
Vocational FHE now: what would valid general education within it be like?

Article version of a talk given by Colin Waugh at a PSE zoom session on 28 April 2022 (notes added to clarify specific points).

Between 1969 and 2013 I taught general education under different headings to students on vocational courses in four FE colleges (1). However, I'm speaking here about the period between 1969 and about 1980.

During this period most of my time was spent teaching what was called General Studies (GS) to mainly craft level students on day and block release from employers in the engineering and mechanical services sectors. At Brixton College for FE in 1969 I was based for most of the time in the Technical Department and taught GS to block release telecommunication and electrical technician students. Then at Tottenham College of Technology between 1970 and the early 1980s I mainly taught GS to day-release craft level students on mechanical, fabrication and electrical engineering and plumbing courses, and to block release students on gasfitting and heating/ventilating courses. All these students were male industrial workers, mostly 16-19 year olds, in unionised industrial sectors (2). (Young women, too, for example commerce, nursery nursing and hairdressing students, did GS - or the equivalent under other names).

The awarding body for all the students to whom I taught GS was the City and Guilds of London Institute (CGLI). CGLI required colleges to provide an hour or so of GS per day of release to students on its courses, but did not require them to pass an assessment in this to get their technical qualification. My timetable often contained 20 or so different groups.

There were about 500 colleges in the country then, and at any point between the early 1960s and around 1980 between about 5,000 and 10,000 lecturers like myself would have been teaching GS. During this period, then, hundreds of thousands - if not millions - of part-time students took part in GS classes. Most GS teachers were humanities or social science graduates (3). We had to devise for ourselves content and methods of teaching and learning that would get and keep students engaged, and in trying to do so we were of course not in a position to shelter behind exam requirements. Discussion formed a big element of what most GS teachers did.

GS was probably more often successful than has been generally recognised, but teaching it could be extremely demanding. Arguably this was because at a national level it had been set up on too half-hearted

a basis (4). Some of the students who resisted it may have done so because they perceived this, and saw the potential of a general education which they were being denied. In any case, the whole thing was destroyed by the Thatcherite changes to production that were implemented from 1979 (5). Nevertheless, it's also arguable that vocational courses that do not include general education in some valid form are inescapably miseducational (6). With the experience of GS in mind, then, what might be involved in attempts to introduce such a valid form of general education on vocational courses in FE now? This experience suggests that there are a number of requirements that would need to be met.

First, this element would need to be a stable requirement of vocational course awarding bodies - that is, they must not have the power to scrap it (7). Secondly, it would need to form part of students' timetables throughout the full length of each vocational course (8). Thirdly, it must not be classable as remedial. (This implies that it would need initially to be introduced at level 3 and above, and extended to other levels from there (9).)

The intended general education element would need to be developed at national, regional and local levels in dialogue with specialist vocational course tutors. It would need to have a content of its own that would be independent of - while also capable of being integrated with - the content of other course units (10). This independent content would need to be specified in terms of knowledge, skill and - above all - understanding (11), and would need to have its own principles of progression.

In terms of teaching and learning methods, a revived general education course element would need to be centred on dialogue, both amongst students and between students and teachers, on project work, and on problem posing and solving, as distinct from and opposed to instruction in some combination of 'academic' subjects.

As regards assessment, such an element would need to be set up so that students could pass their vocational course as a whole only if they passed the general education element within it. In parity with other course elements that element would need to be graded, rather than being something which students can only

pass or fail. For these purposes it would need to be referenced according to criteria (12) that every general education teacher understands and can explain, especially to students, to parents, to specialist vocational staff and to employers. (In particular, its nature and purpose would need to be explained to students, preferably by vocational course tutors, while they are deciding whether or not to enrol on any given programme.) Within this, however, it would need to have its own distinctive assessment procedures (13) that would form an integral part of overall course assessment.

The proposed general education course element would need to be taught by people who understand and are committed to it (14), and who are given time to develop it, and to update and where necessary make innovations in its theory and practice (15). On top of this, it would need to have a second-order teacher education element built into it (16), so that eventually a body of general education teachers could emerge from amongst its former students after they have spent some time as workers in the relevant employment sector.

In conclusion, it can be argued that no issue being discussed on the left now is more important than this question of general education with FHE students on vocational courses (17).

