

KNOWLEDGE-BASED SKILLS

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At last, there seems to be a growing revolt against the Labour Government’s seeming wish to cramp education into pure skills acquisition, often glossed as ‘transferable skills’. For example, motions at the UCU Conference in May 2008 (as reported in *THE* 22-28 May 2008) rejected an instrumentalist approach to *education-for-immediate-job-skills* in favour of a much more productive and flexible *education-for-life*.

Such assertions and resolutions, however, are not enough. Damage is already being done within the Higher Education system, in a well-meant but pedagogically mistaken attempt to respond to government pressure. Thus skills-only courses are being introduced everywhere, to show that Universities are on-message. The aim is to placate the auditors and funding councils, by showing that all the right boxes can be ticked to show delivery.

Yet no proof has ever been supplied that this arrangement actually produces the required pedagogic outcome. And, in fact, it doesn’t. Technical and presentational skills taught in isolation, outside a knowledge framework, are hard to absorb and quickly forgotten.

Who has not had the experience of being instructed in some new technique or methodology, for example when acquiring a new machine or gadget? At the time, everything seems clear. But, unless the information

is underpinned by a deeper understanding and engrained by regular practice, memories of the instruction quickly fade, despite people's best intentions. Thus it often happens that, after a lapse of time, the instruction and learning has to be done all over again.

Take the case of History, which is a subject that employs many craft skills. These are best learned, as in a traditional apprenticeship, 'on the job', when they become knowledge-based. Now, however, there is pressure everywhere to provide separate courses on historical skills. The result is a fragmented set of sessions that fail to hold the students' attention. One week it is *Databases for Historians*; next week, the significance of *Oral History*; then the uses of *Prosopography* (the technique of group biography); or then *Advice for Historians in the Archive*; and so forth, all the way through to a culminating session on *Ethical Dilemmas for Historians*. Each session is relevant and important in the right context – but a skills-only course lacks the framework of a developing knowledge-based programme that will provide such a context.

Students become frustrated and bored. They are all required to sit through everything, whatever their prior expertise. Skills that they have encountered in BA courses are described again in MA courses and then, if they continue further, in courses on Skills for PhD students. There is no scope for flexible adjustment to individual requirements. Students protest or simply absent themselves. They don't learn the things that they need to learn.

The Skills courses are generally put together by committee. Indeed, it is often hard to find tutors who are willing to teach skills-only, with the result that the task is done by a rota of conscripts, adding further

fragmentation to an already fragmented programme. Valuable educational time is being squandered. An air of obedient weariness characteristically envelops these skills-only courses, instead of the enthusiasm and commitment that good teaching and learning require.

I was recently required, as part of a process of syllabus ‘reform’, to subdivide a successful MA course on the genesis and meanings of historical Concepts and Skills. Now there are two sundered half-units. The result is that the Concepts half-unit is too heady and overwhelming, unleavened by the practical processes. And the Skills half-unit is too bitty, boring, and counter-productive, despite the best efforts of the tutors. And why has this been done? No-one really wanted the change. No students had requested it. But the substitution was apparently ‘required’ by the *Zeitgeist*, as interpreted by University policy-makers and academic course validators.

As a result, the push to teach skills in separate courses is over-riding the professional advice of the tutors who actually teach these desirable things. It is hard to explain to complaining students that changes are being made simply ‘because they are expected’ by distant committees rather than because participating tutors or students actually want them.

Providing separate courses on knowledge and on skills is like providing separate courses on walking with the right leg and walking with the left leg. Both teaching experiences are devalued. And the skills component is particularly damaged, leaving the students hobbling awkwardly with a mish-mash of ‘unlocated’ and easily forgotten information. Hence at some future date they will need instruction all over again.

So education everywhere should return to conveying embedded skills. Certainly, such teaching needs to be done much more explicitly than was done in the old days. Learning embedded skills without being able to identify what they are is not good enough. But such an explicit awareness is not hard to integrate into a knowledge-based syllabus, with a carefully graduated programme.

In other words, skills-only courses that look good on the audit trail but don't work should be axed. And teachers should continually remind the world of the great educational truth: **real skills depend upon real knowledge.**