

Communication as a Key Skill: what is it for?

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Sometime in the late 1970s, a group of General Studies (GS) lecturers at Tottenham College, including the writer, were in the staff lounge discussing their work. With one exception they were all full time lecturers in their twenties or thirties. The exception, who seemed to me then very old, was John Shanley, a parttime lecturer in GS attached to the Building Department. I was holding forth about something when suddenly he said: 'Yes, but what is it for?' I could not answer him.

Years later I found out that Shanley, who at the time I knew only to have a union background in the furniture industry, had been from 1924-26 a student at the Central Labour College (CLC) in Earls Court. This institution was opened by activists after the strike at Ruskin College in Oxford in 1909. Part of a national network - the Plebs League - which ran classes in economics and philosophy for tens of thousands of people across the country, it embodied the fight for working class collective self education independent of the state or voluntary sector. When Shanley asked me, then, to say what GS was for, he was implicitly judging it against the CLC, and judging people like me against the miners and railway-workers who built the Plebs League.

In trying to answer Shanley's question for the equivalent to GS now - Key Skills - we must distinguish between what this is for, on the one hand, for those in power, and, on the other, for us - the workers in it and the working class people who are its students.

Clearly one reason why those in power put some of the money they deduct from wages into providing state education is that modern production demands a workforce that is literate, numerate, able to use IT etc. But a central function of state education, including Key Skills, is also to secure the acceptance by those over whom that power is exercised of assumptions that reduce our capacity to resist. There are essentially three such assumptions: that the relation between theory and practice is unproblematical, such that these are either united or unconnected; that the social order is as it naturally must be, such that your only choice is either to fit yourself into it or fail to do so; and that the individual precedes the collective, such that you either pursue your individual interests, or those of everybody.

These assumptions serve the interests of the ruling class in a social order - capitalism - which has created the

possibility of a decent life for all, but which is also starving millions of people and damaging the environment in ways which must eventually render human life impossible. One section of society, and one only, can alter this: the working class, those who must sell their capacity to work, including those who work as teachers of Key Skills and those who study it. Working class people are, by definition, those who, under capitalism, are the main producers, not only of goods and services but of the social order itself and, within that, of their own subjection to it, and by this productive activity we are constantly changing the world. The question we need to address, then, is whether to go on changing it, as now, unconsciously and individually in the interests of the minority of exploiters, or to change it consciously and collectively in our own interests, which are also the real interests of the majority. Those broader interests, then, demand that the widest possible layer of working class people should become able consistently to think themselves out of the double binds in which the assumptions identified above seek to entangle them. And this in turn means we must develop for each of those assumptions a capacity to take up both sides of the contradiction and incorporate them in a concept that enables us to move beyond it.

Key Skills should first, then, help people to see that theory and practice interact and that this interaction involves struggle. Secondly, it should help them to recognise that the social order is something which they make, and which they can re-make. This in turn entails recognising that you cannot act (as opposed to react) without taking your own activity into account. And thirdly, it should enable them to perceive that it is not the individual or the mass who determine what happens about major issues but groups of people working together. In short, Key Skills needs to be about problem solving, improving own learning and performance, and working with others, thus interpreted, whatever the official titles or specifications. This, then, is what Key Skills should be for *for us*.

Moreover, We need to make the development of Key Skills in this sense a central goal of all education of, by and for working class people. To do so, we must make a start both within colleges, universities and schools, where Communication as a Key Skill offers an opening, and independently, outside them, which at present means

mainly via the internal education of left groups. Work in publicly provided institutions needs to be based on independent practice outside, however limited this may be now by contrast to the 1920s, while independent practice needs to relate critically to state provision. Our own situation illustrates why this approach is necessary.

FE does not stand in the same relation to the interests of working class people as schools and traditional universities do. FE colleges are not vehicles for legally compulsory state education in the way that schools are, while neither they nor the bulk of former polytechnics are tied into the competition for research funding which increasingly turns teaching in traditional HE into a means towards direct **profitmaking**, with research students as wage labourers and professors as entrepreneurs. At the same time, though many of its students are over 19, FE differs from Adult Education by the extent to which it is employment-related and not dependent on volunteers. Therefore FE colleges and most **post-1993** universities are peripheral to the crushing **and/or creaming-off** process to which schools and traditional universities, despite the efforts of many teachers, submit working class people, and largely exempt from the voluntary sector ethos present in much of Adult Education. But even so, these **FHE** institutions in no sense constitute an attempt by the

working class consciously to organise its own education.

