

Liberal and General Studies: how practitioners sought student engagement

Jonathan Simmons *looks at what people who taught Liberal and General Studies (L/GS) to students on vocational courses in FE between 1960 and around 1990 say about approaches they used, as revealed through the 55 interviews so far conducted for the L/GS Project. In a previous article* the author argued that L/GS was distinguished from other curricular areas primarily by the fact that within it aims, methods and subject matter were combined without the distorting influence of formal, externally set assessment. Here, he first identifies some factors which contributed to the choice of topics and teaching methods, and then examines some of the practices that resulted. (The article has been edited with the author's permission.)*

In some colleges, the head of the L/GS department or section asked lecturers to follow a pre-established sequence of content areas. Jane Gould, for example, describes how in her workplace in Nottingham:

. . . different years had a different theme. So in the first year . . . they'd do a lot of basic communication. And in the second year, it would be social issues, like abortion, rape, contraception . . . In the third year it was trade union studies, and stuff to do with the environment and pollution . . . And in the fourth year it was anything that they hadn't covered in the previous three - you'd plug the gaps.

Another approach introduced by L/GS section heads or heads of department in several colleges was the use of study packs, described by Julia Duggleby, who worked in Sheffield, as follows:

. . . with a big range of topics that students could work through, choosing their route through with advice from the teacher, and deciding how long to take on each pack. These would involve such things as independent research in the library, producing things, e.g. a poster, research in the city centre. A great idea, often abused by the students.

Madeline Hall, who worked for a time at the same college, says of this study pack approach that:

. . . the aim was to encourage students to think for themselves, to work on their own initiative, through finding out rather than being told, and developing resources to support such an approach.

However, the interviews strongly suggest that most L/GS teachers, most of the time, had to decide for themselves what approaches and what subject matter to use. Some welcomed this, some found it difficult and the majority probably accepted it as inevitable.

One factor affecting how L/GS teachers dealt with this situation was the proportion of their timetable devoted to L/GS. Some of the lecturers involved were full-timers who taught L/GS only, whereas others taught a few hours of it, either as part of a timetable focused on, for example, A-level subjects, or as part-timers. Although several of the interviewees refer to full-timers who filled their time in the easiest way they could, especially by showing a lot of films regardless of their quality, it's likely that the first of these groups would usually have been more committed than the other two to the aims, methods and ethos specific to L/GS. It's likely also that the degree subject background of L/GS teachers had some influence on the topics they sought to introduce and the teaching methods they used. For example, those with a social science background may have tended to focus on political, social and environmental issues, whereas those with an English literature background may have tended to prioritise approaches via written texts. A further factor was that because students on courses at technician level normally had higher levels of formal educational attainment than students on craft courses, they were often less inclined than the latter to question openly why they were doing L/GS. But in all cases the teachers involved were required by their situation to relate both to the views about L/GS held by vocational staff whose students they taught, and even more to the views of those students themselves.

One interviewee, Matthew Simpson, who worked at a college in Sheffield, recounts an incident which epitomises the pressures this could involve. He asked a group of students who were difficult to write down as many swear words as they could:

Now I know, from walking past the lab, that their behaviour was quite volatile at the best of times [ie and not just in L/GS. Ed.] so there would always be a bit of shouting and people mucking about and throwing things at one another but there was three or four minutes when they were completely absorbed in this and writing down all the swear words that they could think of and, at that moment, this man, Frank, [ie the students' vocational course tutor] came in to get something from his little prep room and so he walked through this completely silent room full of his students with a pen in their hands writing and he just walked past me and, when he came back, he came up to me and gripped me by the arm really firmly and whispered in my ear, 'You're doing brilliant work here'. I was so relieved he didn't look to see what they were writing down!

At Brooklands College in Surrey, Paul Elms in one case deliberately ignored students' bad behaviour. He later found out that, although they at first thought he was soft for not reprimanding them, they eventually changed their behaviour because his lack of response rendered it ineffective. Paul also found that he could sometimes generate a relationship with students by allowing an existing conversation to carry on and gradually involving himself in it.

Again, Barry Fyfield describes how at Willesden College of Technology he dealt with one group's challenging behaviour by just sitting at the front of the class and every few minutes writing numbers on the board. After a while the students asked what the numbers were:

And I said, 'I've just earned that'. And they said, 'Well, if you're going to earn that, I want you to teach us'. [Laughter] It was the first time they actually insisted on being taught! Because . . . I could just sit there and get the money anyway.

Also at Willesden, Graham Taylor, working with car mechanics:

. . . studied the automobile industry in my spare time, and developed a knowledge of cars and industrial disputes at British Leyland and things like that . . . I discussed trade unionism by talking about strikes at British Leyland which affected their cars. And I then talked about the third world and developing countries . . . [where] the materials, the metal for the cars came from

. . . So they then couldn't really say that this had nothing to do with them. And then on the Technical Reports side, when they laughed at that, I said that all employers had told us that they wanted to be able to promote autoworkers and building workers to supervisory positions, and they couldn't do that unless they knew how to write a report. And so therefore it was in their interests to do Report Writing if they ever wanted to become supervisors.

