

Liberal Studies in a Technological Time

by Bruce Cooper

The term 'liberal studies' arouses responses of approval, derision and perplexity. Those who approve of it do so in post-prandial statements, amidst the fug of cigar smoke—industrialists lamenting the narrow education of new entrants to industry. Those who deride it do so because they identify the term with a superior culture to which they are not admitted, something to do with making the right noises during the interval at Glyndebourne. The perplexed command most sympathy for their attitude. They are in genuine doubt what the term means.

Most people can identify a liberal attitude and recognise a liberally educated man when they see one. It is difficult to find two people who agree what is the best education to produce this desirable end-product. And there the debate lies. There are many contestants in the field. Historically the strongest, though the one heard least, is the claim of Greats at Oxford. This degree produced the most complete man. But the voice is drowned in the general clamour of economists, sociologists and historians pressing their claims.

A liberal education has always been the concern of teachers, but only recently has the term 'liberal studies' come into prominence. Much of its impetus stems from a Ministry of Education circular issued in the mid-fifties and directed at technical colleges. The 1956 White Paper on technical education heralded an enormous advance in full-time education for technologists. Before the war, they had won their technical laurels via the hard grind of evening classes. Immediately post-war their lot was partially alleviated by the concession of day-release. But 1956 brought in the new Diploma of Technology (more commonly known as the Dip.Tech.), full-time sandwich courses, which meant being in the technical college for six months on end for four consecutive years.

C. P. Snow's *Two Cultures* had underlined what many educators had realised, the increasingly narrow specialised education which young people were receiving, and a corresponding failure to communicate to each other in adult life. 'Liberal Studies' was seen as an attempt to answer this problem. Grammar schools and public schools called it 'General Studies' and found that examining boards had thoughtfully provided GCE papers at both Ordinary and Advanced level to help them with their task. Some schools carried this broadening approach further than others. A powerful group led by such people as Sir Desmond Lee, headmaster

of Winchester, and A. C. Peterson, Professor of Education at Oxford, sought a genuine reduction of the pressures which the universities were forcing on the schools to specialise. Some universities were looking at the problem. An effort was made at Cambridge to widen the Tripos.

The emphasis has mainly been in technical colleges. It has been generally felt that the universities, particularly the older ones, by their very organization, both at student and staff level, made cross fertilization of cultures and interests possible. Technical colleges have been, and still are very largely, monotechnic establishments, predominantly devoted to some aspect of engineering or applied science with some fringe commercial work. They have been felt correspondingly to be more in need of broadening, not merely at the top echelons. The humblest craft apprentice, be he a joiner or welder, has his own modest allocation of liberal studies (or social studies as it is sometimes called) slotted on his timetable. A casual glance at the advertisement columns of the *Times Educational Supplement* will reveal that 'Assistant Lecturers in Liberal Studies' is one of the fastest growing professions, which has produced, as such professions tend to do, its own association, the Association for Liberal Education (A.L.E.).

The nature of provision under the heading of liberal studies is wide and various, but it would not be unfair to say that mainly it has been interpreted with a heavy humanities and arts bias, on the crude basis that science and technology teach you about things, but history and literature teach you about people. This identification with the arts exclusively can have unfortunate consequences. A liberal education is seen as the responsibility of the arts teacher, whereas it is the responsibility of all teachers (or should be). It too easily breeds the attitude of resentment and indifference amongst technical staff, 'If you know all about it, you'd better get on and teach it', 'Now that you've finished diverting my students with "Talking about Music" we'll get down to the bread and butter business of what life is all about'. Thus the divorce between the two cultures is widened rather than contracted.

It is true some technical colleges will offer possibly an hour a week on the appreciation of music. Mostly, though, the bias is on the social studies side, geography, history and economics dressed up in fancy titles, such as 'The Problem of the Under-Developed Countries', 'The Two Party and One Party System', 'Totalitarianism and Democracy', 'The Economy and British Industry', in order to make the subjects more palatable and relevant. 'The History and Philosophy of Science' will figure in a few colleges where they have some teacher on the staff gifted enough to tackle competently this difficult but absorbing subject. Report-writing with senior students will often appear and be taken out of liberal studies' time; even management subjects will nudge their way on to the student's curriculum in his final year of study. The balance of

subjects offered depends very largely on the philosophy of the head of department responsible for the administration of liberal studies and the qualifications and interests of the teachers grouped around him. Some of the staff will be *manqué* university lecturers who hoped to preach the pure philosophy of their subject to the converted and now must perforce popularize it for technical student consumption.

