widely introduced across colleges from 1974 onwards. It's also important to understand that employers now began to recruit 16-17 year-olds with four GCSEs directly as trainee technicians, whereas previously their usual practice had been to recruit technicians from amongst people who were already craft students.

Also as a consequence of the Haslegrave Report, a Business Education Council (BEC) was set up alongside TEC, and BEC courses started in colleges from 1978. Instead of G&CS, these courses included a compulsory general education unit called 'People and Communication'.

In 1983-84 BEC and TEC were merged to form the Business and Technician Education Council (BTEC) - now part of the privatised awarding body Edexcel, which belongs to the Pearson publishing conglomerate. As part of this merger, a BEC-derived model of general education was imposed across all BTEC courses, with the result that G&CS was replaced by an arrangement called Common Skills and Core Themes, which in turn was assessed through a programme of Integrative Assignments - that is, assignments that were overwhelmingly vocational in content.

By 1990 the outcome of the above changes to craft and technician level FE courses was that LS/GS was effectively wiped out, and from the early 1990s it was succeeded by narrower forms of non-liberal general education, successively titled Core Skills, Key Skills and Functional Skills. The most common answer made by L/GS Project interviewees to the question 'When did you finish teaching L/GS?' was 'some time in the late 1980s' or 'by 1990'.

With these points in mind, I will now say something about interviewees' responses to the L/GS Project's question 11, in which interviewees were asked: 'If you

have a view, why do you think L/GS ceased to exist?'

Three of the interviewees did not answer this question. (One of these three was too astonished by the fact that G&CS had been abolished to suggest a reason.) Most people gave a combination of several reasons.

The single most commonly cited reason, given by thirteen people, was: 'pressure for Communication and/or Basic Skills'. After that, twelve people cited the 'demand for work relevance'. Ten people referred to 'cost-cutting', and the same number also gave 'Thatcher' or 'Thatcherism' as reasons. Eight people referred to the influence of TEC, BEC and/or BTEC specifically.

Seven people in various ways referred to underlying economic change, for example: 'de-industrialisation', 'destruction of craft apprenticeships', technical courses reduced and/or taken away' [ie from colleges. CW], or just 'unemployment'. Six people cited the fact of L/GS being 'not assessed', or that it 'did not produce measurable outcomes', while six again cited 'vocational lecturers' opposition'. One person referred to the 'the rise of the MSC' [= Manpower Services Commission. CW].

Lastly, a number of people gave reasons internal to the practice of L/GS itself, which can be grouped as follows. First, there were said to be some factors for which individual L/GS teachers could be blamed, including: 'leftwing teachers evangelising', L/GS being discredited by an overuse of films, and 'cynical GS teachers'. Secondly, some interviewees referred to factors that reflect the demanding nature of L/GS teaching, for example that it was hard to teach craft students, that L/GS in general was hard work, and that GS teachers gave up (either because L/GS teaching was too demanding, or because they saw it as being under threat). Thirdly, some interviewees cited factors that were arguably due to weaknesses of management or leadership at a range of levels, for example: that L/GS depended too much on the quality of individual teachers; that there was a lack of quality assurance within it, and hence its quality was too uneven; that the focus on communication skills that developed in the 1970s was caused partly by previous neglect of this area on the part of the L/GS 'community' as a whole; that L/GS was never properly integrated with other course material; that colleges had too narrow a view of what business wanted; that the Inspectorate (HMI) withdrew support; and that incorporation (ie the removal of colleges from local authority control by the Major government in 1993) gave principals increased freedom to break up L/GS departments or sections.

What, then, did ex-L/GS lecturers do after 1990? Some adapted to teaching the narrower forms of general education that replaced L/GS. Some took redundancy or early retirement. Some performed what used to be called an 'academic side shuffle' - that is, they moved

gradually into teaching their own degree subject, for example as an A-level. Some retrained as IT lecturers. Some pursued other specialisms, for example Trade Union Studies, Media Studies or FE teacher education. Some became managers, including principals. And some became consultants or inspectors.

In conclusion, it can be said that any plan to reintroduce a valid form of general education across vocational courses in further and higher education now would need to take account of the history described above.

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