

PSE: from general education to general intellect

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Introduction

The 'renationalisation' of English further education colleges promised in a repeatedly delayed White Paper is also their technicisation. From corporations competing in a market for students and trainees they are to be repurposed to provide skills for an allegedly greened economy with 'vocational' courses that offer hope to school leavers, particularly in a supposedly 'levelling-up' North.

This renationalisation has implications for higher education, which also supposedly serves the economy by promising access to employment for all those undergraduates who take out loans in hopes of more secure and at least 'semi-professional' careers. As a number of universities no less than several colleges are threatened with bankruptcies leading to mergers and increasingly platformed provision, similar impositions of control can be anticipated over HE while those institutions than can will seek to preserve their independence.

Unlike in Scotland and Wales, despite warm words from the employers' Association of Colleges about university-college collaborations in their *College of the Future* report, the two sectors are more than ever conceived separately, instead of being unified in a tertiary sector leading on from primary and secondary. This separation shifts the relation of 'the academic' to 'the vocational' inherent in the 1944 settlement of state education up the age range from 11 to 18+.

The pedagogical project of general education

It also changes the terms of debate in relation to transformations not only of the economy but of

social class, and this is most easily grasped by tracing what has happened to general education. The archive of *Post-16 Educator* and its predecessors affords a unique resource to do this. It records that the original form of general education in FE was Liberal/General Studies. This more or less universal element in vocational provision partly compensated for low levels of literacy in much secondary modern schooling but introduced cultural and political considerations that extended what could be called Labour's pedagogical project for working-class schooling and adult education.

Academic students of science and technology too could appear lacking in these civilising aspects of education for democracy but their courses stressed maths at least. Meanwhile, the growing numbers of arts and social science students in sixth forms, polytechnics and universities were supposedly imbued with the wider knowledge somehow imparted even by their narrowly academic degree programmes often conceived in the worst traditions of English empiricism. Despite student revolt against them, these academic divisions are still imposed today through the National Curriculum, eg. in the persisting separation of A-level arts from sciences for the sole convenience of English universities and their three-year undergraduate degrees.

At least General Studies lecturers were relatively free to choose subject matter for craft students, even if it was not general education in the political sense declared by William Morris to be 'the real business of socialists . . . to impress upon the workers the fact that they are a class, whereas they ought to be society'. Also, by the 1980s there were more young people remaining in schools and colleges, including women moving beyond the secretarial and office training in which they had always constituted the majority in FE. This was part of wider

transformations in the division of labour in society resulting from technological change. Among other things, it led to a new name for the section of NATFHE to which the c.5-10,000 full- and part-time General Studies lecturers were entitled to belong.

From the Journal of NATFHE's General Studies Section to *Post-16 Educator*

The NATFHE General Studies Section was set up in 1980 by GS lecturers. At that time the large numbers of day- or block-release students on vocational courses across the FE sector were required by vocational awarding bodies to do an hour or so per week of general education. For craft level students, eg in engineering or hairdressing, for whom the main awarding body was the City and Guilds of London Institute (CGLI), this had since the 1950s taken the form of General Studies (GS), which was not formally assessed. On the other hand, from the mid 1970s technician level students in fields like engineering, construction and science had been required by their awarding body, the Technician Education Council (TEC), to do General and Communication Studies (G&CS), which was internally assessed but externally validated and moderated. GS lecturers worked across both CGLI and TEC courses.

However, by 1988, the expulsion of young people from employment had led to three changes: first, the Manpower Services Commission introduced Social and Life Skills training across provision for unemployed young people; secondly, CGLI marketed a free-standing qualification in Communication Skills as a replacement for GS with basic grade students; and thirdly, in 1983-84 TEC was merged with the Business Education Council to form BTEC, which then replaced G&CS with Common Skills and Core Themes. Alongside new staff, many former GS lecturers continued to teach in all three of these fields, but GS as a named area was clearly going out of existence. So in 1988 the Section changed its name to NATFHE General Education Section, simultaneously launching *General Educator*, which in 2000 became *Post-16 Educator (PSE)*.

16 remains the end of legally compulsory school attendance but, if this was raised in line with the age of majority and citizenship at 18, many colleges would close with the loss of all the 14+ year-olds who today forsake school for college. For comprehensive schools though it would pose the question of the general education for a democratic society forgotten since Bernard Crick's 1998

citizenship initiative was perverted into 'British values' in schools and colleges. Unlike the US model of high-school graduation, this general foundation could include entitlement to free lifelong learning full- or part-time, in or out of employment. If there were other alternatives, this guarantee would reduce the pressure to go straight to university.

However, new information technology, eroding the division between mental and manual labour and expanding into office and sales, has been steadily applied up the employment hierarchy to deskill, automate and outsource labour. This has undercut the preparation for the professions that was the traditional staple of university provision, disaggregating professions into para- or semi-professions as the modularisation of professional knowledge has become rote-learning for academic certification - especially if undertaken via automatic marking and more datafication of the student experience.

Similarly in a post-industrial and increasingly service-based economy, former craft skills acquired in apprenticeships at work or on day-release to colleges have been reduced to itemised competences for behavioural assessment. Valid general education has thus been squeezed at all levels, and *PSE's* archive records a long rear-guard action to preserve space for it in youth training, sixth forms, colleges, universities and adult institutes, so that it survives only in what survives of youth and community work.

Yet with a reconstituted reserve army of precarious labour in the gig economy below and a managerial elite supporting globalised employers above, the latest class realignment preserves the features of the post-war pyramid but makes it even more imperative to find security in the respectable middle of society. As a result, nearly half of 18+ year-olds are still prepared to take out exorbitant fees and loans in hopes of graduating to secure employment.

In this fluid social situation, previously unaccredited skills and knowledge are emerging as part of a new general intellect or generalised knowledge, and this 'general social knowledge has become a direct force of production', potentially allowing 'the conditions of the process of social life itself' to come under its control (Marx, 1973, 706). In public services this is instanced by the *Democratic Professionalism* described by Jane Lethbridge, common elements of which extend across all occupations. Caring, for instance, is now much more widely recognised, if still not yet adequately remunerated, across the care and health sectors but extends also to the

nurturing of the environment and the survival of society.

Conclusion

Recognising these changes, *PSE* needs to explore new forms of learning that are not evidenced solely by students' literary reflections upon their practice reflecting only levels of literacy. Instead, as Mike Cooley says, 'we need to admit to the significance of tacit knowledge and facilitate and enhance it', because 'It is precisely that interaction between the objective and the subjective that is so important, and it is the concentration upon the so-called objective at the expense of the subjective that is the basis of the concern expressed in respect [also] of [computer] systems design' (1987, 12-13). By contrast, Cooley explains, 'tacit knowledge . . . is acquired through doing, or attending to things' (10). As Collins and Evans define it (2007, 6), 'Tacit knowledge is the deep understanding one can only gain through social immersion in groups who possess it'.

Cooley adds that this may be a part of 'common sense', by which he means 'a sense of what is to be done, held in common by those who will have had some form of apprenticeship and practical experience in the area' (1987, 10). However, this general knowledge, because it is generalised, does not preclude diversity. Thus, apprenticeships that develop creative and recreative specialisations can be celebrated as genuine achievements in performance or other display, like end of art degree shows when wider assessment by fellow students and the public may contribute to the estimation of acknowledged experts.

References

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