

# Peter Jackson's vision

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Peter Jackson died, in his late seventies, in early February this year. *Post-16 Educator* exists at least partly because of an initiative that he proposed and helped to build. An attempt will be made here to explain the context in which he did this, and to argue that it matters more now than ever.

I first met Peter in the summer of 1971, at a meeting of the North London branch of the Association for Liberal Education (ALE), of which he was the chairperson. At that time I was a lecturer in General Studies (GS) at Tottenham College of Technology in the London Borough of Haringey, and Peter was a GS lecturer at Southgate Technical College in the next-door borough of Enfield. (Colleges then were under local education authority control.)

Most FE students then were young people 'released' by their employers, for example in engineering, construction, commerce, hairdressing or nursery nursing, to attend a local college on one day a week, and there follow a job-related course. Exam boards such as City and Guilds required colleges to certify that each student had participated in an hour or so of non-examined, non-technical GS per day of their attendance, but gave colleges only a general indication as to what should be done in this hour.

The ALE nationally had been set up in 1961, mainly by people with management responsibility for GS. It held national council and regional branch meetings, liaised with the then Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) and provided individual members with a monthly bulletin and quarterly journal. Many colleges were corporate members of the ALE, and basic grade GS teachers in these colleges could attend its annual residential conference, whether they were individual members of ALE or not. This meant they could talk to one another across institutional boundaries.

Some colleges in those days had a dedicated department which serviced vocational departments with GS, but most provided such servicing through a GS section based in a business studies or similar department. As far as I know, Southgate College had a GS department when Peter was there, whereas at Tottenham there was an arrangement by which each of the five vocational departments had

its 'own' GS teachers. This so-called 'Tottenham system' was effectively unique.

In April 1972 Lauri Say, a very experienced, charismatic and forceful GS teacher, was appointed to a department at Tottenham, and soon after was put in charge of coordinating the work of the college's fourteen or so departmentally dispersed full time GS teachers. Lauri got to know Peter through the ALE, and in September 1973 would have been mainly responsible for appointing him as head of the GS section in Tottenham's Science Department.

From this point on, Peter and I were colleagues, and soon after this I also joined him as an officer of the North London ALE. Meanwhile, Lauri Say's approach to GS was having an inspirational effect, certainly on me, and I think probably on most other GS teachers at Tottenham, including Peter, who, when Lauri left in July 1974, succeeded to his role of cross-college GS co-ordinator.

The open-ended nature of GS made it demanding for basic grade staff, partly because of scepticism on the part of some vocational tutors, and partly because of the pressures it imposed on each lecturer to generate material that would hold students' interest. Over the next year or two, while Peter and I worked together on the merger of the North London ALE with the Central London Region, we both began to feel that the ALE was insufficiently geared to the needs of grassroots practitioners.

Around the same time, at a national level, the recently established Technician Education Council (TEC) began to require each college to devise its own programme of General and Communication Studies (G&CS). Such programmes had to conform to a version of Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, and we were required to introduce assessments structured by this, which students must pass to complete their qualification, and through which, subject to external moderation, we had to grade their progress. At Tottenham, Peter and I, along with two other departmental GS section heads, all of us practitioners with full teaching timetables, had to devise and negotiate with four vocational department heads a cross-college G&CS TEC submission.

It was against this background that Peter made in early 1977 his key suggestion: that independently

of ALE we should try to get GS teachers across surrounding colleges to meet regularly and develop common teaching strategies and materials.

By chance, the Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative brought out at this moment Arnold Wesker's short book *Words as Definitions of Experience*. Through the ALE, Peter and I organised a meeting under the title 'Can words become weapons in General Studies?', attended by around a hundred people, at which Wesker spoke. Through this meeting we recruited GS teachers from several colleges to the group (shortly afterwards named General Studies Workshop [GSW]) which Peter had proposed.

However, while we were doing this, Peter was replaced as college GS coordinator at Tottenham by an outside appointee, and through this man we belatedly became aware of developments in the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) FE service, in which, with the support of the ILEA staff inspector Eric Bourne, GS was being replaced by a narrow form of communication skills teaching that was free-standing with respect to vocational courses and certificated on a pass/fail basis by City and Guilds. We judged that, although Tottenham was outside the ILEA, an attempt would soon be made to impose this certificate on colleges like ours. As a consequence GSW turned its attention to campaigning against what we saw as a threat to GS everywhere.

PSE's roots lie in this struggle. However, one consequence of this activity, exacerbated by the decay of the ALE, was that Peter's vision of shared development was sidelined. In July 1978, he himself left FE, as far as I know for good.

Since the period described above, FE has been changed fundamentally - especially by the abolition of time-served apprenticeships, the dissolution of craft level employment, the offshoring of production, technological change, and the removal of colleges from LEA control. The proportion of adult students, especially of ESOL, is much higher than it was then. Instead of GS being developed into a more sustainable and coherent form of general education of the kind Peter and others at that time were beginning to shape, we now have Functional Skills - a direct descendant of the Communication Skills certificate that we opposed in 1977.

All the more reason, then, why current FE practitioners, supported by those retired lecturers who have not forgotten the past, should organise themselves to reassert control over the curricula and teaching methods on which, now as then, the life chances of millions of working-class people depend.

