

Teaching strategies and materials

Drawing on interviews conducted by the Liberal and General Studies Project, Colin Waugh looks at a key issue that practitioners faced.

This article deals with an aspect of the Liberal and General Studies (L/GS) Project. The project was initiated in September 2013 with three aims: to research the history of L/GS; to interview former practitioners; and to consider the relevance of both these areas to present day FHE. The focus here will be on an aspect of the interviews.

There have been four interviewers, three of them former L/GS practitioners. The interviews have taken the form of oral history-style conversations structured by twelve basic questions. These questions were agreed at a meeting in September 2013, at Huddersfield University. Most interviews so far have lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

Interviews with 57 former LS/GS practitioners have been recorded between 2014 and 2019. All but three of them have been conducted by former practitioners. To date fifteen women and 42 men have been interviewed. There is a fair chance that this ratio reflects the ratio of women to men in the L/GS workforce. Between them, these 57 people taught LS/GS at 64 institutions across England and one in Wales.

19 of those interviewed started teaching L/GS in the 1960s, 31 in the 1970s, and seven in the 1980s. (I have discussed the external changes affecting L/GS during the second half of this period in my article 'The phasing out of Liberal Studies', in *PSE* 95.) Eighteen of the interviewees taught L/GS for between ten and fourteen years, fifteen for between five and nine years, nine for between fifteen and twenty years, seven for less than five years, and six for more than twenty years. While several of those interviewed said they had long-serving colleagues who adopted a cynical attitude to their work, the nature of L/GS does suggest that most people who did it for five or more years as the main element in their timetable had a fairly high level of commitment to it. If so, 52 of the 57 interviewees were thus committed.

To understand the background to interviewees' responses, readers need to be aware that most FE colleges in the period under discussion were called technical colleges or colleges of technology, and typically contained departments providing vocational courses for students on part-time release, usually on one day a week, from employment as apprentices or trainees in such fields as engineering, construction, building services such as gasfitting, plumbing or electrics, commerce, science, hairdressing, motor vehicle, mining, nursery nursing and the like, most of them on courses that required an hour or so of L/GS as a compulsory but non-examined weekly component. In most such colleges these vocational departments were serviced with L/GS teaching either by a specialist L/GS section attached to another department, for example of Commerce, or, less commonly, by an L/GS department in its own right. In a much smaller number of institutions, L/GS lecturers were appointed directly to vocational departments.

The focus here will be on the sixth of the questions used in the interviews, namely, 'Where did the teaching strategies and materials that you used in L/GS come from?' Around 50 of the interviewees included in their response to this question a statement to the effect that they devised their own materials, most commonly on their own, but sometimes in collaboration with L/GS colleagues in the same college. With this in mind, let us look at some issues that lie behind this question, and which may not be obvious to people who have not themselves been directly involved in L/GS work.

First, to teach L/GS required not that you just find the best way to put across an agreed content, but rather that you generate that content yourself through your interaction with the students, or, as one interviewee, Steve Stallard, speaking about South East London Technical College (SELTEC) in

the early 1980s said: '... at the early stages you actually devised your own curriculum.' In doing so, however, you had to base yourself on the kind of thing students were - or could get - interested in, which of course might vary from one student group to another and under the impact of outside factors beyond your control. I quote here some things that interviewees said when asked about strategies and materials which reflect this pressure:

'Well, basically, anywhere that you could find materials which could attract the students' attention and interest.' [George Chambers, referring to Barnsley College in the early and mid 1960s]

'Initially they came from whatever I thought I could get away with, in terms of working with the students.' [David Crabtree, referring to Kelsterton College/N.E. Wales Institute in 1972-77]

'... from whatever you could grab ... you had to develop things with the student groups.' [Barry Fyfield, referring to Chelmsford College in 1975-77]

'You had to try and get them interested.' [Colin Hines, referring to Paddington College in 1969-72]

'The charisma, the drive of the individual teacher and whether you had credibility with the kids.' [David Ransom, referring to Granville College in Sheffield during the 1970s]

'It was more or less what you were interested in and what you thought ... you might be able to interest the students in.' [Peter Salisbury, referring to South Kent College of Technology in the mid 1970s]

