Pedagogy and Academic Skills.

Any existentially loaded activity deployed without due attention to the human condition as a whole is trivial at best and an act of violence at worsted.

You get what you buy in to.

Dr. Mike Alsford 2018
Often taking the back off and rooting about can help us understand how something behaves the way it does.
The Enlightenment

Joseph Wright of Derby: “A Philosopher Lecturing on the Orrery” 1766
Rene Descartes 1596-1650
John Locke 1632-1704

Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690)

"White paper, void of all character"
Everyone “thinks” in the same way.
The cocktail of reductionism...

The Enlightenment cocktail has given rise to:

- A **reductionist epistemology** - knowledge as simple data.

- A **passive understanding of human cognition** - the human consciousness as an empty receptacle.

- A **limited understanding of the complexities of how people actually think**.

A much reduced understanding of human experience leading to:

- **Positivism** - knowledge as label
- **Behaviourism** - cf. Skinner, ‘operant conditioning’. Human being as “rat in a maze”.
The resulting pedagogy...

...leading to an approach to education that has privileged **precision of transmission**, the **uniformity** of received dogma and evaluation by **continual standardised testing**.
Totalism

The purpose of education is thus construed as:

The accurate reproduction of a data set found in one conscious mind inside another conscious mind via a value neutral process of transmission.

This prioritising of ‘one self’ over ‘another’ has been referred to by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas as Totalism. (1906-95)

Totalism is fundamentally an act of violence where one isolated self seeks to subsume another into itself largely out of fear of difference.

“To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But it also means: to be taught.” - Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority
While the Enlightenment influence on HE pedagogy continued to gain ground even by the mid 19th Century a more liberal understanding still persisted in the writings of, for example, John Henry Newman.

In his justly influential collection of essays “The Idea of a University” (1852) he lays out his vision for the liberal university experience that prioritizes

• Communities of knowledge
• Nuanced educational context
• The establishing of patterns of thought
• The development of transferable skills.

Graduate attributes:

“A habit of mind ... which lasts through life, of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom; ...This then I would assign as the special fruit of the education furnished at a University, as contrasted with other places of teaching or modes of teaching. This is the main purpose of a University in its treatment of its students.”
Connectivism Learning Theory

George Siemens (2005) and Stephen Downes (2005)

Adapted from Hill & Crevola (unpublished)
Bringing it back to earth - Current drivers...

Both the NSS and TEF results reveal a growing dissatisfaction among students with their HE experience that they recognise, at some tacit level, as malfunctioning.

**HEA Student Academic Experience Survey 2017:**
An ongoing decline in student perception of the value of their HE experience. **Value perception lower than 40% across all main institutions.**

“Teaching quality stands out as being a major driver of value, with several of the questions which rate teaching staff being identified as having the strongest relationships with value for money. This consolidates the importance of teaching and provides a consistent view for the sector that a focus on teaching is likely to pay dividends in terms of student views of their experience.” (HEPI 2017 p16)
Some alarming trends

![Graph showing the value for money of a present course over years]

**Value for money of your present course**

- **Good/Very Good**
  - 2007: 44%
  - 2012: 53%
  - 2013: 50%
  - 2014: 44%
  - 2015: 40%
  - 2016: 37%
  - 2017: 35%

- **Poor/Very Poor**
  - 2007: 22%
  - 2012: 18%
  - 2013: 21%
  - 2014: 26%
  - 2015: 29%
  - 2016: 32%
  - 2017: 34%

*Base: All respondents. 2007 (14,859); 2012 (9,058); 2013 (17,090); 2014 (15,046); 2015 (15,129); 2016 (15,221); 2017 (14,057).*
### Teaching quality and workload

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>All respondents</th>
<th>Students at alternative providers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Base size (all respondents excluding N/A)</td>
<td>(14,057)</td>
<td>(78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All teaching staff encouraged you to take responsibility for your own learning</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All teaching staff clearly explained course goals and requirements</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All teaching staff motivated you to do your best work</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All teaching staff helped you to explore your own areas of interest</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total contact hours attended</td>
<td>12.14 hours</td>
<td>11.92 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total workload</td>
<td>30.42 hours</td>
<td>28.35 hours</td>
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</table>
"Analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data from NSS shows that the University must improve it service across a range of areas. Those in need of the greatest attention relate to:

• The quality of teaching, and staff professionalism, availability, and communication.
• Course organisation, information availability, and convenience and clarity of timetabling.
• Timely and helpful feedback on assessments, and assessment spacing.
• Distinct and coherent learning communities built around our subjects and departments."

- Vice Chancellors office in its Action Plan following the results of the 2017 NSS.
295 institutions in total:

50% Silver
24% Bronze – a threshold award at best.

Even those institution normally associated with quality within the sector have not shown themselves to be beyond criticism.

