

## **“It wasn’t the *Wilt* experience” (at least for some): vocational students’ historical experiences of liberal studies**

### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the historical experiences of a set of former vocational students, all of whom undertook a course of liberal studies whilst attending an English college of further education at some point between the mid-1960s and the late-1980s. It is set against the backdrop of Tom Sharpe’s novel, *Wilt*, which both lampooned the antics of the beleaguered liberal studies teacher, Henry Wilt, and presented vocational students (and lecturers) as narrow-minded, unruly and inherently hostile to academic learning. The data presented here, taken from a programme of narrative research with participants, many of whom eventually went on to teach in vocational further and higher education themselves, go some way towards challenging such stereotypes. Whilst it is evident that their experiences were varied and uneven, most participants remembered liberal studies as fairly relaxed and student-centred, and the majority were positive about their experiences of liberal studies, particularly in retrospect.

Key words: Liberal studies; vocational learners; historical experiences

### **Introduction**

**This paper deals with the historical experiences of former vocational learners, all of whom experienced liberal studies whilst attending a college of further education<sup>i</sup> in England, between the mid-1960s and the end of the 1980s. It draws on a programme of narrative research to compare and contrast the experiences of these individuals with those presented in Tom Sharpe’s novel, *Wilt*, and challenges negative stereotypes about working-class attitudes to academic study. Initially then, it is worth considering the roots of such beliefs.** The notion that individuals from different social backgrounds are more or less suited to particular types of learning can be traced back to Plato’s *Republic* and ancient views about the relative value of different Forms of education (Plato 1955). Such

ideas have been influential across Europe and further afield but perhaps especially in England where education has played an important role in maintaining and reproducing social divisions since the Middle Ages and the ruling classes have always favoured a classical education at exclusive seats of learning (Simon 1960). Schooling for the masses has, where it has existed at all, traditionally focused largely on discipline, morals and instrumental learning, although sponsoring 'bright' working-class pupils to attend elite institutions has a long history too (Turner 1961). **Business leaders and policymakers nevertheless extol the virtues of technical and vocational education as a viable alternative to academic study, at least for working-class youth (see, for example, Edge Foundation 2018).** Academic credentials, however, continue to carry more prestige, and usually offer better labour-market returns than vocational qualifications (Wolf 2011; Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission 2015).

At school, working-class children tend to be placed in lower sets and streams, and are frequently taught by less-experienced teachers in more poorly-funded institutions (Reay, 2017). They are more likely to attend FE colleges, or technical colleges<sup>ii</sup> as they were once known and **to undertake vocational learning, an employability programme or some other form of work-related training.** In higher education (HE), working-class students tend to study more locally and attend **former polytechnics or other 'less-selective'** institutions than those from higher social classes (SUN 2017). They also remain less likely to participate in university-level study, despite the great expansion of HE (Crawford et al. 2016). This is not the full story though: the nature and content of different forms of learning also has significant epistemological implications for those from different social backgrounds, **with different forms of education and training providing access to significantly different forms of knowledge.** Basil Bernstein (1999), for example, argues that principled, conceptual knowledge as contained within the humanities and the natural sciences provides a greater degree of explanatory power than other types of learning. Bernstein (2000, 59) goes on to explain how generic modes of knowledge based largely on 'common-sense' notions of learning were first introduced into

mainstream education through state-funded training programmes, such as the Youth Training Scheme and similar provision for unemployed young people. Such processes have since colonised FE more widely and much of the vocational curriculum is now based largely upon routine, procedural and instrumental learning underpinned by discourses of employability and generic modes of pedagogy and knowledge. This is problematic in numerous ways, not least because such processes effectively deter working-class students from thinking beyond the immediate and the material, and discourage critique of the *status quo* (Wheelahan 2010).

In FE, most vocational students have, since the 1980s, been required to undertake various forms of literacy and numeracy training alongside their main course of study (see Warren 1979). **Today, most young people in FE are required to study English and mathematics, either in the form of GCSEs<sup>iii</sup> or Functional Skills<sup>iv</sup>, alongside a programme of vocational learning.** Ostensibly seems quite reasonable: most employment requires at least basic literacy and numeracy skills, and the ability to use words and numbers effectively is obviously useful across a range of social and cultural settings. **However, as Simmons (2015) points out, such learners are also largely excluded from broader forms of social and cultural learning which, in Bernsteinian terms, can be limiting both socially and intellectually.** Yet this was not always the case. From the 1950s until the 1980s, most FE students were required to engage with liberal studies (LS) or general studies (GS) alongside a programme of vocational learning. These terms reflect different understandings of the relationship between general and vocational education, although all such learning was underpinned by the principle that vocational students should be exposed to certain forms of general, academic learning alongside more directly-occupational education and training (Cantor and Roberts 1969, 68). It is, however, important to locate all this within its social and historical context.