'You went in with a number of strategies that were intended to elicit from them the things that they were interested in that you could draw on.' [Jonathan Simmons, referring to, successively, South Downs College, Portsmouth College, Hounslow Borough College and South London College in the period 1977-1986]

'I had to work out stuff for myself that I could do which students would accept.' [the present writer, referring to Brixton College for FE in 1969 and Tottenham College of Technology from 1970]

Secondly, as these quotes also indicate, your ability to do the job depended to a large extent on whether you were able consistently to find ways to

catch and hold the students' interest. Some other responses from interviewees that reflect this requirement include:

'... there were no real materials at all there, you had to develop things with the student groups. I mean I just did things off the cuff with some. [With] others, it was looking for materials and putting programmes together.' [Barry Fyfield, referring to Chelmsford College in the 1970s]

'... basically it was trying to find out what the students were interested in, and then starting from there.' [Jane Gould*, referring to a college in Nottingham from 1979 to the mid 1980s]

'I used to, really, try and vary the topic. They'd go from the basis of Israel being formed through to flying saucers the next week. ... So I was always trying to just sort of - it was basically to keep them interested.' [Colin Hines, referring to Paddington College in the 1960s]

'... a lot of it revolved on me and how well I was able to enthuse the students and communicate to them. And of course I got them sharing ideas between themselves and that sort of thing so it didn't all react upon me.' [Keith Sellars, referring to Woolwich College between 1963 and 1967]

'... there was no bank of teaching materials. There might have been a bit of using other people's materials ... But basically you were on your own. And so the ideas about what you might do stemmed from your own experience, what you judged the students might find interesting, and of course useful, not perhaps in the sense of their courses being useful, but in their life in general.' [Mike Ward, referring to Ashton under Lyme, later Tameside, College in 1966-68]

L/GS teachers, then, were constantly under pressure to develop - and to keep on expanding and updating - a repertoire of things they could do with students. This situation could be bewildering, even to a confident person. For example, referring to his impressions on arriving at Kelsterton, David Crabtree said:

'... there wasn't really an idea of what actually needed to be taught. There seemed to be an ongoing discussion. Some of the technical departments wanted us to focus very much on things like report writing ... , and another member of staff that I worked

with wanted to do more exciting things like why the pyramids are where the pyramids are, or ley lines or stuff like that.'

Or again, speaking of Harlow College as it was when he joined in January 1983, Jerry Thomas said:

'... when I first came in from a secondary school, I thought it was quite disorganised. It seemed to me to be very, very open. ... It was very much left to the individual to make up, to decide what kind of delivery they wanted to give.'

It could also be stressful. For example, as one interviewee, a woman working at Brooklands College in Surrey in the early 1970s, put it: '... you might be driving in to work thinking "What am I going to do with them?"' Lastly, it can be seen that to be an L/GS teacher demanded that you possess a capacity to tolerate a good deal of uncertainty as to what might happen in any given lesson.

However, several of those interviewed also looked back on this situation as positive. For example:

'I guess for most of it one would have made stuff up ... I can't even remember being given a curriculum document but quite clearly there was a fair amount of freedom to do what you wanted to do.' [James Avis, referring to a college in Wolverhampton in the second half of the 1970s]

'I would read a blue Penguin on something. I can remember reading something by the Club of Rome on limits to growth, and ... I would then devise a series of six lessons and discussions on [inaudible], ecology or environmental studies, pollution ... And I was, sort of, you know, it came out of nowhere. There was no syllabus. I wasn't told to do environmental studies.' [Malcolm Clare, referring to Chiswick Polytechnic, actually an FE college, in the 1960s]

'... one was given a great deal of scope to be creative, and to try to provide education within that remit.' [Bill Dabbs, referring to Chance Technical College in Smethwick in the early 1960s]

'... basically I put together a programme ... which was: economics for life, gender and sexuality, race and racism, trade unions and workplace politics ... That's normally where I would start with all my young workers, asking them about pay and conditions, trying to get something out of the dynamics of the workplace.' [David Kear, referring to Havering College in the late 1970s]

'They were personally devised, with the help of a few dead philosophers.' [Brian Marshall, referring to Brooklands College over a long period starting in 1973]

'In the main you did your own thing. I tried to incorporate anything political or sociological - eg why is our society as it is?' [Karen Nadin, referring to Shirecliffe College in Sheffield, where she started in 1981]