Notes

1. These headings included Liberal Studies, General and Communication Studies, Common Skills and Core Themes via a Programme of Integrative Assignments, Core Skills, Key Skills and Functional Skills English.

2. For purposes of this presentation I left out the teaching and curriculum development that I did (ie alongside GS with craft students) in relation to technician level students after the introduction of the Technician Education Council awarding body courses, starting in 1974. I consider that the experience of this work generated insights that are crucial to the argument about general education expressed in this article, but to explain these properly would require a separate article.

3. In contrast, that is, to many of those who taught the Liberal Studies that preceded GS, who were drawn from a wider variety of backgrounds.

4. For example by senior civil servants in the Department of Education, most of whom were remote from the day-to-day situation in FE colleges.

5. These changes included the offshoring of many industrial processes, the introduction of new management techniques, technological changes aimed at marginalising the capacity of workers, the attack on unions, and their exclusion from participation in decisions about industrial training, hence the ending of

time-served apprenticeships in many trades.

6. My argument here does not exclude the possibility that vocational staff do sometimes provide forms of general education (for example, discussions of social issues) on an informal basis within courses where there is no explicit provision for general education. (The term 'miseducation' may have been first used by the US writer Carter G. Woodson in his 1937 book, *The Miseducation of the Negro*.)

7. For example, the drive by CGLI during the 1970s to promote the 'free-standing' Certificate in Communication Skills Level 1 and 2 as a replacement for GS.

8. The alternative is that general education comes to be regarded as something that can be done once for all at a specified stage, rather than a dimension whose integration at all stages is a necessary condition of a vocational course's validity.

9. It should go without saying that, while of course recognising that there are differences in individual students' prior attainments, we reject any notion that there are 'level 2 students', 'level 3 students' and the like.

10. Whatever relationship may develop at the level of day-to-day practice, this integration would need to be organised also at the level of each overall programme run by a college. Therefore any attempt by awarding bodies to promote forms of general education as 'free-standing', as for example was the case with CGLI Communication Skills in the 1970s (see note 7 above) and with Functional Skills more recently would have to be excluded.

11. The inclusion of understanding implies an obligation on the part of general education to develop students' capacity to think about thinking. Ultimately it concerns the attempt to help students develop within themselves the capacity referred to by William Blake when he wrote that 'every honest man [sic] is a prophet' - that is an ability to see the forces behind the surface of everyday life and explain to others the consequences of allowing them to go unchecked.

12. If, as in the proposed model, the setting of criteria is determined by grassroots teachers in regular contact with - and hence so far as practicable answerable to - students, it potentially constitutes a democratic alternative to norm referencing.

13. The teaching and learning methods intrinsic to general education as envisaged here would require assessment procedures centred on research, project

work, presentation, discussion, development work, and evaluation by students of their own progress which would be sharply different from conventional exams, phased tests and the like.

14. As distinct, that is, from teachers mainly involved in other types of work who are making up their timetables with an hour of two of general education.

15. This would need to include access to labour market intelligence.

16. This would require a methodology in which students are regularly encouraged to consider how they would explain to a third party things they are learning or have just learnt in the general education component of their course.

17. The intention here is not to claim that the question of general education within vocational FE courses is more important than, say, tackling climate change. It's rather to claim that a movement which sets out to bring about a lasting solution to issues like climate change has no chance of succeeding unless it includes within its ranks people whose life chances depend on the presence or absence of valid FE, one determinant of which is the integration within it of valid general education.

The struggle to bring about such inclusion needs to be understood as part of a broader drive to develop and implement a 'pedagogy' (that is, a theory and practice of teaching and learning) 'of' (which is to say by and for) the exploited (that is, waged workers and their dependents, as distinct from - though of course not opposed to - 'the oppressed'). Such a 'pedagogy' would need to operate both within publicly provided FHE and in parallel with it (for example via education movements amongst grassroots union activists along the lines of those built by UK workers in the early 1900s).

Lastly, the strategy proposed in this article would be worse than useless unless its supporters also organise themselves to prevent senior managers and the like coopting superficial aspects of it and imposing these on FHE from above, thereby confronting working-class students with yet another set of hoops to jump through.



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