Here we see, then, an example of where a lecturer started from the functional task of technical report writing - that is, something vocational staff pressed L/GS lecturers to teach - and, in an effort to overcome students' resistance to that, broadened out towards issues in the industries the students worked in. In fact, because most students were part-time, several of the L/GS lecturers interviewed saw their work context as a fruitful area through which to secure engagement. For example, Paul Elms describes how he:

. . . got them to investigate their work situations, and taught them to think by asking questions . . . for instance: 'How do you get on with your boss?', 'What do you enjoy most about your work?', 'What do you enjoy least?', 'What problems do you have?' - things like this. And they really took to this. And it gave them something never articulated in any systematic way before. . . . And obviously they were then questioned by their colleagues in the class, and that provoked further conversations.

This allowed class members to see how employing organisations approached similar issues in different ways.

Other employment-related topics included rights and responsibilities at work and 'pay, conditions, trying to get something out of the dynamics of the workplace' (David Kear). Some staff broadened out from these starting points into personal areas such as budgeting or car insurance, and some extended it into social issues like the environment, race relations or abortion. Or again discussion of students' legal rights at work could lead into their interface with the law as citizens - for example in the field of consumer rights but also in that of more controversial issues such as the 'sus' laws.

Another way in which several interviewees made a conscious effort to gear what they did to the backgrounds of their students was to bring groups from what were then exclusively male trades such as motor mechanics or building crafts together with predominantly female groups such as hairdressers, for example for mutual discussion about future career expectations. This is one example of how, during the period covered in the interviews, gender politics began

to play an increasing part in L/GS practice. Several interviewees commented that most of the staff in L/GS when they started were men, and that this led to situations in which the approaches used were split along gender lines.

Some of the women interviewees also saw themselves as feminist role models, who thereby presented a different way of life to students, and with the young women in particular demonstrated a wider range of choices than they might otherwise have envisaged, as well as generating enhanced levels of confidence. For example, Viv Thom points out how young women on hairdressing courses in the Sheffield college where she taught came to realise that they were good at the organising, planning and presenting aspects of communication exercises done there in L/GS, and thus perceived that they had skills other than those required for their trade. This could also develop into consideration of sexism, thereby opening up new lines of thought amongst both male and female students. (L/GS lecturers also looked for analogous ways of encouraging white students to think twice about respects in which 'commonsense' attitudes that they held were racist.)

Another way in which L/GS teachers encouraged students to think about controversial issues was through role plays and simulation games, which allowed exploration of controversial issues in a manner that encouraged students to express views from the standpoint of the role they were playing rather than from their personal perspective. Madeline Hall described her use of a simulation which required students to represent people trying to make a living from fishing, in which the teacher manipulates the game by holding all the cards without the students knowing:

I played it with British Telecom engineers and for the first time I was seriously challenged . . . There was a woman in the group, she was the only woman, but she organised the rest into a union to take me on. I was really struggling. It went over three weeks this game - you had to buy boats and lobster pots and see what the weather was like. And on the last week I had a delegation of engineering teachers - 'Look, sell the bloody boat, will you! They keep talking about it!' Which was great.

Jerry Thomas describes a simulation that was focused on 'health and safety [at] work issues and somebody had to be the works manager, somebody the representative of the workforce, and to decide what to do if there'd been an issue at work'.

Other examples came from outside sources, such as Starpower (concerned with competitiveness and class), and include 'fishbowl' role plays as mentioned by Guido Casale, where one group observes another and feeds back their evaluation. Another group decision-

making game was the 'NASA' scenario, in which students had to imagine that they were stranded on the moon with a limited number of items which they were required to rank in order of usefulness. They did this in three stages, first as individuals, then in small groups, and finally as a whole class. This often involved noisy discussion, but encouraged them to think about how people learn from each other and how such discussions can be organised to produce beneficial outcomes.

Another change that took place during the period covered by the interviews is that it became easier not only to show films but also to record television programmes for use in class, and eventually to involve students in making videos.

Jane Gould used programmes such as *Eastenders* to discuss social issues like single parenthood. Others, for example David Kear, used films to explore political issues, such as race, class and gender, and/or as "a stimulus to talk about something - possibly a current affairs issue" (Viv Thom). There were some films such as Peter Watkins's *The War Game* which were shown every year, sometimes provoking controversy and complaint from employers. Viv Fraser, a lecturer who worked at Tottenham College, set out some of the issues that arose with showing films as follows:

. . . because of the challenges [in teaching L/GS], I think, there was a tendency, then, to turn it into entertainment . . . Hence the reliance on film . . . I was slightly worried about what we were doing there, because we were showing the films, and we [the teachers] were seeing the films many, many times, so we were beginning to deconstruct film, understand moving into media studies, whereas for the students of course they were seeing it once, and they were not able to take that on really, because it was just getting the story or whatever. Or we were using film to support the issues that we were dealing with. And I felt there were lots of contradictions there with using the media, that we were showing something as a mirror to the world and then on the other hand we were talking about media as not being a mirror to the world but actually something that could give a false image of what was going on - the early stages of media studies. So we were trying to have our cake and eat it, I felt, a bit, because we were using film as evidence but also critiquing the nature of film as evidence.