'... it was very easy for us to invent our own materials, which I did. ... I can't remember exactly but I'm fairly certain I would have done quite a lot on the position of women and the women's movement at that time.' [Penny Noel, referring to Tameside College, where she started in 1974]

'Initially, in the non-examined City and Guilds courses, there was a lot of opportunity to work with the students and find what sort of experiences they thought would help their education, and it was really quite educationally focused. As far as I was concerned the sky was the limit, and we could work out together what sort of things we were happy in doing.' [Geraldine Thorpe, referring to the London College of Furniture where she started in 1977]

'In those days there wasn't - I see it as a positive thing - there wasn't like a national syllabus that you had to follow. There were criteria that you had to meet that were published by examining boards ... But you were able to design your own materials, which we tended to do collectively.' [Ken Hyam, referring to what may well have been the biggest L/GS department in the UK, at Willesden College of Technology, where he started in 1972]

'I'm sure that we shared ideas and talked about teaching approaches, and I remember that we had meetings, but I think one of the great things about General Studies was that you could actually develop what you wanted to do and then do it. Perhaps that is not always a good thing but I think that there was a lot of integrity around that kind of teaching and the people who were doing it. ... it meant that you had the freedom to work with a group of students and start from where they were and develop an interest and develop ideas and what was really great was that sometimes you would get a student who would really take off on something.' [Viv

Thom, referring to a college in Sheffield where she started in 1981]

Finally, Barbara Hill, referring to the early 1970s at the same college in Nottingham described above by Jane Gould, said:

‘... as I remember, there was a cupboard with lots of General Studies resources, and I found they were not very helpful. So although we had lots of boxes with stuff in them and so on, when it actually came to the reality, I could very rarely find anything that I could use. And luckily, because this was the time of General Studies, we were all free to do our own thing, we were all free to... really, within a very loose framework, to develop our own ideas, our own courses... It was extremely stressful, because of the problems that we were combating. But it was also very fulfilling to be able to devise your own course within that framework.’

The last three of these responses came from people who clearly had a high level of commitment to L/GS and were well capable of generating their own practice. They reflect the fact that in some colleges practitioners, including some who were line managers of L/GS as well as themselves teaching it, collaborated to make L/GS more coherent. Kevin Donovan described the situation at Old Swan, a college in Liverpool geared mainly to telecommunication and other engineering courses, where he started in 1969, as follows:

‘... thankfully, in those days there was much less neurosis about assessment and inspections... it was much more collegiate... there probably was a City and Guilds syllabus somewhere but most of our work was departmentally devised: colleagues, over the years, had built up work schemes and syllabuses, loosely defined, and banks of resource material. And they provided the rough shape for what people did at levels which were largely determined by the course that the students were on and their ages.’

Similarly, describing the practice some years later in the Science Department of a college where L/GS teachers were attached to vocational departments (Tottenham), Viv Fraser said, after describing college-wide initiatives:

‘... within our own department... (eventually there were three of us)... we would organise the term’s work together and then we would try to get things, and we would try to develop things in most cases related to the students’ vocational studies as well. So we would do stuff on science and develop

ideas on that. And then we would rely on materials such as films or speakers. And then it became quite issue-based, really. So there was a combination of published material, self-generated material, and either group work, trying to get them working as a group using various games or role-plays or whatever, or things like films or speakers where it was more issue-based. And the main work was discussion-based actually.’

Or at Stannington College in Sheffield, where she started in 1979, Madeline Hall described how:

‘... there was a rich mine of stuff there that people had put into a shared bank... we held termly development sessions, sometimes one or two days with people maybe deciding on one particular year group or one particular trend and developing resources for that. We used to divide up into groups so that everything got covered over the course of the year. It was well organised’.

However, although such initiatives, whether organised informally by practitioners and/or their line managers or more formally by heads of L/GS departments, may have alleviated the pressures to which those practitioners were subject in their interactions with students, they could not totally abolish them. For example, Dick Booth, formerly a practitioner at Brighton Technical College but referring here to the period in the early 1970s when he was head of a small L/GS department at the then Hertfordshire College of Building in St Albans, said, with respect to L/GS programmes they were providing for block-release gasfitting students:

‘So if you had that group you saw them 12 times and it was a big contract for us - we had to get it right. We didn’t get it right. I’m not sure we knew what to do really. We struggled to find a programme that those students would put up with.’

