The development of academic skills: an investigation into the mechanisms of integration within and external to the curriculum of first-year undergraduates

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DECLARATION

I declare that this work has not been previously accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted for any other degree.

I further declare that this thesis is the result of my own independent work and investigation, except where otherwise stated (a bibliography is appended).

Finally, I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photography and inter-library loan, and for the title and abstract to be made available to outside organisations.

Signed ________________________________

Peter Redding
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I would like to thank Professors Eleri Jones and Janet Laugherne whose patient and measured attention allowed me to grapple with new territories and frame my own thoughts on a perplexing range of areas. I am grateful for the support and guidance of all the kind folks in UWIC’s Learning and Teaching Development Unit. And on the other end of the spectrum, I have to thank a special furry friend whose persistent cheerfulness and unconditional love saved me from insanity on many occasions.
ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates a change management project involving the attempts of a university faculty to develop the academic skills of first-year undergraduates. While much of this effort had taken place within stand-alone modules dedicated to research skills or personal development, it was recognised that there were multiple influences shaping the student experience. Therefore, the project sought to achieve a more integrated approach, as guided by current pedagogical theory and understandings of organisational behaviour. The project was conducted within an over-arching framework of action research, in which each year of delivery represented iterative cycles with modifications. In order to further investigate the practices and their context, a series of semi-structured, qualitative interviews were conducted with key personnel who had all contributed, in some way, to skills development throughout the organisational structure of the university. The interviews used a form of projective technique which focussed the participants on their roles within the organisation, their relationships with the curriculum and university departments, as well as their place within the student experience. The resultant data was analysed through a grounded theory approach. The analysis provided factual data, unique perspectives and, perhaps more importantly, a more holistic overview. From this, it was possible to propose a new analytical tool for guiding future efforts, one which encompassed the theoretical underpinnings of teaching and learning within HE, with the pragmatic considerations of implementation, thus combining pedagogical theory and management theory. Paradoxically, the paradigm embraced the instrumental or utilitarian tendencies exhibited by some students in order to achieve the longer-term goal of producing independent learners. This emergent paradigm guided further interventions which acted at a local level to foster better communication among key players and to integrate the contents with the wider curriculum and student experience.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

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This thesis investigates a change management project in which a university faculty is attempting to develop skills within first-year undergraduates. The main focus is on academic skills, sometimes referred to as study skills. As will be seen, these terms can be enigmatic, if not contentious. In the UK, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) refers to key skills, a term devised primarily for curricular design at the primary and secondary school level, but now commonly adopted for use in higher education (HE). They are categorised as follows:

- Application of number
- Communication
- Improving own learning and performance
- Information and communication technology
- Problem solving
- Working with others

(QCA, 2004)

However, the literature review below will discuss how there are multiple terminologies, continuous repackaging of concepts, and considerable debate over their application if not their validity and appropriateness in HE. This project will focus on a practical definition of academic skills, borrowed in part from Cottrell (2001):
those skills needed by first-year undergraduate students for success at university.

Therefore, throughout this thesis academic skills and study skills will be used as terms of practice within a specific context. They will also be placed within the context of wider academic discussions of a skills agenda.

1.1 Background, Aims and Objectives

The setting for this work is a Welsh university, referred to as The University (in order to maintain some semblance of anonymity). It is characterised as a post-92 university in that it became a university during a period when Britain was seeking to widen participation in HE. Its historical background was primarily as a vocational institution, specialising in various professional fields. More recent strategic changes have included the gaining of taught- and research-degree awarding powers, with attempts to increase the research profile while maintaining a reputation for learning and teaching. The University is currently organised into five Schools, which align with broad subject areas. The focus of this study is on a School of Management, and will be referred to as The Faculty. The term ‘faculty’ was chosen to make a clear distinction from primary and secondary ‘schools’, as much of the subsequent discussion will involve pedagogic approaches used throughout all levels of education.

This project primarily looks at several taught modules that have been delivered to first-year undergraduate students within The Faculty and their relation to
other forms of student support and development. The modules, while similar in content and learning outcomes, have been called Professional Development 1, Research Methods 1, Research Skills 1 and most recently Academic Skills for Business 1. They have all operated within a curricular matrix and typically run in parallel with five other modules during the first term. The Faculty has been undergoing a series of portfolio reviews which seek, among other things, to rationalise similar modules across a range of programmes which include: business and management studies, international business, marketing, retail, hospitality, events management, tourism, and computing studies. As such, these skills-based modules have undergone changes in staffing, delivery patterns, content, methods and programme-specific focus. As of Academic Year 2010/2011, all first-year students within the Faculty take Academic Skills for Business 1, now a 20-credit module. The evolution of this module and the guiding principles is the subject of this project.

From the outset, these various skills-based modules presented significant challenges, not the least of which was engagement of students who often voted with their feet by not attending or participating. Similarly, the modules often existed in a subject-specific curriculum where other staff held varying beliefs on the value and place of skills within HE. Through a process of collegiate (if not fractious) negotiations, a skills-based module remained an integral aspect of all programmes. The Faculty had invested in staffing skills modules, but was also ensuring that non-academic staff were supporting such development, for example by involving library staff and later through the creation of a dedicated
team of personal tutors. Despite early attempts at highlighting the importance of skills and dedicating resources to their development, there was evidence that students still were not coping with some of the basics, notably aspects of referencing, plagiarism, time management, independent research, etc.

Therefore, for the sake of this project, these concerns can be expressed as the following research question:

Given the multiple influences that shape a curriculum and the student experience, how can a faculty best develop the academic skills of new undergraduates?

As the evolution of the modules became the focus of this change management project, the following aims and objectives began to crystallise:

Aim:

To achieve an integrated approach to developing academic skills within The Faculty’s programmes, taking into account the student experience as well as the multiple players within a complex organisation.

Objectives:
• to undertake a critical review of relevant literature on the theoretical underpinnings and practical approaches to academic skills enhancement in HE, with a view to synthesise a model of best practice;

• to investigate current good practice within and outside of The University, critically evaluating against the models of best practice identified in the first objective;

• to explore how all key stakeholders contribute to the enhancement of academic skills in order to identify success factors, barriers to effective implementation and any policy issues affecting the processes;

• to propose a new analytical tool for curriculum design within an institutional framework and make recommendations for institutional policy or other processes that impact on achieving an integrated approach to study skills support.