For thirty years after the end of World War II, the majority of young people found employment immediately after leaving school and most left home, settled down, and started a family soon

thereafter (Carter, 1966). For working-class boys especially, an apprenticeship was often the goal and, by the late-1960s, almost a quarter of young workers were apprentices (FECRDU 1978, 34-35). This often entailed 'day-release' at the local 'tech' and, over time, hundreds of thousands of young people passed through FE where they also experienced liberal studies. In other words, nascent engineers, accountants, hairdressers and so on were required not only to learn the knowledge and skills deemed necessary to work in a particular occupation or industry, but to engage with political debate, discuss current affairs, and learn about literature, media and the arts. This coming together of different traditions of learning then produced a milieu particular to FE, and a pedagogy which, at least sometimes, challenged the established customs and practices of formal education (Simmons 2016). It was also (in)famously parodied in Tom Sharpe's comic novels featuring the shambolic liberal studies teacher, Henry Wilt – the first of which was published in the mid-1970s, a period when education was increasingly blamed for a variety of social and economic ills, and teachers, especially those engaged with creative methods and progressive pedagogy, were heavily criticised both in policy circles and popular discourse more broadly (Warburton and Saunders 1996).

There is nevertheless little academic literature on LS/GS in further education. That which exists focuses largely on the organisation and management of liberal studies, and the content of the curriculum (see Hall 1965; Neale 1966; Watson 1973), although Gleeson and Mardle's (1980) book *Education or Training?* deals, in part, with staff and student experiences of liberal studies. More lately, there has been some historical research on liberal studies in FE, relating mainly to the policy terrain (see Bailey and Unwin 2008) and to the recollections of former LS/GS teachers (see Simmons 2015; Simmons 2016), although there is some work on the historical experiences of former liberal studies students (see Simmons 2019). There is nevertheless a paucity of published research on this topic, especially given the number of those who experienced liberal studies in FE. This paper goes some way toward addressing that deficit. It is also partly a response to McCulloch and Woodin's call for more research on the social history of learners and learning. Traditionally, educational research has focused

largely on the position, views and opinions of teachers, administrators and policymakers (McCulloch and Woodin 2010).

The first section of the paper provides a brief overview of FE in England and summarises the rise and fall of liberal studies in further education. The second section describes the research upon which this article draws – a programme of narrative interviews with twenty former FE students - and discusses some of the strengths and weaknesses of this approach to social research. The third part of the paper presents some of the key themes contained within *Wilt* (Sharpe 1976), which provide a framework through which to understand findings from the fieldwork. Whilst the data confirm that vocational learners' experiences of LS/GS were sometimes problematic, they also suggest that most participants experienced liberal studies in a varied, uneven and sometimes positive fashion. The concluding section argues that the stories presented in this paper go some way toward challenging the crass stereotypes of working-class students portrayed in *Wilt*, and popular assumptions about the relationship between education and social class more broadly. **It finishes by reflecting on the contemporary relevance of some of the debates raised in the paper.**

### **Liberal studies in further education: a brief history**

In England, the structure and organisation of post-compulsory education is complex and potentially confusing. Partly, this relates to the historic reluctance of the state to intervene in education and training, although successive governments have, since the 1980s, encouraged new providers into what is now a multi-layered quasi-market constructed, managed and maintained by the state (Bailey and Unwin 2014). There are now some 130 'public-sector' universities in the UK and over 120 alternative HE providers, which vary significantly in terms of size, remit and reputation (HEFCE 2015). Meanwhile, school sixth forms, sixth-form colleges and FE colleges offer a diverse range of academic, vocational and pre-vocational programmes to those over the age of 16. There are also now literally thousands of voluntary and private-sector providers, most of which specialise in particular forms of work-related

learning. Post-compulsory education in England is therefore intricate and baffling, not only for employers, parents and the general public but often for staff and students too (Orr and Simmons 2010, 353).

