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# Lecturers' self-organisation then and now

*This article by Colin Waugh is based on the notes for a talk, a shortened version of which was given to the Tutor Voices conference held at Northern College, near Barnsley, on 26th September 2015*

I was an FE lecturer from 1969 to 2013, mainly at Brixton, Tottenham, Barnsley and North West London Colleges. From 1969 to 1991 I taught Liberal and/or General Studies - that is, the one or one-and-a-half hour of open-ended general education that used to be attached to courses for day- or block-release students in such vocational fields as engineering, building, science, hairdressing, nursery nursing and the like.

As such, I was involved in the Association for Liberal Education (ALE), which was like a sort of subject association for lecturers and managers in that area of work. In 1977, with others, I started the more leftwing, London-based group General Studies Workshop, which in 1980 was the main impetus behind the foundation of the NATFHE General Studies Section. From 1980 to its dissolution in the 1990s, I was the national secretary of that section, which at one stage had 750 members in 250 colleges. In 1988, I also took over the editorship of the ALE Journal and along with this initiated the Section's own journal *General Educator*. In 1991 we made this into a bi-monthly publication, and in 1997, after 67 issues, with a broader grouping within NATFHE and some NUT members concerned with post-compulsory education, we re-organised this as *Post-16 Educator*, which has been sustained through 80 on-schedule issues till now. In 2009, as a spin-off from these activities I also wrote the pamphlet 'Plebs': the lost legacy of independent working-class education', which we have since developed into the Independent Working-class Education Network (IWCEN).

My remarks here, then, are based on the experience which I have outlined, as well as other attempts to organise lecturers and teachers which there isn't time to spell out here. I must stress that 'we', in the sense of all those active in these initiatives, and I in particular, no doubt made many mistakes. Therefore I'm not setting myself up here as someone who can tell people in Tutor Voices what they should do, only as someone whose experience they may find it useful to learn from.

There are quite a lot of differences between the situation with regard to General and Liberal Studies in FE in the 1970s and 1980s and the situation in which Tutor Voices is organising now. For example, at that time there were about 500 colleges, whereas now there are apparently no more than 240. Those colleges were under local education authority control. They were driven mainly, though not only, by the technical education of part-time industrial-release and similar students. The inspectorate, then called HMI, was broadly supportive. There was in every college a large group of tenured - ie securely employed - basic grade lecturers. And there was a basic assumption that lecturers knew their trade or academic discipline and could put it over, especially if they had undergone a period of pre- or, more commonly, in-service FE teacher education. Within this set-up, there would at any given time have been somewhere between five and ten thousand GS lecturers like myself.

To me the single most important change since then has been the 'deindustrialisation' of the UK economy that took place mainly from the early

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1980s onwards. Effects of this that are directly relevant to this talk include the destruction of time-served industrial apprenticeships and with this of much of the technical education side of FE. At the same time, the majority of 16-19 year olds were driven out of the mainstream labour market. One consequence was that General Studies was destroyed along with industrial release and apprenticeships, and for many students replaced with narrower, basic skills-type provision that began around 1975 and in recent years has taken the form of Functional Skills.

### Creeping

Another key change was the 'incorporation' of colleges in 1993 (ie their removal from local authority - and hence at least partly democratic - control). A long term consequence of this has been the development within FE of the Ofsted regime, which is clearly an engine of creeping privatisation, itself accelerating now. Ofsted derives its power from and itself promotes the increasingly insecure employment of lecturers, and is also tied up with the attempt by the state to force people to stay in 'education' to 18.

Against this background we can identify some similarities between the situation in which GS lecturers organised and that in which Tutor Voices is seeking to organise now.

For a start, FE remains essential to many working-class people's life chances. Secondly, FE is still mainly - and, to me, rightly - vocational. (In fact it can be argued that it should be more so, in the sense that it should provide more reliable access than it currently does to worthwhile employment.) And as a consequence, most courses - now, as then - contain a large element of work-related training. A basic issue therefore is: is this training to be accompanied by a hidden curriculum of miseducation or even indoctrination, or by some form of consciously organised, real - that is to say, problem-posing, dialogic - education?