On the contrary, the history of FHE, and especially of the general education element within it, illustrates our failure to develop, within ourselves as well as within students, the capacities defined earlier on. If we had begun to do this, the situation would be better than it is, for us, for students and for those who might have become students - that is, for much of the UK working class, and if we do so now it will become better in future. We need, then: to reject the idea that there is something inevitable about the current state of FE and Key Skills within it; to think out, starting from our own **day-to-day** experience, why it is as it is; and to cooperate to change it.

In looking at Key Skills more closely, we must distinguish between **education-in-general** - the totality of teaching and learning - and general education, that which goes beyond the requirements of any particular job or qualification. The three mandatory Key Skills - Communication, IT and Application of Number (AON) - are the form which general education takes at present in FE, as GS was in the 1970s. As **such**, this general education currently forms a domain which, because of the decision to make Key Skills freestanding with respect to vocational courses and the failure to integrate it with academic subjects, is set over against all other **curricular** elements

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there. This opposition is administrative - that is how timetables etc are organised - but also conceptual, in that ability in IT, AON and Communication is presented as worth acquiring in its own right whatever else you are studying and even though you use material from this other study as the vehicle for acquiring it.

However, general education is also a dimension of all taught material. In class society the forms through which education for the majority is made specific - mainly academic subjects on the one hand or vocational courses on the other - both express and promote the interests of the ruling class. In short, they are largely about miseducation, either by the dissemination of material that is false, or by the omission of material that is true, or both. But in order to **miseducate**, capitalist schooling must also include some genuine education, some of which is purely technical (ie it conveys knowledge, understanding or skill that would be needed for production under any feasible social order) and some of which promotes free inquiry, open-ended thinking, **self-organisation** etc, in other words general education. With a few exceptions, those in power see this general education of working class people mainly as something which they must let us have so that we can miseducate ourselves and one another. Their instinct, therefore, is to minimise it, and their conscious policy is to keep it under **control**.

A certain amount of general education takes place informally and without official sanction through the dominant forms themselves (for example, a discussion in a history lesson, problem solving in engineering), and it may also be an **officially** sanctioned element within them, as for example Core Skills was in GNVQs, or a sanctioned activity which runs in a free-standing fashion alongside them, as with Key Skills now. Where it is officially sanctioned, however, the struggle between valid general education and miseducation which takes place within mainstream course elements also takes place within that general education, and in some such cases the miseducation side gets the upper hand. Nevertheless, regardless of how it is organised, general education threatens, if only in potential, to challenge the dominance of miseducation. The crucial issue for us is whether - and, if so, how far - practitioners raise this challenge consciously. The practitioners most likely to do this at present are those concerned with Communication.

In most colleges, IT as a Key Skill is in effect a substitute trade - a body of material which you have to possess if you want to compete for certain kinds of employment and refuse others as unskilled - in short, **vocational**. In contrast, AON is usually taught by lecturers based in maths sections. Behind those lecturers, shaping their perceptions, stand centuries of maths as an academic subject with boundaries, internal hierarchies, and understandings accessible to lay persons only via controlled procedures. In short, because it has not been differentiated from maths in the way its designers hoped, AON is in effect a subject. But although

Communication as a Key Skill may appear to stand in the same relation to English as AON to maths, its history shows that it is a form of general education.

After popular agitation forced the government to grant the vote to sections of working class men in 1867, the former chancellor Robert Lowe led a movement in parliament for compulsory primary education, saying 'I believe it is absolutely necessary to compel our new masters to learn their **letters**'. The 1870 Education Act set up schools to drill working class children in basic reading and writing and calculation, using huge classes, **draconian** inspection, payment by results, pupil teachers, truant officers and the cane. This process is part of our own history as teachers of Communication as a Key Skill. It shapes what we do, even though - and all the more to the extent that - we fail to recognise this. In the intervening period the capitalist class has learnt that it is more efficient to keep state violence out of sight most of the time, but the threat of it ultimately enforces Key Skills just as its use enforced '**letters**', arithmetic etc in earlier times. Along with economic compulsion, state violence, as for example in the threat to deport asylum seekers who fail to learn English, stands behind us.