FE colleges are nevertheless the most significant providers of post-compulsory education outside the universities, catering for to some 2.2 million learners. Their provision ranges from basic skills and pre-vocational learning through to apprenticeships, professional qualifications and, in many cases, degree-level work (AoC 2017). FE's central purpose has, however, always been providing technical and vocational education for everyday employment in business, construction, engineering and so on, or in parts of the service sector, as is more likely today. This remit means that further education has always been a largely working-class endeavour and few policymakers or academics have direct experience or in-depth knowledge of FE (Richardson 2007). Either way, further education colleges have always been closely connected to industry and commerce, and traditionally most FE students were released from their place of work to study for vocational qualifications in their field of employment, usually on a part-time basis (Lucas, 2004). Similarly, the majority of FE teachers were drawn from business and industry and teaching was usually a second or subsequent career. Typically, lecturers saw themselves primarily as book-keepers, bricklayers or engineers who happened to teach rather than professional teachers *per se* (Venables 1967, 212). Ivan and Joanne, former vocational students who took part in the research upon which this paper is based, help us understand something of this:

[P]eople had motorbikes and stuff...you went into the staffroom there were clouds of smoke and a massive tea urn, and they were all talking about cars...They were all from industry. There weren't any academics, I don't think  
(Ivan, former engineering student)

[T]he vocational staff...were in industry so, for example, one tutor might have been a head chef in Scarborough who came in one day-a-week...in those days you didn't need any educational qualification...it was all based on your experience (Joanne, former catering student)

There was, as Joanne implies, traditionally no requirement for FE lecturers to undergo teacher training; it was assumed that subject knowledge and vocational experience were the main determinants of teaching quality (Harkin 2005, 166). Perhaps unsurprisingly, classroom relations tended to mirror the demands of industry with a strong emphasis on discipline, respect and time-keeping (Gleeson and Mardle 1980, 29-32). Here, another participant, Patrick, provides some insight:

[T]hey [vocational lecturers] were quite firm...they used to say to us "I'm teaching you a trade that's been passed down for hundreds of years so don't disrespect it." So we did have respect...if you didn't behave they would inform your employer, and you could lose your job (Patrick, former construction student)

Whilst vocational lecturers generally commanded authority at the 'chalk face', pedagogy was often dull and uninspiring, staff were sometimes unresponsive to learner needs and student drop-out was generally high (Bristow 1970). For many young people, the reality of going to college meant long days of exhausting and objectified learning (Gleeson and Mardle 1980, 31). Pierce, another research participant, provides a flavour of this:

[W]e were learning linear expression and how different metals react...what would happen if you did x and mixed y acid with it...chemical compositions...your mind just became frazzled...you would be sat there thinking, "I need a break from this" (Pierce, former construction student)

Liberal studies stemmed from quite different traditions. Whilst the 1960s and 1970s were heyday of LS/GS in further education, its roots can be traced back to the Oxford Extension movement and notions of improving the condition of the working classes popular among Christian Socialists and liberal reformers in Victorian Britain. Arguably though, such sentiments were driven by concerns about working-class activism and the dangers associated with industrialisation and urbanisation, as much as humanitarian concern for the lower orders (Simmons 2015, 85-86). Either way, the idea of providing at least a section of the working classes with access to liberal studies had gained some traction by the early-twentieth century, due largely to the campaigning efforts of the Workers' Education Association, the National Institute for Adult Education and similar organisations. Slowly, their ideas entered the political mainstream and, following World War I, the Ministry of Reconstruction's Adult Education Committee encouraged technical colleges to offer liberal studies in order to:

[A]ssist the growth of a truer conception of technical education, but especially because it seems to us vital to provide the fullest opportunities for personal development and...a higher standard of citizenship. Too great an emphasis has been laid on material considerations and too little regard paid to other aspects of life (Ministry of Reconstruction 1919, 153)

Thereafter, the inter-war years were a period of significant debate about the relationship between liberal and vocational learning, and the individual and collective purpose of education more generally. Perhaps understandably, developments were somewhat attenuated by the social and economic crises of the 1920s and 1930s, and the onset of war thereafter (Silver 1983). Later, the years after the end of World War II saw a degree of consensus between government, trade unions and many leading industrialists about the education of young workers, although again multiple agendas were at play. It can, on one hand, be seen as part of the project of social and economic reconstruction which characterised post-war Britain. But there were also concerns about the moral welfare of youth driven by the rise of political extremism in Europe as well as anxieties about emerging patterns of spending,



leisure and consumption as full employment and rising wages fed new forms of youth culture (Carter 1966, 174).