1.2 Project Overview

This thesis is an analysis of a change management project that spans a number of years, and in many ways is still ongoing. While direct involvement started much earlier, the more focussed and formal investigations took place during the academic years 07/08, 08/09, 09/10 and the planning stages for 10/11. The overall project can best be seen as a form of action research.

Action research has an established history of application in the social sciences, with many of its tenets tracing back to the ideas of Kurt Lewin who studied corporate organisational behaviour and the difficulties of bringing about change
(Cole, 2004; Koshy, 2005). It was seen as a collaborative process in which participants, often employees in a workplace, analysed problems and implemented solutions. As a procedure, it distinguishes itself from the classical ‘scientific’ methods of investigation in that the researcher is often a part of what is being researched. The implications of this are explored further in the methodology chapter. The processes of action research evolved within the context of management studies, yet have increasingly been applied to academic practice and even curricular development (Cousin, 2008; Gray, et al., 2007; Koshy, 2005). It has been accepted as a standard tool in introductory texts on research methods, and applicable in a wide variety of contexts (Collis & Hussey, 2009; Cousin, 2008; Crotty, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Patton, 2002; Saunders, et al., 2007).

At its simplest, action research can be described as a series of procedural steps: formulating a problem, collection of information, formulating specific action, implementing the action, monitoring, evaluating the effectiveness, and repeating the pattern through iterative cycles. This is not unlike the Deming Cycle of Plan, Do, Study, Act – a widely accepted mantra from the proponents of quality management and incorporated into recognised management systems (Aguayo, 1990; Munro-Faure, et al., 1995; Sheldon, 1997). Such an approach is popular within the corporate sector and seen as fundamental for planning and executing change and bringing about continuous improvement. Bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the UK have adopted many of these tenets, with expectations that they will be applied at the
strategic and local levels (QAA, 2006). Application of action research within corporate systems and as purely academic research does not differ fundamentally. Within the context of purely academic research, there would appear to be different expectations as to the nature and rigour of data collection, e.g. the use of academically recognised sources of literature, and research methods firmly grounded in attributable epistemologies.

Recent discourses on action research highlight how it is not just a methodology, but can also be seen as a platform for exploring epistemologies and philosophies. Carr (2006) for example describes how it has evolved from a set of positivist techniques to become methodology which embraces fundamental ethics and values, historically in line with ‘practical philosophy’ established by Aristotle. Whitehead (2009) describes action research’s relation to ‘living theory’ in which individuals generate personal theories that very much recognise the own ‘I’ in their quest to improve their own practice, in his case, specifically improving the learning experience of his students. Altrichter et al. (2002, p. 130) encapsulate action research’s unique approach as an “enquiry with people, rather than research on people”. These epistemological distinctions are explored further in the methodology chapter.

Therefore, action research seems well suited for investigations into the workings of a university, and even more so for a professional doctorate whose aim is to bring about change within an organisation, while demonstrating thorough and justifiable analysis.
The process of action research can be depicted graphically.

Such a depiction lends itself well to illustrating the project at hand, in both the wider history of the evolving module, and the more specific process of this professional doctorate. It is possible to roughly align the action cycles with the academic years. Admittedly this is a bit of artistic licence, but it does help show the major events and the loose chronology. The following diagram shows the overall process and highlights the more important stages.

**Figure 1.1: Action Research Cycles (after Saunders, 2007)**
As will be discussed in later chapters, a professional doctorate places a significant emphasis on the reflection on the process of the project, in addition to the academic analysis of the particular data. From the outset it became obvious that there would be challenges in mapping the expectations of a traditional doctoral format onto a workplace scenario where external factors often control events. This tension is especially explored in the methodology section. It does however highlight the artificiality of presenting the overall work in distinct sequential stages, e.g. a literature review which produces fully formed themes to then feed into a methodology which would then produce results which are then used to bring about change within the organisation through some sort of intervention. In practice, there were many parallel and concurrent changes which were a result of intermediate conclusions and fortuitous timings. Nevertheless, the presentation as follows draws out the highlights of the process. Admittedly it packages events and ideas in such a way as to give a more narrative structure.
1.3 Layout of Thesis

This thesis is divided into distinct chapters, each of which concentrates on particular aspects of the overall narrative of this project.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the Literature Review and Secondary Data. It provides a discussion of educational theory, as influenced by psychology, philosophy and science, and as interpreted within the context of organised educational systems such as primary, secondary and tertiary levels. The chapter identifies emergent themes that appeared to be most relevant to the project at hand, and worth exploring in greater depth within the organisation. The chapter also analyses secondary data in the form of postings from a national discussion board devoted to learning development in higher education. While this analysis was not part of the formal methodology of this project, it provided valuable insight into the themes which would be explored further in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 is the Methodology. As discussed throughout, the overall project involved numerous methodologies: whether the over-arching concept of action research or the smaller data gathering exercises for refining aims and objectives. Chapter 3 however represents a more formal and in-depth approach to developing procedures which address the clarified aims and objectives. It provides justifications for a particular qualitative approach to generating primary data, and places it within the context of epistemologies and prevailing paradigms. It discusses in detail the mechanical aspects of collecting
and analysing the data, specifically, a series of interviews guided by projective techniques, whose transcripts were dissected, coded and interpreted.

Chapter 4 is the Results and Discussion which explores the qualitative data that has been generated and methodically analysed. It presents the emerging themes and begins to relate them to the concepts in order to produce theory.

Chapter 5 focuses on Theory and Application and brings together the themes from the literature review and the primary data and discusses them within an emerging paradigm. The chapter will then turn toward the practical application of the theory by discussing subsequent interventions that have taken place within The Faculty as a result of the research.

Following the Conclusions and References, additional appendices include the supporting material for the methodology, and a summary of the Personal Development Portfolio.
## Chapter 2: Literature Review and Secondary Data

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2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the academic literature surrounding education, skills and the learning process, particularly in higher education. To a great extent, it reflects investigations undertaken to formulate the aims and objectives of this change management project, before embarking on the more focused generation of primary data. However it was not a discrete step. As Figure 2.1 illustrates, it is the culmination of reviews throughout the overall process, perhaps more typical of iterative action research.

Figure 2.1: Reviewing Literature and other secondary data

The literature review investigates current and past theories which underpin this overall study, and identifies key concepts which can be explored further through the appropriate methodologies. The analysis of the literature begins with an evaluation of historical trends in educational theory and the more recent emergence of the field of pedagogy. It then focuses on pedagogical aspects of
HE, with particular emphasis on skills and skills development. The practical aspects of implementing these theories are then discussed within the context of management theory.