Also, as portable video equipment became available, some staff organised students to make their own films. Talking about how 'the arena of a negotiated classroom discussion' that was central to L/GS 'gave the students a voice, which they possibly didn't have

elsewhere, or an opportunity to explore their voice a little bit', David Crabtree, referring to Harlow College, added that 'I thought that was most useful when I got things like video cameras and did a bit of filming, or started, you know, getting them to collect their own stories'.

Throughout the period, however, some L/GS teachers continued to use literature-derived material to stimulate student engagement. For example, Graham Taylor read poetry by Kipling, Shelley, Browning and Ginsburg to his building and automobile students, and, after they had watched a television programme about the Mersey poets, got them to write their own poems. He sent some of these to Roger McGough who 'wrote back this ecstatic letter, saying how wonderful it was to receive this work, and how it made his television series worthwhile to know that there were auto mechanics in Willesden who were so enthusiastic about poetry'.

Beryl Pratley, then at Acton College, got students to write 'their version of Macbeth set in their own environment' (based on a film version and their school experience) which eventually convinced some students that 'actually [Shakespeare] was better than they thought and they quite enjoyed it', while at Carshalton Pam Stevens organised her students to complete a partially written play about a young woman getting pregnant, writing their own ending and presenting it to one another. Matthew Simpson describes how in Sheffield "George Orwell's story 'Shooting an Elephant' just went down fantastically with every student and I never read that to any group who didn't listen open mouthed", As well as developing sessions in which he brought in a variety of newspapers to examine the way the same story was told in different ways and with different emphases, Simpson also used the lyrics of pop songs such as the Beatles' 'She's leaving home' as a link to previous discussions about saving up to get married, describing this as: "sort of literary criticism and a bit of cultural analysis but mainly it was sort of enjoyment and provoking discussion".

Some L/GS staff also used activities that allowed them to address 'second order' issues - that is, to encourage students to think about thinking. Peter Salisbury, for example, used 'optical illusions to talk about the way that we see the world around us', and the Asch halo test, in which two groups described what they thought was the same person but where one subgroup had been told that the person concerned was 'warm' and the other that s/he was 'cold', by this means exploring prejudice and stereotyping. At Tottenham College, two lecturers attempted to use students' interest in logic problems and puzzles to teach reasoning, and one of them developed this into questionnaires based on sets of statements that might be made about controversial areas or 'points of strain'

in the students' world view which they were: 'invited to agree or disagree [with] or express uncertainty about', thereby encouraging them to reflect on their own commonsense. Influenced by the work of the anthropologist Mary Douglas on avoidance behaviour, the same lecturer describes getting students to list three food items that they personally found too disgusting to eat, writing these items on the board, and inviting the class as a whole to look for patterns and regularities in what were supposedly subjective lists. At Brooklands College, Brian Marshall got students to look at

. . . thought processes which were referred to as 'tools of thought', and included: 'What was fact?'; 'What was belief?'; 'What was opinion?'; 'What was dogma?'; and 'How do you use those constructs in arguments?'

Lastly, many interviewees talk about the value in terms of student engagement of going out of the college environment on visits, for example to magistrates' courts as part of sessions on law and rights, and to galleries, museums and other environments that they might never otherwise have experienced, such as Kenwood House or Offa's Dyke.

It can be seen, then, that the absence of externally imposed assessment enabled some L/GS staff at least to approach the formation of the curriculum from a variety of directions and perspectives. In many cases, they were able to use their students' initial interests to broaden the scope of the subject matter those students would otherwise experience in colleges, and make connections across different aspects of their students' lives, from work to personal, social, cultural and conceptual issues. Some of the examples given here also testify to the way staff negotiated an underlying tension within L/GS teaching between, on the one hand, 'functional' requirements such as communication skills and report writing, and, on the other, social and conceptual topics. In doing so those lecturers arguably went some way towards demonstrating that an approach which consciously integrates these areas with one another may be more productive than one which attempts to abstract 'skills' from the problems of knowledge and understanding that in reality inescapably accompany them.

* Jonathan's previous article is in the *PSE* occasional publication *The Real Radical Education? Liberal and General Studies with vocational students in UK colleges 1950-1990 as revealed through interviews with practitioners who taught it*, Bulletin 2, November 2018, pp8-20. Both this and Bulletin 1 are on the website www.post16educator.org.uk, or for paper copies of both please email cwaugh1@btinternet.com.