There was, against this backdrop, a groundswell in favour of providing vocational learners with access to liberal studies, as expressed in the 1956 White Paper *Technical Education* (MoE 1956) and subsequently endorsed by the Ministry of Education – although the Ministry provided only broad suggestions about the nature and form which liberal studies should take (MoE 1957). Consequently, there was substantial variation in the style and content of LS/GS, both between different institutions and within any given establishment (Watson 1973). Either way, for the next thirty years, most FE colleges provided vocational learners with some form of LS/GS. Liberal studies was also, for much of its existence, un-assessed and teachers were often left to follow their own interests and potentially those of their students. They were also often at the forefront of new developments in teaching and learning – in terms, for example, of student-centred learning, team teaching and the use of audio-visual resources. We should not, however, romanticise the past. In some cases, LS/GS was nebulous, poorly designed and badly delivered (Seymour and Acres 1974). There was, over time, a growing feeling, not only among policymakers and employers but also some of those working or studying in FE, that liberal studies needed to become more closely related to the world of work (Gleeson and Mardle 1980, 105).

Following the Haslegrave Report (DES 1969), more ‘applied’ versions of LS/GS began to appear. First, general and communication studies (G&CS) was introduced on courses validated by the Technician Education Council (TEC). This was significant as G&CS placed more emphasis on communication and literacy skills than previous iterations of liberal studies, though G&CS was also the first variant of liberal studies to be formally assessed alongside the vocational curriculum. At the end of the 1970s, Social and Life Skills units appeared on Manpower Services Commission (MSC) programmes introduced in response to rising unemployment, especially among young people. Undoubtedly, such provision was intended to be more instrumental than previous iterations of LS/GS, the MSC (1978) actually

stipulating that socio-economic context should be excluded from taught sessions. Some practitioners were nevertheless able to continue to pursue broader educational goals, at least for a time (Gleeson 1989). This was not to last though and, from the 1980s onwards, further changes incrementally squeezed any recognisable remnants of liberal studies out of FE. First, general and communication studies was replaced by Common Skills on BTEC programmes (BTEC being a merger of TEC and the Business Education Council). Common Skills were then displaced by Core Skills which were, in turn, superseded by Key Skills as part of the Curriculum 2000 reforms at the end of the twentieth century. Eventually, Key Skills were replaced by Functional Skills – a form of learning bearing little resemblance to the liberal studies programmes from which its origins can be traced.

#### **Liberal studies in further education: researching the past**

The data presented in this paper are drawn from a programme of narrative interviews with twenty former FE students all of whom experienced liberal studies in their youth. Participants were drawn from across five broad vocational areas: engineering, construction, business, catering, and hair and beauty. Sixteen had been apprentices in local industry attending college on a day-release basis; four were full-time students. Participants had undertaken vocational studies from introductory craft qualifications through to National Certificate and National Diploma programmes, including courses validated by City and Guilds, BTEC, and various professional bodies. All experienced liberal studies for at least two years, although several participants did so for three or four years. Most attended colleges in industrial towns and cities in the north of England, although three participants went to 'tech' in other parts of the country.

Fieldwork took place during late-2016 and early-2017, with interviews conducted in participants' homes or at their workplace. Most interviews lasted between 40 minutes and an hour, and were semi-structured and informal with participants encouraged to reflect on the past in an open, conversational manner. A snowball method was used to find participants, with an initial core of participants, all of

whom had gone to college at some point between the late-1960s and the end of the 1980s, recruited through personal contacts and professional networks. These people then introduced a number of others to the research who, in turn, helped find further participants - although care was taken to include individuals from different vocational backgrounds in order to capture something of the varied nature of FE. Fifteen men and five women took part, reflecting the traditional male dominance of further education. It is not appropriate, however, to claim that participants are representative of all former FE students. On one hand, obviously the sample is quite small but most participants also undertook more advanced study later in life, **all but two of them eventually becoming FE teachers themselves, at least for a time.** Thereafter, certain individuals took up senior positions in colleges and three participants became university lecturers. It might therefore be reasonable to assume that some views and opinions were influenced by subsequent experiences of education and work, perhaps significantly so.