The chapter then looks at other secondary data, in the form of discussion boards from a community of HE learning developers in the UK. While not a strictly academic publication, the discussion boards offer a wealth of academic and practical data which have helped guide the overall project.

The chapter concludes by identifying emergent themes for consideration in subsequent investigations.

2.2 Historical Roots of Educational Theory

The understanding of study skills is inextricably bound together with the general concepts of education. In the 21st Century, the academic field of education is well established and contains a wide variety of branches, where subtle but crucial distinctions are made between seemingly similar concepts such as learning, teaching and developing skills. Historically, such differentiation is relatively recent. Nevertheless, the overall process of ‘education’ has been the subject of objective analysis for millennia. The evolution of educational theory provides us with some insight into current understandings of skills development in a modern university. This evolution has been influenced by philosophers, psychologists and social scientists.
It is easy to invoke the philosophies and methods of the ancient Greeks as early attempts to improve the process of education. The ideas of Plato and Socrates have survived in historical records and still have resonance with many of today's approaches. Socrates in particular was able to frame many of the basic questions of what we would now call epistemology, or the science of knowledge (Phillips, 2008; University of London, 2005). In order to know how to teach, we must have an appreciation of what it means to know. The philosophical musings of the Greek philosophers lay the groundwork for much of this Western intellectual tradition. Their writings however were not strictly conceptual.

In Plato's *Republic* he outlined a curriculum for educating the citizenry of a civilised Athens. And he did so by entering into a fictional dialogue – an educational device developed by his 'teacher' Socrates. This Socratic Method can give us insight into mechanics of education that are still accepted today. As Nails (2005) reminds us, the various teachings and dialogues of Socrates tend to be re-interpreted to fit each era. Fittingly in an era where education curricula now involve methodical and reproducible approaches to educating students, Socrates offers us a process to take students through. This process involves posing a thesis and a series of questions rather than factual statements. Students then engage in an argument which should, if all goes well, look at opposing interpretations of the thesis before arriving at a conclusion. Geen (2001) and others point out how this approach is the basis for subsequent techniques classified as 'heuristic', 'discovery' or 'problem-solving' methods, used by other educationalists discussed below.
Analyses of the Socratic Method and its appropriateness in education often involve the perceived role of the teacher and whether their role is authoritarian or not (Jarvis, 2006). Teaching styles and methods can exist along a continuum of teachers’ power relationships, where traditional didactic approaches represent the clear role of the teacher as being the authority and font of knowledge and the student the passive recipient. A Socratic Method offers the possibility of the teacher ceding increasing responsibility and authority to the student. Such concepts are explored below when discussing current pedagogical approaches such as student-centred learning. At any rate, in terms of a widespread adoption of the Socratic Method, there is little evidence that it was used as a basis for curricular design throughout the ages. Nevertheless, informal practices of questioning students during the course of ‘teaching’ surely existed alongside more conventional didactic methods.

Philosophies underpinning education progressed throughout the ages, reflecting the various eras, whether Roman, early Christian, or Renaissance. Educational historians, such as Power (1991), recount how the evolving philosophies explored the epistemologies and the role of education more so than offering practical insight into the process of educating students. Education was often seen as a method of maintaining doctrines and faith, just as Plato’s preoccupation was to achieve an idealised Athenian republic and to produce elite leaders. Not surprisingly, the Renaissance produced humanist thinkers who turned a scientifically objective eye toward producing practical solutions.
Vergerius, for example, expressed preferences for an education that was focussed on not only the classics, but also the specific aspects of grammar, rhetoric and logic. Here we see what might be the beginning of a curriculum that looks at content-specific knowledge (e.g. Greek and Roman history) plus something akin to the more generic skills (application of logic, rules for grammar etc.) It represented pre-set units of learning, designed to take the students through a process. The Renaissance also saw the rise of what are now recognised as universities in which scholars dedicated themselves to advancing knowledge as well as educating students. Delanty (2001) describes how medieval and post-Enlightenment universities concentrated on the analysis and propagation of seminal texts whether doctrinal or, increasingly, scientific. The practical mechanisms of education seem to be less important than the philosophical. Nevertheless, academics such as Delanty and Power describe how universities increasingly embraced views of knowledge and education which could be described in terms of the seven liberal arts (grammar, rhetoric, dialectics, arithmetic, astronomy and music). Again, many of these concepts are analogous to what we would now refer to as academic skills.

It must be highlighted that most all discussion of education throughout the ages seemed to be concerned with education as applied to elite. Plato was focussed on producing leaders and a ruling class, the church educated their clergy, and the Renaissance leaders established a system for creating intellectuals. This focus on elitism overlooks many of the issues developed below when addressing subjects such as widening participation and the heterogeneous
profile of today’s students. It should also be acknowledged that parallel to the development of universities there was a similar evolution of training taking place among the guilds and trades. Often overlooked in discussions of education, the system of apprenticeship followed what are now commonly embraced tenets of experiential learning. That is, students (although they may not have been called that) were exposed to ideas (albeit of a practical nature) and tested on their ability to reproduce (often more physical than mental). It is perhaps the mental aspect of their skills that is downplayed. Again, there is a strong element of societal prejudice inherent in such a distinction. Nevertheless, the learning process fits nicely into learning styles and cycles that are discussed below.

2.3 Toward a Science of Pedagogy

The rationalist thinking that spread during the Renaissance manifested itself in a number of fields for the next several centuries. Scientific, objective scrutiny was applied not only to the hard sciences, but increasingly to areas less associated with predictable laws of nature. By the 19th century, scientists turned toward the study of human behaviour and psychology. Some of the branches of psychology very much influence our current understanding of learning and teaching. With the rise of psychology, the study of education moves from the theoretical and philosophical realm to the more practical.

Behaviourism is a branch of psychology most often associated with Pavlov and Skinner (Gross, 2005; Long, 2007). Pavlov used the famous salivating dogs to illustrate that many species can be conditioned to respond to certain stimuli.
may be unpalatable to equate conditions which result in salivating dogs to the loftier aspirations of modern education. Nevertheless, the science does offer a framework and vocabulary for analysing predictable behaviour.) Skinner expanded upon Pavlov’s theories of classical conditioning by offering a vision of operant conditioning. His theories dealt more with the modification of voluntary behaviour. His complex experiments on rats, pigeons and humans helped him develop theories specifically relevant to human education. On the more practical side is the recognisable role of positive and negative reinforcement during education.