The emphasis on correctness, common to both '**letters**' (see, for example, the account by the former pupil teacher D.H. Lawrence in *The Rainbow*) and Communication as a Key Skill, is only partly to do with producing a certain kind of labour force. Just as now there are only a few groups of workers, for example some secretaries, legal workers etc, for whom such correctness is a work requirement, so in the late 19th and early 20th century the demand for clerks was not big enough to explain this emphasis. Partly also a measure of output necessary to a **payment-by-results** system, its main purpose was to separate those who were to become junior administrators for the capitalist class from those who were to be administered - in short, to cream-off the former so that they could help to crush the latter. Not tied to any specific occupation or academic field, '**letters**' was a form of officially sanctioned, **free-standing** general education.

For the preparation of a slightly higher stratum of administrators, on the other hand - the teachers - Lowe, with others, invented a subject: English Literature - that is, a body of knowledge centred on a canon of writings, provided with an ancestry in Early and Middle English, Old Norse etc, and linked in its ethos both to British imperialism and to the anti-instrumental - and in part anti-industrial - values urged by such thinkers as Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin. So whereas '**letters**' aimed at discouraging reading, ideas, thought etc among the majority, English Literature aimed to encourage these things (of course within a field judged to be safe) amongst a minority, in order to help them feel superior. So although teachers have regularly striven to liberalise '**letters**' within statutory schooling, to turn it into English, they have always done so, even during the **progressivist 1960s** and

70s, against the grain of official policy, and there have always remained at bottom two different and opposed (but therefore also complementary) entities: 'letters' or 'reading and writing' or Communication on the one hand, a form of general education; and 'English', a subject, linked to literature, on the other - if you like, then, a stick for one section of the working class, the majority, and a carrot for another, much smaller, section.

So Communication as a Key Skill is a reincarnation of 'letters', differing from it in form rather than essential content. This reincarnation is the product of a struggle within general education between Liberal Studies and General Studies.

In 1957, Department of Education and Science (DES) Circular 323 decreed that technical courses in colleges should include liberal education, to broaden the minds of the students. Especially after the expansion of day release regularised in the 1964 Industrial Training Act, college management tended to fulfil this requirement by providing a timetable slot staffed by teachers who specialised in this work. By 1962 the DES was calling this slot 'General Studies'.

In itself, the broadening idea was not wrong. We should not, for example, on the grounds that there is a self-sufficient 'working class culture', reject attempts to improve working class access to high culture. Nor were those who pioneered liberal education in the colleges wrong when they criticised the timetable slot approach. To the extent that they argued for the broadening impulse to be integrated across all course elements, they were right. But in reality most of them, most of the time, advocated broadening via the addition of 'subjects' to the technical curriculum. In other words, they lacked an adequate concept of integration, and this in turn was because they did not develop a valid notion of general education in its own right. Their inability or unwillingness to do this made it inevitable that liberal education would end up as a one hour GS slot (for part time students, ie the vast majority) with a weekly afternoon of 'enrichment' for full timers.

Especially during the late 1960s and 1970s, GS teachers were increasingly recruited from amongst a section of graduates from newly established universities such as Sussex, Essex, Warwick etc, people from working class backgrounds who had frequently been involved in student politics. Hitherto employed mainly as hourly paid part timers, these people now started to get tenured posts in what were men LEA-run institutions. Entailing little admin, these jobs demanded mainly that they work out what to do with students in GS, which was usually not assessed. Although this could be difficult, their situation was secure enough to encourage them to challenge aspects of college organisation, official curricula etc. They tended also to constitute a distinct group in most colleges, at odds both with many of the former craftspersons who were technical teachers and with those in charge of General Studies, whose background lay more commonly in adult education.

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