Arguably, all knowledge is socially constructed but this is particularly the case with narrative research, especially when it depends on recollections of events which took place many years ago – and certain participants acknowledged that memories had clouded over time. Narrative research can nevertheless help us to ‘get close’ to individuals’ thoughts, feelings and emotions, and the data are drawn from a variety of participants, all of whom experienced LS/GS over a significant period of time in a range of institutions, across a large geographic area. Narrative research is, however, perhaps best understood as a way of exploring accounts of the past rather than an attempt to produce ‘hard facts’ or an incontestable truth from which broad generalisations can be established (Batty 2009, 110-112). It is also a method which allows us to examine the lived experience of those who have traditionally been overlooked or ignored (Goodson and Sikes 2001, 87-88). Narrative research is therefore particularly appropriate for researching FE, a sector which has always been regarded as something of an educational backwater (Richardson 2007). Here, it is used to present the stories of former vocational students, most of whom were from working-class backgrounds, about their experiences of learning.

### **Liberal studies in further education: the historical experiences of vocational learners**

Tom Sharpe wrote five *Wilt* novels, published between 1976 and 2010, which focus on the escapades of the long-suffering liberal studies teacher, Henry Wilt, who does **“his damnedest to extend the sensibilities of day-release apprentices with a notable lack of success”** (Sharpe 1976, 2), although Fenland’s College, the institution at which Wilt works, has become a ‘new’ university by the time of the last book. The first of these novels, simply entitled *Wilt*, is perhaps the most notable and was also made into a film, starring the comic actor, Griff Rhys-Jones. Its plot is farcical and Wilt becomes the centre of a murder investigation when a body is discovered in the grounds of the College. Hilarity derives from police Inspector Flint’s pursuit of Wilt as well as Wilt’s rocky relationship with his overbearing wife, Eva – although much of the humour comes from Wilt’s struggles against the anti-intellectual culture at Fenland’s College, and the hostility of vocational staff and students towards liberal studies in general, and him in particular.

Whilst *Wilt* is a work of fiction, cultural artefacts are not neutral and arguably Tom Sharpe’s humour both reflected and fuelled popular discourses about the supposed failings of education at that time. The 1970s were a period of intense debate about education, and its social and economic role in particular. The Black Papers blamed ‘progressive’ teaching methods and Left-wing teachers for declining educational standards and the moral malaise they claimed was gripping Britain more broadly (see, for example, Cox and Dyson 1969; Cox and Boyson 1975). Such notions were widely supported in the popular press where the William Tyndale affair and other high-profile controversies caught the headlines, and ‘trendy’ teachers were berated as lazy, decadent or subversive (Warburton and Saunders 1996). The education system was also blamed for the UK’s economic decline: teachers were apparently too divorced from the ‘real world’ of industry and commerce; young people, it was argued, were not being properly equipped for the rigours of employment; the curriculum was criticised as too vague and abstract (see Callaghan 1976).

Fisher, et al. (2008, 161) argue that *Wilt* is underpinned by three interrelated themes:

- vocational learners are inherently negative towards academic subjects
- The views and opinions of vocational lecturers are similar
- the working classes are generally nasty, brutish and intolerant

Sharpe animates these sentiments in various ways with his writing informed, at least partly, by his experiences as a Cambridge history graduate working in FE. But, whilst Wilt's teaching is undoubtedly chaotic and disorganised, he is actually more concerned with survival than radical ferment and, toward the end of the novel, Wilt proposes replacing his stereotypically free-form model of liberal studies with a rather different curriculum:

In future [vocational students] would learn the how of things not why. How to read and write...How to fiddle their tax returns. How to make an incompatible marriage work...After all, you don't require a degree in English literature to teach gasfitters the how of anything (Sharpe 1976, 220-221)

Such ideas can be seen as prescient because, as we have seen, liberal studies would soon be recast along such utilitarian lines. It is, however, also deeply problematic. On one hand, there is an implication that working-class youth should only be educated within certain parameters in order to fulfil particular roles and functions – and Bernstein (1999; 2000) and others have, as described earlier, explained how such processes limit and constrain working-class students' access to the emancipatory potential contained within more traditional 'subject-based' forms of learning. But it also infers that those responsible for teaching **lower-achieving students who often find themselves on vocational**

**programmes in FE** do not themselves need academic ability, an assumption which Thompson (2010) argues is likely to reinforce the marginal status of vocational education and of those exposed to such learning.