The implications for learning and curriculum design are evident. On a mechanical level, behaviourism gives us a formula for eliciting a response from students: Perform a task, receive credit toward a qualification. This has tangible benefits for producing results. However, as discussed below, this approach may well run counter to our desires for ‘deep learning’. The behaviourist model also contributes to our understanding of instrumentalism as currently displayed by many university students (discussed below).

Another set of educational theories that came from the scientific background of the 19th and early 20th century are those attributed to Piaget. Piaget was firmly in the positivist/rationalist camp, using experiments to observe and codify human behaviour. Piaget’s theories of cognitive development and genetic epistemology are considered by many to be the basis of much of education theory today (Gross, 2005; Jarvis, 2006; McNally, 1974; L. Smith, et al., 1997)
Perhaps his most famous contribution to human psychology is his depiction of straight-forward stages of cognitive development. He observed that infants tend to follow the same patterns for acquiring information and making sense of it as they grow up. Early stages involve differentiating between self and objects, later stages involve classification. Eventually, as children move toward puberty, they start to handle concepts such as abstraction and conceptualisation.

Piaget also built upon prevalent theories of constructivism, which say that learners ‘construct’ knowledge based on acquiring and processing information. Piaget articulated two basic mechanisms: assimilation and accommodation. **Assimilation** involves incorporating new information into pre-existing understandings or models known as schema or schemata. These schema do not essentially change, allowing us to continually build upon our personalised understanding of the world around us. However, this mechanism is disturbed when we encounter concepts that do not fit nicely into existing schema. Therefore, there are times when a learner must **accommodate** new ideas and create new schema. In Piaget’s vocabulary, we are constantly in a state of **equilibration** as we try to balance these different processes of acquiring knowledge. Critics through the years have always been quick to point out that perhaps cognitive development is not so easy to categorise, and that the stages are not so discrete (Illeris, 2007; Jarvis, 2006; Jarvis, et al., 1998). However Piaget’s ideas have endured within education circles because they lend themselves to the task of preparing an educational process. We may not fully understand the individual intricacies of how the brain is absorbing information.
Nevertheless his theories give us a framework and a set of expectations that tell us that we should try to align our teaching with our understanding of the student’s readiness to accept it.

Others have built upon Piaget’s approach toward cognitive development. Notably, the works of Lev Vygotsky are having resurgence in pedagogical discussions (Bruner, 2006; Illeris, 2007; Long, 2007). As a constructivist, Vygotsky also acknowledged that individuals methodically construct meaning. However, whereas Piaget emphasised natural and biological progression of stages of learning, Vygotsky focussed on the aspects of social interaction. Acquisition of knowledge may naturally occur in early life, but Vygotsky also believed that our interaction with each other increasingly determines how much we learn. His ideas are encapsulated in his theoretical *Zone of Proximal Development* which he defined as,

“...the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers”

(Vygotsky, 1978 as cited in Illeris, 2007, p. 59)

In other words, individuals need help in learning the more complex, conceptual and abstract ideas. This cognitive development can be supported with ‘scaffolding’ provided by educators. These approaches represent a significant shift in attitudes toward education. As a professional, an educator becomes
more than a ‘sage on a stage’ and becomes responsible for engineering a process that meets the psychological needs of the learner.

The implications for Vygotsky’s approach are both practical and philosophical. As Cottrell (2008) points out, it is certainly the role of the educators in HE to develop skills such as evaluation and criticality. In Vygotsky’s world, this is not something that comes naturally to learners. Rather, there must be a process which supports these goals. Learning developers therefore must devote time to the mechanics of this scaffolding, in addition to imparting factual information. In a more philosophical sense, Vygotsky also prepares us for challenging the nature and purpose of higher education. Jarvis (1998) rightly points out that Vygotsky emphasised the potential of learners rather than their achievements and inherent capabilities. This attitude seems to fit well within more recent depictions of higher education as opportunities for all rather than bastions of elitism (also discussed below).

Building on the ideas of Piaget and Vygotsky are the works of Jerome Bruner, another constructivist, developing further theories of how children construct meaning (Bruner, 2006; Cottrell, 2001; Jarvis, 2006; Long, 2007). He described three modes of thinking:

- *iconic* – typified by visual representation;
- *enactive* – dealing with physical movement or control; and
- *symbolic* – concerning abstractions such as words.
These categories help us understand the natural processes that children use to acquire knowledge, but also give us clues as to how educators can guide the learners. The enactive mode has a clear relation to the concepts of experiential learning, while the symbolic mode is relevant to the increasingly difficult task of developing the critical abilities of learners. Bruner often alluded to Vygotsky’s zone of proximal learning and the role of scaffolding. While he acknowledged that schools may not be able to provide scaffolding to the same extent as parents, they can clearly play an important role in engineering education. Eloquently, he summarised the theoretical and practical relevance of Vygotsky’s concepts:

But how does pedagogy work? Through shielding a learner from distraction, by forefronting crucial features of a problem, by sequencing the steps to understanding, by promoting negotiation, or by promoting some other form of ‘scaffolding’ the task at hand.

(Bruner, 2006, p. 192)

Bruner also reflects some of the more recent shifting paradigms of post-modern thought. In later writings, he characterised only two major modes of learning or thought: _logico-scientific_ and _narrative_ (Bruner, 2006). In the former mode, a child applies constraining principles and tests their understanding of the world around them. Knowledge is verifiable and subconscious hypotheses can be constructed. The language adopted to describe this mode fully reflects positivist and scientific terminology. However, Bruner goes on to embrace the value of narrative – a decidedly less scientific mode which involves storytelling, drama and historical accounts. In short, it deals with emotional and moral
information which have always been problematic in the scientific context. Narrative is concerned with value and morality, while logic is value free. Bruner also reminds us that whereas Aristotle may have said ‘Art imitates life’, there is perhaps more truth in Oscar Wilde’s ‘Life imitates art’. The narratives and discourses that are found in culture are very much involved in how we process information and construct meaning, and are therefore fundamental to learning.

2.4 Pedagogy and Application

Piaget and his intellectual descendents seem to be typical of the new breed of educational scientists and philosophers in the 20th century, as the field of pedagogy became more recognised and better defined. Their contribution is distinguished from previous theorists by their more explicit aims of affecting change in education. Granted, the ancient Greeks highlighted the importance of education. And while the Socratic Method is now widely recognised as a teaching method, it is questionable whether his contributions were perceived by his contemporaries as anything more than philosophical.