In the period 1950 to 1990 this issue took the form of struggle around Liberal and General Studies. But now it takes the form of struggle over FE teacher education and continuing professional development. Therefore the present day struggle of Tutor Voices and the earlier struggles of Liberal and General Studies lecturers are different forms of one and the same underlying struggle.

The agenda pursued by the state, the Government, Ofsted and senior managers in colleges now is to push FE towards narrower and narrower forms of non-specific 'employability' 'training', in which malleable instructors, employed

on an increasingly precarious basis - or even outsourced to agencies - operate IT systems to deliver pre-determined learning packages. They want FE teacher education staff to promote and police this agenda, especially via appraisal systems and draconian micro-management. At the same time, however, they want those same teacher education lecturers to provide a smokescreen of educational professionalism to camouflage this, and there is a strong drive to remake the working lives of these lecturers so that they conform to this role. This in turn means that teacher education staff stand between, on one hand, the broad mass of lecturers and of actual and potential FE students, and, on the other, the state, the Government, Ofsted, those journalists and other media commentators who support their agenda, and senior management in FE itself.

In this situation the most conscious and principled FE teacher educators will see themselves as answerable to FE lecturers generally, and via them to the broad mass of working-class students and potential students, and they will try to organise themselves collectively on this basis. To the extent that Tutor Voices is the expression of this impulse, I believe there are some fairly specific organisational lessons which the history of the General Studies struggle may offer to those involved.

First, such a movement needs to be based in a coherent group of practitioners with a clearcut common interest (in this case, FE teacher education staff in universities and in colleges). Secondly, this group should reach out to the widest possible range of practitioners and students of FE teacher education and CPD across the system. Thirdly, they must have a positive, rational vision of what FE can and should be like. Fourthly, they must organise themselves in such a way as to minimise the risk of victimisation. Fifth, they must maintain a clear line between specific campaigns and longer term collective self-organisation. Sixth, the development of a positive vision and the building of an organised grouping must proceed in parallel - that is, neither can be postponed till the other is complete.

### Collective

There are some more specific points that I feel should be made about the relation between campaigns and collective self-organisation. Clearly, campaigns need to reach out beyond practitioners and draw support from a wide range of people and organisations. Further, in campaigns, the proposed practitioners group will necessarily relate to sympathetic union officials, national union officers, exam board employees, consultants, inspectors,

managers, journalists, student union officers, media personalities, community spokespersons and the like, and those heading campaigns will need to intervene in and work through bodies that will often be dominated by management. (An example of this in the General Studies struggle was the Association for Liberal Education, and in recent ESOL struggles, NATECLA.)

I believe it is nearly always useless to try to abstain from such involvement. But I also believe that under no circumstances should the practitioners involved allow any of these other people or organisations to shape the agenda that underlies their campaigns and their struggle as a whole. In short, they should restrict the process of longer-term collective self-organisation to practitioners.

**Threshold**

This applies at the level of ideas as well as of campaigning. The practitioners' group must develop for itself - initially, of course to a threshold level - a common body of principles and ideas. This group must also develop a capacity to go on doing this - that is, to continue to extend, test and remake this shared ideological basis.

My experience strongly suggests that the whole thing will degrade quickly if both these capacities are not developed. To put this another way, either we make - and keep on making - our own ideas, or we will have the bosses' ones, whether we know it or not.

It's also a corollary of this that the development of ideas must not be left to one or two individuals; that it must be collective. And this in turn requires that within the practitioners' group democracy must operate both in spirit and letter, and both as regards decisions about action and as regards the exchange of ideas.

In short, I believe that the experience of practitioners like myself shows that the practitioners organising as Tutor Voices will need to develop and maintain amongst themselves the same autonomy which valid education seeks to develop amongst both teacher education and mainstream FE students.



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