Either way, the data below suggest that certain participants' experiences reflect those parodied in *Wilt*, in some ways. Partly, this related to the general culture and ethos of liberal studies, and the perceived attitudes and dispositions of LS/GS teachers – some of whom participants saw as divorced from the realities of working-class life:

[S]ome people called it liberal studies and I can understand why... because it were so liberal. I would class the three tutors who taught us as ex-hippies or they gave you that impression... You never knew what you were doing from week to week...  
(Dean, former construction student)

Some [LS/GS teachers]...didn't relish walking into our classroom...they met with a lot of resistance... sometimes that was down to the demeanour and attitude of the tutor... if the teachers can't handle class management then it's fun and games...(Joe, former engineering student)

Some tried to swear in front of you because they thought that was the done thing for a bricklayer and that would give them credibility...it sounded all wrong...it just sounded silly (Dean, construction)

Such sentiments can be interpreted, at least partly, as working-class resistance to the cultural colonialism which existed within some variants of LS/GS (see Simmons 2015). Either way, it would be fair to say that **perhaps half a dozen** participants saw liberal studies in a largely negative light.

There weren't many great lessons and many teachers started the lesson late and finished it early, and some students went to the toilet and didn't come back...I think the majority of the students perceived its value as nil. (Joe, former engineering student)

[I]t was poorly managed... He'd have a big pile of books and magazines and he would say "you can do a precis on something from there"...we'd say "can't we do something else?"...Once we went out and had a snowball fight during a general studies lesson. The teacher stayed inside and ten of us went outside and threw snowballs at each other. (Neil, former construction student)

There were also some stark differences between some participants' orientations to liberal studies and vocational learning, and to teaching staff in particular – which might be understood in terms of the class-based resistance among working-class students that Paul Willis (1977) wrote about in the 1970s.

I had a lot of respect for our vocational tutors but less so for the liberal studies guys. I mean...Jack Ward had been all around the world for British Leyland as a trouble shooter...when this geezer [liberal studies teacher] turned up... it was a little bit like game on and we could toy with this bloke but you couldn't toy with Jack...(Ivan, former engineering student)

[T]he general studies tutors...weren't used to students like us. They had no empathy with us...they'd probably just gone from school to university and then education, and so they had no knowledge of anything else (Joe, former engineering student)

It was the first period after lunch...we sort of had more of a liquid lunch...I think the tutor knew that we didn't want to be there and we knew that we didn't want

to be there...so there was common ground between us (Gary, former catering student)

**Here, there are parallels with Henry Wilt's students who arrived at his classes "late and drunk" (Sharpe 1976, 3). It is, however, important to note that this was not the norm, although perhaps half the participants did regard liberal studies and liberal studies teachers as overtly politicised.**

I seem to remember it introduced us to politics...what was happening in the news at that stage and what was relevant...I found out about things that I didn't know at that time and probably wouldn't have been introduced to, other than in general studies (Joanne, former catering student)

I can certainly remember it was about politics...and I was very naïve about anything political...It gave me...an awareness of politics which I didn't have before. I think it was quite cleverly done because it gave us the big picture...(Murad, former business student)

[T]here was quite a lot going on politically...often you found yourself thinking that a tutor was quite a Lefty...we would be discussing things, and things would be quite animated so there must have been some interesting topics (Carole, former business student)

Yeah, he was Left-wing or a socialist, or whatever...It was the '70s, strikes and all that, different times...I remember I saw him, this guy, selling the *Socialist Worker* once...that was what he was like...very Left-wing, yeah, that's it...(Walter, former engineering student)



This is perhaps unsurprising. Robin Simmons has written about how, for some LS/GS teachers, liberal studies was always a political exercise. Set against the backdrop of the changing social and cultural expectations of the 1960s and 1970s, this coming together of often young, Left-leaning LS/GS teachers and vocational learners often from highly-unionised workplaces, sometimes resulted in forms of reciprocal teaching and learning which, at least in some instances, can be described as critical pedagogy in action (Simmons 2016, 697). Either way, participants did not necessarily see the politicised nature of liberal studies as problematic. This is important as, whilst learning is often regarded as a cognitive and intellectual endeavour, it is also a social process through which individuals come to understand themselves and the world around them.

**For at least half the participants though,** their liberal studies teachers were neither political activists nor academic dilettantes. Almost without exception though, student-teacher relations were seen as less hierarchical than in vocational sessions, and generally participants experienced LS/GS as more varied and student-centred than their main programme of learning.