Even the educational theories developed in the 19th century tended to fall more clearly in the camps of psychology and philosophy. The scientists, using their technical/rationalist observations, help us understand how the human brain works and allow us to make certain predictions of how we behave. Yet again, there isn’t the explicit link between those sciences and the increasingly professionalized field of education. On the other hand, theories that evolved in the 20th century show a more direct relationship between the field of pedagogy
and teaching within an educational system. The term pedagogy can be traced back to 16th century in a variety of contexts (OED, 2009). Yet the 20th century saw an elevation of the field, one with explicit recognition by educational establishments, academic publications and, perhaps most importantly, governmental institutions.

Symbolic of this emergence of pedagogy is John Dewey who straddled the fields of psychology, philosophy and pedagogy. His contributions to philosophy again involved epistemology, carrying on the debates over whether knowledge can be innate or derived as a consequence of experimentation and an interaction with society (Anderson, 2005; Field, 2007). Arguably more important were his series of books published in the early decades of the last century which explicitly dealt with pedagogy and schooling, culminating in *Democracy and Education*. In them, he sets out a clear manifesto for the role of education and a need for a methodical approach:

> There is... a marked difference between the education which every one gets from living with others... and the deliberate educating of the young.

*(Dewey, 1916, Section 1)*

As with Plato, Dewey placed education high among the concerns for building a strong society. His pedagogic beliefs involved experiential learning, experimentation and the use of reproducible methods for cultivating the learning. He goes on to elevate the importance, if not status, of teaching:
…the method of teaching is the method of an art, of action intelligently directed by ends. But the practice of a fine art is far from being a matter of extemporized inspirations.  

(Dewey, 1916, Section 1)

His vision has been credited by many as being a catalyst for educational reform in the US (Anderson, 2005; Field, 2007; Geen, 2001). The theories of Dewey move education away from didactic approaches, where education is seen as a process in which teachers transmit knowledge to students. Dewey and his followers emphasised that children (and adults) learn through experience, rather than passively absorbing information from authoritative sources. These ‘heuristic’ or ‘discovery’ or even ‘problem solving’ methods place an emphasis on the active role of the students in learning, as opposed to the already established active role of the teacher in teaching. Dewey’s approach is reminiscent of Socrates’ in that it involves questioning, and invites the student to go through a process of discovering the answer.

Heurism and experiential learning were embraced by many of the pedagogical thinkers of the 20th Century. Kolb is often cited for his model on learning cycles (Gross, 2005; Jarvis, 2006). In a simple four stage model, he describes the various stages that a learner goes through as they acquire and process new information. Students are exposed to a concrete experience which they can observe and reflect upon. As they learn, they begin to formulate the more
abstract concepts and derive generalisations. Finally, they can test these newly derived concepts on situations.

As with the stage theory of Piaget, the value of Kolb’s theory is more in providing a conceptual framework rather than pinning down an exact description of how a child might be learning. Kolb’s theories have acted as a springboard for reinterpretation. Jarvis et al. (1998) similarly use a graphical flow chart to show the various stages that a learner might go through, with the understanding that each might choose different paths at critical junctures. The practical implications of all these theories are obvious: students must be given the time to reflect and test, and educators must see their role as supporting all stages, and not simply as purveyors of knowledge and facts.

Pedagogy is, by its etymological definition, primarily concerned with educating children. However, many of the educational theories of the 20th Century saw a blurring of the lines between learning styles of adult and children. Again, experiential learning was a key mechanism in both. Knowles is credited with advancing the field of andragogy, i.e. the education of adults (Jarvis, et al., 1998; M. K. Smith, 2002). In his theories, experience plays a crucial role in that adults are able to build upon their already considerable base of experiences as they assimilate new information. The distinctions between andragogy and pedagogy begin to seem unnecessary when seen in the context of Piaget’s assimilation or Kolb’s learning cycles. Therefore, for the sake of subsequent
discussions here, the term pedagogy will be used to describe the science of learning, irrespective of the age of the learner.

Another influential proponent of experiential learning was Kurt Lewin who is associated with the field of *action research* (Saunders, et al., 2007; Schön, 1991). Action research also falls outside the neat confines of pedagogy in that it was originally an exploration of how learning occurs within organisations and the underlying psychology of change management. Lewin’s descriptions of a learning organisation that undergoes freezing and unfreezing are reminiscent of other cyclical descriptions of the processes learners undergo, as well as Piaget’s notions of disequilibration. And Schön (1991) has taken the concepts even further by explicitly acknowledging that throughout life, individuals tend to learn and solve problems based on what he describes as *knowledge-in-action* and *reflection-in-action*. These are concepts which, by his own admission, more closely resemble the fuzzier areas of intuition rather than the rational and scientific approaches of being taught by experts in a school setting. Practitioners in the real world, he asserts, tend to learn not through formalised methods, but through looser, independent learning which relies less on authoritative instruction.

The development of pedagogy in the 20th Century only serves to illustrate that it is not a homogeneous field, perhaps typical of social sciences as a whole. However in terms of its relation to the practical tasks of education, the important themes underline the shift away from didacticism and more toward experiential
learning and independent learning. The evolution of pedagogic theory in the last century also mirrored the conceptual debates surrounding epistemology. Piaget, with his experiments on children and pigeons was working within the classic framework of positivists and technical rationalists: hypotheses on learning were tested under laboratory conditions. On the other hand, theorists such as Schön firmly rejected the dogma of rationalism to embrace more interpretivist and constructivist views of the world.

The concepts of learning can be debated at the conceptual level using a variety of frameworks. However the 20th Century also saw attempts at the practical application of the theories. Granted, these approaches to learning represent a revival of ideas which can be traced back through Rousseau and Socrates (Dewey, 1916; Illeris, 2007). However, they seem to have had a resurgence at a time when there was enough political interest to gain more widespread acceptance and application. Educational reform in the 20th century involved specific political agencies whose remit was to improve primary and secondary education at a national scale, and to ensure some parity of experience. Such standardisation had the possibility of ensuring not only similar content being delivered, but also common approaches to teaching methods. And the burgeoning field of pedagogy was on hand to provide justification for government policy. The degree to which these theories have been wholly adopted in school education is debatable. Nevertheless they have been enshrined in teacher training which has ensured some level of permanency through government backing.
This linkage between educational theory and government policy brings us back to the notion of skills. The above theories of learning reinforce the idea that *how* we learn can be separated from *what* we learn. In other words, learning is not strictly dependent on the subject area. Therefore teachers (in whatever guise) are not just subject specialists; they should also be experts in developing learning skills. It is in this environment that the next development in pedagogy will be discussed: its acceptance and application in higher education.

