

Talk on the Liberal and General Studies Project given at TELL event, Oxford College, 19 November 2018

1. The L/GS Project

Initiated in 2013 by former L/GS practitioners

Only funding: £300 in 2013 from Raymond Williams Foundation

Interviews recorded with 14 women and 38 men who were former L/GS practitioners

Interviewees taught L/GS at 60 institutions across England

16 interviewees started teaching L/GS in the 1960s, 30 in the 1970s, 7 in the 1980s.

Each interview took form of oral history-style conversation structured round 12 questions.

2. What was Liberal and General Studies?

'Liberal Studies' and 'General Studies' (L/GS) were terms most widely used to refer to a curricular element that existed across UK further - and some higher - education institutions between early 1950s and about 1990.

Thousands of teachers and hundreds of thousands of students took part in it.

Characteristically consisted of a one or one-and-a-half hour slot in college day of young people 'released' from work on one day a week (or equivalent by block release) to follow technical (or other vocational) courses,

Remainder of their college time spent on work-related material taught by specialist vocational staff.

L/GS 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 not formally assessed, let alone examined.

Often pushed L/GS lecturers into radically experimental practice, and, sometimes, thinking.

3. Interviewees overwhelmingly positive about L/GS

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;

Helping students to become more confident and articulate;

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;

Fostering students' individual and collective capacity to change themselves.

4. Changes to L/GS from mid 1970s

4.1 Craft-level students

Eg, 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, H&V

In first half of 70s, movement developed within ILEA FE service to replace GS with craft level students with courses in communication skills.

This movement strongly promoted by ILEA inspectorate.

Mid-70s: main craft exam board CGLI piloted Certificate in Communication Skills (CGLI 772) based on this practice in ILEA

Assessed via centrally set and marked assignments and multi-choice test

GS with craft students in most ILEA colleges replaced entirely by 772.

This then marketed by CGLI Gen Ed Dept across country.

From late 70s, then, GS depts and practitioners across country faced with dilemma as to whether to stick with old-style GS with craft students or adopt 772 or what?

772 widely adopted.

4.2 Technician-level students

Refers to apprentices being prepared for supervisory roles, or other roles requiring theoretical as well as practical expertise

Following 1969 Haslegrave Report Technician Education Council (TEC) set up

Adopted overall framework based on Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives in psycho-motor, cognitive and affective domains

Renamed GS 'General and Communication Studies' (G&CS')

Made it compulsory 15 per cent of course time

Graded

Students must pass to get overall qualification

But units to be college devised and assessed, subject to moderation by

TEC moderator for that programme (eg Engineering, Building, Science etc)

Units to be expressed in behavioural objectives in cognitive and affective domains and submitted to relevant TEC panel for approval or otherwise.

TEC courses, including G&CS, widely introduced across colleges from 1974.

4.3 BTEC

BEC set up alongside TEC. Courses started in colleges 1978. 'People and Communication' rather than G&CS.

1983-84 Merger of BEC and TEC to form BTEC (now part of Edexcel/Pearson)

BEC-derived model of gen ed imposed across all courses

G&CS therefore replaced by Common Skills and Core Themes assessed through programme of Integrative Assignments, ie assignments that were overwhelmingly technical in content.

4.4 Outcome by 1990

LS/GS effectively wiped out.

Succeeded from early 1990s by narrower forms of non-liberal gen. ed., successively: Core Skills, Key Skills and Functional Skills.

Interviewees' most common answer to 'When did you finish teaching L/GS?' was 'some time in late 1980s' / 'by 1990'.

5. Project Question 11

Interviewees asked: If you have a view, why do you think L/GS ceased to exist?

Will now say something about responses to this question.

3 did not answer. (One too astonished to suggest reason.)

Most people gave combination of several reasons.

Single most commonly cited reason: 'pressure for Comms/Basic Skills' (13 people)

After that, 'demand for work relevance' and 'cost-cutting' (9 people each)

8 people gave 'Thatcher' or 'Thatcherism' as reason.

6 people cited fact of L/GS being 'not assessed', or 'did not produce measurable outcomes'.

6 people cited 'vocational lecturers' opposition'.

6 people referred to TEC, BEC and/or BTEC specifically.

6 people in various ways referred to underlying economic change, eg 'de-industrialisation', 'destruction of craft apprenticeships'. technical courses reduced / taken away' (ie from colleges), or just 'unemployment'.

1 person referred to HMI withdrawing support for L/GS.

Lastly, a number of people gave reasons internal to L/GS practice:

6. Factors for which individual L/GS teachers could be blamed

'Leftwing teachers evangelising'

Discredited by film showing

Cynical GS teachers

7. Factors that reflect demanding nature of L/GS teaching

Hard to teach craft students.

L/GS in general hard work.

GS teachers giving up (ie because L/GS too demanding or because L/GS

seen to be under threat).

8. Factors arguably due to weaknesses of management or leadership at range of levels

L/GS depended too much on quality of individual teachers

Lack of quality assurance within it, hence too uneven

Focus on comms skills partly caused partly by previous neglect of this area by L/GS 'community' as a whole

L/GS never properly integrated with other course material

Colleges had too narrow a view of what business wanted

HMI withdrew support.

6. What ex-L/GS lecturers did post-1990

Some:

- adapted to narrower forms of gen. ed.
- took redundancy
- did 'academic side shuffle' (moved gradually into teaching own degree subject, eg as A-level)
- retrained as IT lecturers
- pursued other specialisms, eg TU Studies, Media Studies, FE teacher ed.
- became managers, incl. principals
- became consultants, inspectors etc
- took redundancy, early retirement etc.

7. Conclusion

Any plan to reintroduce valid form of gen. ed. across FHE now would need to take account of this history.

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