You had a timetable and you turned up...I do remember liberal studies being a little bit more participatory though...now being a teacher and looking back I think the guy must have put a fair amount of effort into preparing those sessions (Justin, former construction student)

[I]t was quite a tight ship in hospitality and catering and all the tutors...were called Mr or Mrs but the general studies tutors used first names and it was much more...relaxed and freedom of speech was more open (Julie, former catering student)

**For five participants,** liberal studies included various site visits and other external activities, although these were, in the main, related to their vocational studies:

I can remember watching a council meeting... we had visits to museums...visits to a mine in Wakefield, a forge in Leeds, and we went to Ferrybridge power station, and a whole host of things (Pierce, former engineering students)

Pedagogy was nevertheless, **in all cases**, mainly classroom-based and largely teacher-led.

[I]t was an hour a week for all the two-year course...in the afternoon...sitting behind desks. I think we did do different topics...plus the practical things we might need to know if you were to run a salon (Patricia, former hairdressing student)

Well, the layout of the classroom was a more formal set-up...sat at desks but I think it was practical and easier to arrange...but this was in the late-70s so it was before PowerPoints...we would probably have overhead projectors...I remember that one went wrong (Gail, former business student)

There was, **according to at least half of the participants**, also evidence of collaboration between LS/GS teachers and those responsible for participants' main course of study:

[T]hey worked together and our vocational tutors would always check if we'd attended our general studies sessions, and there would be some discussion in the general studies classes to make sure that we are doing alright with our vocational course...as a teaching team, they worked very well together (Brundby, former engineering student)

I think it was quite linked to... our vocational course...It wasn't a hairdressing person who taught us but a general teacher and maybe they'd worked with the department to find out what we were doing and what we might need...it was joined up (Patricia, former hairdressing student)

[W]e did conversational French...flower arranging... window dressing...we had to be able to understand the importance of...your salon window and that window being

enticing to a client...It was very much linked to our main course...it wasn't the *Wilt* experience...(Denise, former hair and beauty student)

Student-teacher relations were, contrary to popular stereotypes, also often cordial.

[W]e bonded very well. The tutor we had was very personable and well-liked...it was something we all looked forward to...There were some sessions on the main course where people would not turn up but general studies was well-attended (Murad, former business student)

[I]t was the same tutor every week and he was a really nice guy...I had quite a good rapport with him. Even twenty-five years afterwards I would often bump into him in the town and he remembered us, and stopped and had a chat (Justin, former construction student)

Yes, he was very enthusiastic...we all saw the point of going...the way that he was, it brought the best out of us...it was always very clear what we were going to do and what we would get from it...we all had a good working relationship with our tutor (Brundby, former engineering student)

For perhaps **two-thirds of participants**, their experiences of LS/GS were, it appears, broadly positive, and pedagogy was fairly 'mainstream', if more informal than in their vocational studies. Whilst **virtually all** those who took part in the study remembered liberal studies and LS/GS teachers as more 'laid back' than their vocational classes, a *Wilt* scenario was not the norm.

## **Conclusion**

FE colleges are now quite different places to the institutions Tom Sharpe wrote about. The flow of day-release students evaporated as the youth labour market collapsed during the 1980s and colleges were forced to recruit broader constituencies of learners in order to survive. Most FE students are

now full-time learners; the curriculum now focuses largely on childcare, leisure and tourism, and health and social care; perhaps unsurprisingly then, nowadays the majority of both staff and students are women (ETF 2017, 16). Traditionally, a combination of relatively generous terms and conditions, and the peculiarities of municipal governance protected FE teachers from an excessive exploitation of their labour. Today, further education colleges are self-governing corporations which compete against each other and other providers in a quasi-market organised and managed by the state. Class sizes are generally larger; staff workloads are heavier; and FE teachers are subject to multiple levels of supervision, surveillance and control (Gleeson et al. 2015). LS/GS in further education is long gone and many of those working or studying in FE today may not even be aware of its existence (Simmons 2015, 93). There is, however, continuity as well as change: further education remains largely orientated to the world of work and FE colleges are still essentially working-class institutions.

Nowadays, popular stereotypes of working-class people are openly negative and often crass but Tom Sharpe undoubtedly depicted the working classes as philistine and uncouth too, **going so far as to describe Wilt's unruly group of apprentice gasfitters as "putative human beings" (Sharpe 1976, 3)**. It is therefore worth remembering how the data presented in this paper relate to Sharpe's observations about education and social class in the 1970s, and how the experiences of those who took part in this study compare to those presented in *Wilt*. The data, I suggest, go some way towards challenging popular stereotypes about liberal studies and the negative image of working-class students presented in *Wilt*.