### 2.5 The Pedagogy of HE

The role of pedagogy in influencing school policy and classroom practices seemed to be well established throughout the 20th Century. The same however cannot be said of HE. The debates concerning HE learning and teaching methods are more recent, although still have clear links to pedagogical theories applied in schools. This difference in timing and uptake may be down to a number of social, political and cultural factors, many of which are explored in later sections. Nevertheless, it is important to put it into the context of the differing goals of HE and secondary schools. In one sense, universities can be seen as a continuation of the processes of acquiring knowledge and factual information on certain subjects. However, the structure and methods of learning within universities is markedly different to schooling. Underpinning pedagogies must therefore reflect those differences.
As mentioned above, Vygotsky reinforced the idea that students in later stages of development need external 'scaffolding' in order to adopt more conceptual skills such as criticality. The ability to analyse, critically evaluate and synthesise information is generally accepted as being a goal of higher education. Therefore it would stand to reason that the role of HE educators is to develop these skills in particular, as well as impart subject-specific knowledge. The degree to which this naturally occurs is debatable. Perry (1970 as cited in Cottrell, 2001; Jarvis, et al., 1998) investigated how even the elite students at Harvard struggled with conceptual ideas in their early years of study. Perry described the development of learners from absolutist stances of right and wrong, through to relativist constructs more typical of independent thinking. As with previous pedagogic theories applied to primary and secondary education, the implication of Perry’s work is that HE curriculum needs to be structured as to encourage such a development. While other educationalists followed similar lines of investigation, there didn’t seem to be the same parallel interest from policy makers as had been exhibited for primary and secondary education. Nevertheless, there continued to be focussed research on the cognitive development that occurs during university study. As with Perry’s work, there was a continuing preoccupation with how and when (and if) students achieve the goal of being analytical, independent learners.

Marton and Säljö (1976) interviewed university students in depth to characterise their approaches to learning. They were able to characterise the various strategies and process of learning, describing them in terms of whether the
learner was engaged in *surface-level* or *deep-level* learning. Such a depiction is now commonly referred to as *surface learning* and *deep learning* (Cottrell, 2001; Gibbs, 1992; Ramsden, 2003). Säljö (1979) went on to further classify the students’ own perceptions of what it means to learn into five categories:

- Learning as a quantitative increase in knowledge.
- Learning as memorising.
- Learning as acquiring facts, skills and methods that can be retained and used as necessary.
- Learning as making sense or abstracting meaning.
- Learning as interpreting reality, or ‘personally meaningful learning’.

This spectrum of approaches reflects the more commonly recognised dual categorisation: surface learning is associated with the first three, i.e. the acquisition of facts and knowledge; deep learning is then the realm of the conceptual and abstract. Although a dual categorisation is somewhat simplistic, it has become central to the debate of how the process of education in universities can be enhanced in order to achieve better graduates, those who might enter the workforce and/or lifelong learning.

Learning or teaching the more conceptual aspects of knowledge is one of the greater challenges of ‘higher’ education. Recent pedagogic discourses invoke terms such as *troublesome knowledge* and *threshold concepts* to illustrate the recognisable phenomena in which students struggle to grasp certain key ideas which then prevent them from acquiring more knowledge in a particular area.
Subject specialists have recounted those areas unique to their field where they have had to spend extra time and effort in guiding the students through concepts which they themselves may have absorbed long ago; whether it is an economist explaining *opportunity costs* or a mathematician explaining *limits*, or even a physicist explaining why the best chefs have an innate understanding of the concept of *heat transfer*. There are concepts which, until they are conquered by the learner, are destined to be superficially memorised.

Many researchers have explicitly challenged the historical teaching methods used in universities as being impediments to deep learning. Gibbs (1992) and Ramsden (2003, 2008) have pulled together extensive data that suggest that standard didactic lectures and traditional exams may actually thwart the development of deep learning. Students may have a natural inclination and motivation toward intellectual exploration. Yet when faced with lectures where they sit passively while the lecturer imparts facts, the students may adopt strategies to receive the facts, without entering into the questioning and exploring that the above-mentioned pedagogical theories recognise. Similarly, end-of-year exams are then seen to be opportunities to regurgitate the contents of the lectures.

The basic tenets of experiential learning which seem to have been widely embraced in primary and secondary education appear to be less evident in HE. This may well be down to the professionalization of school teachers as
contrasted to the relative freedom and flexibility enjoyed by university staff in designing their own work. Despite the relative lack of a centralised approach to learning and teaching in HE, significant theoretical and practical research has been conducted in the later decades of the 20th century. Some of the major trends that are proving to be influential concern the role of assessment, personal development and problem-based learning.

One of the ways of implementing experiential learning is by reconceptualising the role of assessment. Proponents such as Black (2003; Black & Wiliam, 1998) remind us that assessment can be much more than a testing of a student’s success in retaining facts. Rather, assessment can be seen as a tool for learning rather than a tool for judging and classifying accomplishments. Assessment can come in a variety of tools and styles, ranging from diagnostic (measuring a starting point), formative (providing opportunities for testing understanding), through to summative (a more conventional take on exams). Formative assessment in particular plays an important role in experiential learning. As with the Kolb Learning Cycle, it acknowledges that the student must observe and reflect on a concept, and then test the implications before truly understanding it. If the purpose of an assessment is to demonstrate that a student has memorised facts, then the formative step of testing understanding could easily be skipped, leaving it questionable whether deep learning could occur. Formative assessment not only allows the teacher to give targeted feedback but also to modify their teaching to respond to areas of doubt in the students’ minds.
Gibbs and Simpson (2002) do acknowledge that formative assessment of a sort has long been established in British HE. They point out that the classic Oxbridge approach of small group or one-to-one tutorials are opportunities for immediate feedback and testing of ideas, central to the concept of formative assessment. However, they go on to describe how recent trends in the massification of HE and resource constraints have led to a reduction in the frequency of assignments and the quality and quantity of feedback.

Biggs (1999) speaks of the role of assessment and innovative techniques within a larger process of constructive alignment in which curriculum design follows a process of setting learning outcomes, and following them through an appropriate teaching method and assessment strategy. The strategy is especially relevant for HE insofar as how the learning outcomes are expressed. In other words, if the learning outcomes are explicitly concerned with a higher level of analysis, then appropriate formative assessment and feedback should be used to reinforce the desired level of analysis, or deep learning.