21 **Russell Group** universities only 8 Gold – LSE gaining Bronze

**HEA 2017 Survey**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Staff</th>
<th>RG</th>
<th>P92</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encouraged independence?</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful?</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting?</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivational?</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The 4th Emergency Service…?
Not part of the solution...

The familiar “bolt-on” or “separate” approach to study or key skills has been widely criticised as largely infective especially when dealing with an increasingly heterogeneous student population.

“On the grounds of both educationally relevant theory and actual practice, it is argued that ‘separate’ provision of the ‘academic support’ type has a limited impact, and that a mix of semi-integrated and integrated models of curriculum provision offers better prospects for helping a wide spectrum of students to succeed at university.” – Digby Warren. (2002) Curriculum Design in a Context of Widening Participation in Higher Education.

Phenomenologically the suggestion that "skills", of any sort, might be meaningfully taught outside the context of a specific discourse is most certainly open to critique and, to my mind is still very much an approach rooted in the Enlightenment model previously sketched out above.
“Embedding” and The Proximity Myth

As a counter to this potentially alienating notion of ‘bolt-on’ study skills support the term "embedded" has often been deployed as code for a provision that seeks to integrate itself more closely within the student's wider educational experience On the face of it this would seem to be a laudable development, however I believe the term to have been widely misconstrued.

David Hume (1711-76) draws our attention to a major problem here when he maintained that there is no logical connection between cause and effect other than proximity.

Disengaged events often appear connected simply because they are seen side by side.
Embedding

“Embeddedness", with regard to academic skills support, needs be construed in a manner that goes significantly beyond merely running study skills classes in the same buildings as the subject specific classes are run. To equate embeddedness with juxtaposition is a category mistake.

The term "embedded" received its defining treatment in the work of the economist Karl Polanyi, elder brother to the perhaps better-known philosopher Michael Polanyi.

The economy is not separate from the rest of human life, it is integral to it. Economic "bolt-ons" such as protectionism and government bailouts only serve to illustrate the failure of an economy that pretends to operate in isolation to the wider human context and the ultimate inadequacy of these supporting interventions.
The Lessons...

All human constructs such as economics and education are inherently "embedded" within the lives of those engaged with them.

Malfunctions occur when this embeddedness is ignored, marginalised, misunderstood and left undeveloped.

Interventions are thus always remedial and merely highlight rather than address malfunction.

This raises a number of serious issues for any institution that seeks to provide meaningful skills support principally - Where and how ought such support to be embedded if indeed it should be at all?
Stuff that we don’t really have time for…

“Subsidiary and focal awareness are mutually exclusive. If a pianist shifts his attention from the piece he is playing to the observation of what he is doing with his fingers while playing it, he gets confused and may have to stop. This happens generally if we switch our focal attention to particulars of which we had previously been aware only in their subsidiary role.”

(Personal Knowledge 1958 p. 56)
So…

When applied to our discussion of academic skills support Polanyi’s observations would seem to suggest that any attempt to direct focal awareness away from actual study and towards the skills and processes associate with study is to court malfunction. Any change in focal awareness is likely to impact on your tacit ability to deploy the required skills successfully.

“Our subsidiary awareness of tools and probes can be regarded now as the act of making them form a part of our own body…We pour ourselves out into them and assimilate them as parts of our own existence. We accept them existentially by dwelling in them.” (Polanyi, M. p. 59).
...where does this leave us?

In the best of all possible worlds the ideal response to a malfunction is to stop using the damaged item, pull out the plug so that nobody gets a nasty shock, and then decide whether the thing can be effectively repaired or whether it needs to be replaced with a brand-new upgrade.

Realpolitik makes this a total non-starter. The sector is not going to dry-dock their universities while their hulls are inspected for leaks and their critical systems are replaced. A thoroughgoing exercise in embedding tacit skills within an institution’s entire suite of programmes would seem to be entirely impractical and economically unviable.
Tinkering with the power on?

“The effective development of institutional approaches to teaching excellence more generally by higher education providers…Requires approaches to be embedded, i.e. a whole institutional approach to developing, implementing and evaluating strategies and processes which support excellence.” - HEA (2017) Evidencing teaching excellence p106

Nobody must get hurt – we cannot afford to experiment with student’s lives. We are largely insulated from poor pedagogic choices, they aren’t.

Continue to move away from prioritising the A & E model which reflects an interventionist approach that institutionalises pedagogic malfunction.

Change focal awareness away from students themselves and towards curriculum development and subject tutors?
Re-Focus?

- It could be argued that to implement truly embedded support for HE study skills tutors need to largely abandon students per se.

- Focus may need to be upon contributing towards the generation and development of learning environments that tacitly reflect the skillsets and tools that we would wish a graduate to embody at the level of subsidiary focus.

- Skills need to be present at the design level of individual courses and supported by discourse specialists.