#### *Vocational learners are inherently negative towards academic subjects*

The participants' stories presented in this paper do confirm that some of them were hostile to liberal studies in their youth, although their chagrin, it seems, was aimed more at LS/GS teachers rather than at liberal studies *per se*. This was not the norm though and most of those who took part in the research were fairly positive about liberal studies and their liberal studies teachers. The more hostile

participants were on engineering and construction courses, and some of their words are vivid. It is, however, not possible to say whether their views are representative of others from similar vocational backgrounds. Partly, this is due to the small scale of the study but Justin and Brundby (from construction and engineering respectively) were among the most positive participants. The recollections of those from other vocational backgrounds were variable but enmity was not the norm.

*Vocational lecturers are similarly un-enamoured with such forms of learning*

In *Wilt*, the head of catering describes LS/GS teachers as “cranks, perverts or red-hot revolutionaries” (Sharpe 1976, 23). Gleeson and Mardle (1980) use less colourful language, although they do report some negativity towards liberal studies among some vocational staff. Partly, this derived from its perceived lack of relevance, although some enmity towards LS/GS teachers was also evident in Gleeson and Mardle’s study – emotions seemingly rooted in particular forms of inverted snobbery. Staff attitudes were not central to the research reported in this paper but the data suggests that some participants believed or suspected that some tension between vocational staff and liberal studies teachers existed, although this was a minority view. In two or three cases participants reported that liberal studies was openly denigrated by vocational lecturers but **at least half** remembered staff relations as positive or at least civil. The rest had little to say about such matters.

*The working classes are generally nasty, brutish and intolerant*

In *Wilt*, Mr Morris, the head of liberal studies at Fenlands College, comments that “Anyone prepared to teach the sort of bloody-minded young people we get can’t be entirely sane” (Sharpe 1976, 202). Data from the research reported in this paper suggest that **some two-thirds of** participants did not fit such a negative conception, although their subsequent educational and career trajectories mean that they, as individuals, cannot be regarded as representative of working-class students as a whole or of working-class orientations to learning more broadly. There was nevertheless some evidence of boorish anti-intellectualism. Former engineering student, Joe, for example, admitted that he was

ashamed about the antics of some of his fellow students during LS/GS sessions, although he also claimed that “we weren’t bad lads” and believed that much of the unrest he described derived mainly from his classmates’ inability to come to terms with the more open, student-centred culture of liberal studies which ran contrary to their previous experiences of school and FE.

Whatever their earlier orientation to liberal studies might have been, a key theme arising from the data was that, almost without exception, participants were more positive about their experiences of LS/GS in retrospect than they had been in their youth. The data also suggests that, **in all but two cases**, participants believed that the knowledge and skills they gained from liberal studies contributed to their future personal and professional development, at least to some degree. Some recalled how LS/GS had given them a long-term interest in politics, history or some other form of learning outside their main programme of study. Others talked about ‘broadening horizons’, increased social awareness, the ability to see the world from a range of perspectives. **The current relevance of all this is striking. On one hand, such skills and abilities are increasingly necessary if young people are to make sense of rapid social change and engage in debates about culture, identity, politics and the media as critically-informed citizens and consumers. Meanwhile, the increasingly utilitarian nature of the vocational curriculum runs contrary to dominant discourses about the knowledge economy and the need for flexible, creative, imaginative workers. Whilst liberal studies in FE is long gone, it is somewhat ironic that LS/GS sought to promote these very attitudes and dispositions in vocational learners (Simmons 2015; 2016). Data presented in this paper suggest that, at least in some cases, it was successful in doing so.**

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<sup>i</sup> FE colleges are multi-functional institutions but their main remit is providing vocational education and training. Whilst international comparisons are not straightforward, they have some similarities with community colleges in the USA and TAFE institutes in Australia.

<sup>ii</sup> FE colleges were, in the past, often called technical colleges. This reflected their close relationship with business and industry, and their role in training technicians and other workers for employment.

<sup>iii</sup> GCSEs are Level 2 academic qualifications taken at age sixteen by most pupils in England and Wales. Vocational learners who do not achieve at least grade C in GCSE English and Mathematics at school are often required to re-sit these qualifications in FE.

<sup>iv</sup> Functional Skills in English and Mathematics are competency-based qualifications which, at Level 2, are notionally equivalent to GCSEs.