Another major trend in the evolution of HE pedagogy is the more explicit role of reflection and personal development. The notion of reflection has been acknowledged in the theory of pedagogy dealing with experiential learning. However, it’s questionable whether traditional approaches to HE have explicitly accounted for it. Whereas early proponents of reflection such as Schön looked at the value of reflection of adults in the workplace, Jarvis (2006) and Boud et
al. (1985) see reflective learning as important within the context of HE. Reflection becomes part of learning in the wider context of personal development. Advocates of experiential learning in HE promote tools such as learning logs, portfolios and diaries as tools that fit within an HE curriculum. These major trends in pedagogic techniques can be used in a coordinated way when designing a curriculum. The momentum for such ideas is reflected in the more recent policies surrounding Personal Development Planning in HE.

An even more radical departure from traditional HE methods can be found with problem-based learning (PBL) where the curriculum in a traditional sense is replaced with a process whose focus is independent learning, and the student sets the agenda. Boud and Felleti (as cited in Jarvis, 2006) trace the trend back to a number of US and Canadian institutions who experimented with delivery patterns among health science programmes. As they have evolved, PBL programmes are characterised not only by their underlying pedagogical theory, but also their systematic, almost mechanical structures for implementation. Students are versed in repeatable patterns of establishing and dissecting the ‘problems’ to be researched, followed by planned interventions and guidance by tutors. The emphasis on the process is perhaps more reminiscent of the field of project management than education. The educational institution becomes responsible for the coordination of the process as much as the contents of learning. Knight (2002) and others acknowledge the degree of mechanisation by emphasising the considerable planning and coordination needed. In such a process, the role of the ‘teacher’ is considerably re-cast. Gilkinson (2003) has
investigated whether those that lead the student even need to be an expert in the specific field. Instead, many argue, they can be experts in the pedagogic techniques. In other words, there are medical degrees where students are taught to a considerable extent by non-doctors.

PBL has been around long enough to analyse its relative success. As with many discussions of ‘best practice’ the results are far from conclusive. Smith (2005) and others have analysed its appropriateness as a method in different contexts such as business schools. While their research unveils a large amount of evidence on the pros and cons of PBL in general, they do acknowledge the limitations within the context of some subjects. For example, a certain amount of surface learning and memorisation may well be unavoidable if not preferable in subjects such as accounting, finance and statistics.

While the jury may still be out on the merit of these innovative techniques, it still demonstrates the degree to which the pedagogy of HE is now heavily focussed on the concepts of experiential and student-centred learning. The general acceptance of such ideas within mainstream HE seems to have lagged considerably behind their adoption in primary and secondary education. Again, it could be directly attributable to the role of centralised government agencies in setting policy and professionalizing the role of teachers. In the UK, the landmark publication of the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) set out an agenda for educational reform in HE, in which the methods of learning and teaching were to be explicitly enhanced and based on sound pedagogy. The report
spawned the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) whose remit was to promote and enforce a level of quality whose definition encompassed these new notions. In what could be described as a difficult transition period, universities soon began to monitor and make explicit their own approaches to learning and teaching (L&T). Similar quasi-governmental initiatives were occurring internationally, most notably in the US and Australia. By the late 1990s, the notion of a pedagogically-informed approach to teaching in HE was well represented in institutional and governmental policy. There was also a significant amount of HE-related primary research as academics turned to investigating their own practices. Again, this confluence of pedagogy and policy has resulted in a maturation of the academic field.

This maturation has not resulted in a prescriptive approach to controlling the processes through national curricula, at least not to the same extent as found in secondary education in for example the US or UK. Nevertheless there are certain educational tenets that are becoming more prevalent in policy. Many of these are characterised by the broad headings of independent learning, student-centred learning, learning to learn or even life-long learning. Student-centred and independent learning acknowledge that students must take on an increasing responsibility for learning whilst the universities take on responsibility to deliver in a way that aligns with our most current understanding of education. Learning to learn re-frames the discussion to highlight the more meta-cognitive aspects of education, where knowledge becomes the process rather than the merely product. And life-long learning reinforces the ethos that learning is not
confined to a particular stage of life before entering into what might be considered the working world. Such characterisation places the emphasis firmly on learning rather than teaching, shifting the perspective to that of the students and by association their learning processes. There is an implication that a ‘quality’ university is one that concentrates on sound pedagogical approaches in developing its students.

The very nature of these pedagogic discussions is that the proponents must speak in generic terms, i.e. not within any particular subject area. In other words, the techniques and underlying theories for effective pedagogy in, say, engineering should also apply in psychology or biology. The language of generic pedagogy most often revolves around skills rather than subject-specific knowledge. It could be argued therefore that skills become the new *lingua franca* in helping HE implement the new approaches and designing a curriculum.

### 2.6 The Focus on Skills

Within current academic discussions, the all-encompassing and nebulous subject of skills seems to be manifesting itself in three distinct arenas:

- conceptual and academic analyses;
- policy initiatives; and
- implementation at the institutional level.
Conceptually, many of the current debates revolve around the distinction between developing skills and acquiring knowledge, both of which are aspects of education or learning. Cottrell (2001) gives us one of the more concise distinctions by linking skills to performance, rehearsal and repeatability. A skill becomes something that is improved through practice and repetition, as part of the learning process. Knowledge, on the other hand, can be more associated with factual information or data storage and retrieval. It is a highly semantic debate and even Cottrell is quick to point out that knowledge also can be construed as a process rather than an end product, a stance more in line with constructivists such as Bruner in the 1960s. Nevertheless this polarisation provides a starting point for exploring the nature of learning and guiding educational policy.

The attribute of repeatability is most easily illustrated when looking at what is characterised as motor skills. Williams and Hodges (2004) provide an overview of the scientific study of skills in which 19th Century researchers concentrated on how to increase efficiency in repetitious jobs such as sending Morse code or typing text. On the surface, this aspect of skills development has clear links to the improvement of manual labour or sports performance, more so than the loftier goals of higher education. However, as outlined above, many of the cognitive psychologists of the 20th Century also explored the idea of learning as a skill in itself with repeatable patterns of acquiring knowledge. Therefore, as a concept, skills could embrace the more cognitive and analytical within the definition. Unfortunately, it would appear that the term could soon become all
things to all people, perhaps sowing the seeds of confusion as evidenced by the subsequent translation from concept to policy.