'Popularize' is not too unfair a word. Teaching liberal studies to technologists (or craft apprentices) has something in common with university extra-mural and WEA work. There is no captive audience waiting for you, but rather one to be won. The student's prime need and motivation is to acquire the necessary technical information that will allow him to put M.I.Mech.E. after his name or brandish a City and Guilds certificate in the face of a future employer. Liberal studies is not directly related to this pursuit and is seen as a diversion, even as an intrusion into his precious time. There is a constant pressure, even if implicit, for the liberal studies teacher to justify his presence and his subject in a way that he would not have to do were he working at a university. The student knows that the class of award he obtains will depend on his technical expertise. Some form of liberal studies assessment may take place, whether by examination, dissertation, project work or even intelligent participation during class periods, but when the chips are down his success in liberal studies will not be crucial. It is against that background that the teacher has to operate.

It is a colossal act of faith really that liberal studies is worth doing. It is noble in conception even if in fact flaws can be seen in its practice. There are a number of broad approaches to the subject. One which has not been resolved is whether you should add non-technical subjects on to the technical subjects – and there is little to guide your choice which subjects have the highest claim – or, and this is a very much more difficult task, to study the implications of the student's particular technology and fan out from there. Sir Eric Ashby, if I understand him aright, calls this technological humanism. The treatment would be broad rather than narrowly specific. Something on the social psychology of industry might be offered in the context of automation. By automating a plant or a section of a plant, certain processes are done more quickly, quality control is ensured, a technical problem solved, but the redeployment of men is not so easily solved, nor the deprivation of certain muscular and mental satisfactions associated with work. If an architect and civil engineer are building a new town what amenities should they provide? Should there be a church or theatre? What is a church for? Is it a monument or a place where people worship? What do people do on a stage and why do they do it and what does an audience look for?

One can extend the list indefinitely. Any technology creates social problems. A consideration of these problems could lead to a short course

on religion or comparative drama or human motivation looked at in the context of the student's future job. I do not say it does lead to. Engage the student's interest by self-interest and proceed from there. Most lecturers find it easier to add their own subject on as a discipline worthy of study in its own right, because that is the way they have been taught it themselves.

Another way of looking at liberal studies is to decide whether you are trying to disseminate information or change attitudes. This dictates method rather than content. You can lecture about the welfare state or the colour problem and show documentary films on the subject or, as I prefer to do, you can involve students in situations which will imperceptibly produce attitude change. I give my students projects to do in groups on such topics as 'The extent and nature of provision for old people on Tees-side', 'The extent and nature of air pollution, of the provision for the arts, of the adequacy of the hospital services, of the extent and nature of unemployment, etc.' In the course of their investigations, they travel with WVS women on 'Meals on Wheels' errands, watch old people having their corns removed by a chiropodist, witness the sad and degrading spectacle of an unemployment queue, visit a mental hospital ('looney bin' before their visit) and write with a good deal more sympathy and understanding of what they have witnessed than if they had been lectured at for a term on these subjects and asked to regurgitate them for an exam.

My remarks have been made generally with the Dip.Tech. and National Certificate student in mind. The range to be catered for is much wider than that; the provision as various as the colleges themselves. As a general principle students released for six months sandwich courses will spend between three and four hours a week on liberal studies; some subjects will be compulsory, some optional. Some will be studied in depth over two or three years, others the bird's eye view will be given. For day-release students three-quarters of an hour or an hour must suffice. One's efforts have got to be scaled down to the audience. Operatives and craft apprentices cannot absorb much of academic content, and so some of the work must seem very elementary. Remedial English is often considered a necessary part of the liberal education; an analysis of popular culture and communication à la Hoggart is another popular favourite. What does Hoggart say somewhere in *The Uses of Literacy*: 'Helping them to be wise in their own way'?

An aspect which is sometimes mentioned but soon shelved and forgotten is the liberalization of technical education and technical teaching. The arts man must tread warily here. Sufficient that some technologists and scientists are aware of the problem, and at some universities, such as the electrical engineering department at Birmingham, the degree syllabus has been thoroughly looked at, much dead wood thrown away

and a revised and substantially altered syllabus prepared.

The texts of many a liberal studies man are E. M. Forster's 'only connect' and Donne's 'No man is an island'. His *raison d'être* is to remind his students of their validity. To earn their respect he might admit that he is culturally impoverished in a technological age if he knows nothing at all of the workings of the internal combustion engine. But his value is to underline the problems that science and technology can solve and those that by their very nature they cannot solve, to show that whereas there is often only one simple answer to a technical matter, in human affairs certainty is not so easily come by, and where the sheer complexity of decision-making stifles action. He is dealing in a field where value judgments are important – a field where I would have thought Catholics have something positive to offer.

Don't Touch the Dream by Roman Gorzelski

Don't touch the dream,
It's just begun.
Let it thrust its roots
Deep, let it choose
Things seen long ago,
Let it open up memories.
Don't touch the dream,
It is compact,
When it is hardened
The daybreak will crumble it.

(translated from the Polish by Anthony Black)