Similarly, Mary Conway, describing the situation as it existed from 1972 at Willesden College of Technology, said:

‘Actually getting together materials for the students, I would say we did entirely ourselves, and it wasn’t very well done, really. We had a sort of central store of materials which we tried to put together, but they weren’t consistent. Whoever was given time for putting them together didn’t get much time to do it. And I think that was an area where if I could ever go back and revisit it, I would want to see that different, because I think actually customised materials for the students was what we needed.’

Asked whether she thought the materials should have been customised to students' vocational areas, Mary then added: 'In relation to vocational areas, or just addressing where the students were'.

One limitation on the effectiveness of attempts to develop strategies and materials collectively was the structure of the L/GS workforce. There were three broad categories of L/GS lecturer: those who had a full-time tenured post in L/GS and therefore a full timetable of that work; part-time hourly paid staff on short term contracts, some or all of whose hours consisted of L/GS teaching; and teachers of academic or vocational subjects who made up light timetables by doing some L/GS. The involvement of this third group was described - from a favourable perspective - by George Chambers, referring, as hitherto, to Barnsley College in the 1960s, where L/GS servicing for the whole institution was provided by a Department of Commerce and General Education:

'... if there were people in the Department of Commerce and General Education who had an hour or two unfilled with their specialism - perhaps accountancy or law or anything of this kind - they would be drafted [in] to teach Liberal and General Studies. Now while this sounds a hotchpotch it gave a very considerable breadth of approach to what people did, because people taught what they were comfortable with and what they knew, so therefore, as part of the Liberal and General Studies course you could have a little session on accountancy.'

The combination of situations like this, which were fairly common, with situations where a big proportion of L/GS teaching was done by part-timers - that is, people whose circumstances could often make it hard for them either to form a stable relationship with students or to participate in the collective development of programmes and materials - could undermine attempts to develop coherent approaches. For example, a full-time L/GS specialist might devise a body of materials, and, with this, ideas about how those materials should be used. But then on taking over a group he/she might find that a teacher from another field who was making up his/her timetable, or a part-timer under pressure, had already used those materials with that group, often without being aware of the rationale that lay behind them. So given that for L/GS teachers their materials were like tools without which they could not do the job, it's likely that many avoided sharing materials they had originated.

The form in which L/GS had been set up meant also that there were other methodological problems that neither individual creativity nor the collective

development of materials and strategies could solve.

First, the absence from L/GS of the extrinsic motivation to which students were subject in examined parts of their course demanded that there should exist within it a principle of progression, both in terms of long-term aims and in terms of the stages through which those aims might be approached. Moreover, this principle of progression would need to have won the support of the majority of committed practitioners, and to have been one that they could explain convincingly, both to vocational course tutors and to students. Jonathan Simmons hinted at the lack of this when he said:

'... one of the weaknesses that I now identify is that I'm not sure that the students actually knew what they were learning. I felt like I was in a position where I was watching them discuss and debate stuff, and I could see that they were learning things, but I never felt like I'd managed to get to the point where they would say they learnt stuff.'

Secondly, although students often engaged enthusiastically in specific L/GS activities, the absence of such a principle increased still further the pressure on practitioners to find ways of catching their interest at low points in between. But each time you found some approach that did this, you raised the standard you would need to meet the next time, thus locking yourself into a progression that could become hard to sustain.

Thirdly, because L/GS lessons virtually always involved interaction between one teacher and a group of students, and because students' consent to it depended, rightly, on open-ended discussion, the lecturer had regularly to function both as a chairperson of and a participant in such discussion (for example, to move it on when it began to flag or to encourage a quieter student to speak). Therefore you were always in danger of being both referee and player (as well, that is, as being, more often than not, the initiator of the topic itself). This situation could have been avoided only if we had been able to work in pairs.

I believe that given time and more commitment to L/GS on the part of those able to shape policy, we the practitioners could have solved all these problems. But de-industrialisation and Thatcherism, by destroying apprenticeships, shut off this possibility. However, if the L/GS Project can tell enough of the right people about former practitioners' insights, it can help activists now to re-open it.

* 'Jane Gould' is a pseudonym. Ed.