Within the UK, the skills agenda has been manifest in both the school and post-school policies. Schools have been guided by a National Curriculum since the Education Reform Act of 1988, as overseen by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (prior to devolving many responsibilities to English, Welsh and Scottish counterparts). Significant revisions were made to the National Curriculum in 2008 to make more explicit the role of skills development. For example, the non-statutory guidance in Wales made it clear that:

Schools will need to devote attention to developing attitudes to learning – affecting the disposition of learners and developing their learning skills – as well as to delivering formal instruction.

(Estyn 2002 as cited in WAG, 2008, p. 2)

The policy documents continue to say:

…the Welsh Assembly Government should consider, as a long-term goal, the vision of a radically revised curriculum that is more overtly learner-centred and skills-focused, and not necessarily subject-based.

(WAG, 2008, p. 3)

This demonstrates that school policy has been undergoing a similar evolution and adoption of terminology as that discussed above for HE. Whereas much of the emphasis is only recently enshrined in policy, schools have experimented to
a varying degree with the skills agenda. One notable example is the approach promoted by The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA). Their Opening Minds framework is characterised by their manifesto which encapsulates many of the previous ideas:

The Opening Minds curriculum features five categories of competences: learning, citizenship, relating to people, managing situations and managing information. Focusing on competences means that Opening Minds teaching is emphasising the ability to understand and to do, rather than just the transmission of knowledge.

(RSA, 2010)

As for post-school approaches to the skills agenda, there have been initiatives since the 1960s, most often associated with the vocational schemes such as Business and Technician Education Council (BTEC) or Youth Training Schemes (YTS) or General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQ) (Hyland & Johnson, 1998). With the evolution of policies, there were more attempts to more clearly define the relevant skills. By the end of the 20th century, pedagogic and policy discussions were awash with a bemusing range of permutations on a central theme, using interchangeable terms such as key, common, transferable, academic, learning and other skills. The National Advisory Board for Public Sector Higher Education (NAB/UGC, 1986) used the term transferable skills to refer to those skills that needed to transfer with the student from the world of academia to the professional world. Bridges (1993) and Hurley (1994 as cited in Cottrell, 2001) respectively referred to meta-skills
and core skills to describe those skills that could be adapted across different contexts.

By the late 1990s these concepts made inroads into HE with the publication of the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) which made it quite clear that universities should be embracing the concept of developing skills. Not surprisingly, there was a backlash among many academic circles against the emphasis on skills with HE. Some vehemently pointed to an educational agenda that seemed to be built on semantic confusions, fallacious reasoning and questionable evidence (Holmes, 1998; Hyland & Johnson, 1998; Wolf, 1991). Subtle distinctions between the various lists were seen to be compounded by even more basic understandings of the term skills which can be used to describe something as specific as repeatable mechanical action or as conceptual as demonstrating problem solving. Perhaps more contentious was the core assumption that skills can be transferred at all across contexts.

Early notions of transferability were explored by Edward Thorndike, an educational psychologist at the turn of the last century who found that learning in one context could result in improved learning in other contexts (NAB/UGC, 1986). However, his theories went on to say that the effectiveness of this transfer was dependent on the similarity of the respective tasks. In other words transferability of learning had its limits. Critics of the skills agenda still maintain that there is insufficient evidence that a skills approach is productive enough to base policy on (Holmes, 1998; Hyland & Johnson, 1998). The application and
development of skills, they say, need to be seen in the context of the academic versus the working world, as well as the disparate contexts of the many fields and professions which may have evolved separately. The skills valued in one field may not be wholly appreciated in another. For example, the hard sciences have generally emphasised numeracy skills, the central role of scientific methods, the recall of scientifically derived facts, etc. And on the other end of the spectrum, the arts and humanities place emphasis on expression, communication, subjective interpretations and/or the more cognitive and conceptual skills. Any effort to bridge the gap by producing a unifying list of skills is bound to produce friction.

The publication of the Leitch Report (HM Treasury, 2006) re- emphasised the then government’s interest in HE as a means of developing skills, and their roles in linking education and employment. The move was part of a wider initiative to bolster the UK’s competitive position among other developed nations. Acknowledging the international pressure, the report (p. 21) stated that “A highly-skilled workforce drives innovation, leadership and management, enabling businesses to compete in the global economy.” It could be argued that much of the political rhetoric was geared toward providing advice and justification for funding. It does however highlight the tendency to concentrate on skills, rather than a specific area of knowledge. It didn’t say our students need to learn a particular computer programming language, it said they needed to have IT skills. The report went on to setting government targets for raising the level of the population measured by Level 4 (HNC). Drawing on many of
the concepts outlined below, the report set out targets and expectations using definitions of skills and levels of acquisition. It could be argued that as a strategic government document, its goals were more aspirational and symbolic rather than pragmatic, and yet it does provide a strong indication as to the state of the debate which has been evidenced for several decades.

Despite vigorous academic arguments over the value of the skills approach, a critical mass seems to have been reached so that the agenda is proceeding. These concepts have influenced the governmental educational bodies who in turn have begun to codify the terminology and disseminate standards. In the UK, the QCA and their precursor agencies have opted for the term key skills, which have now settled into the following broad categories:

- Application of number
- Communication
- Improving own learning and performance
- Information and communication technology
- Problem solving
- Working with others.

(QCA, 2004)

The QCA’s definitions of skills are linked to definitions of academic levels. At each level, the particular skills should manifest themselves differently. For example, a student still in secondary education, at Level 1, would be expected to demonstrate certain competencies in written communication. According to
QCA’s categorisations, they should be able to master basic grammar, punctuation and paragraph structure. Yet by the time they enter the first year of university, at Level 4, the definitions of those skills take on more conceptual interpretations, where students are expected to develop strategies and monitor their own progress in achieving communication skills. QCA’s standards and specifications for skills are not so much a listing of competencies but rather a mapping of a process for developing them. Whether this progression comes naturally, or needs to be explicitly taught relates to previous discussions on cognitive development.

In Wales, the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills has repackaged many of areas previously covered by the term key skills and presents their categories as follows:

- developing thinking across the curriculum (broadly encompassing previous notions of Improving own learning and performance and Problem solving);
- developing communication across the curriculum;
- developing ICT across the curriculum; and
- developing number across the curriculum (with the word ‘number’ chosen to replace numeracy as a gesture toward inclusivity, “in order to be equally valid for the youngest and oldest learners, as well as those with additional learning needs” (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008, p. 22).
Academics continue to refine conceptions of skills, especially in relation to their application in the relatively new arena of HE. Previously, Biggs (1999) had defined three levels of skills most relevant to HE:

- generic study skills, e.g. managing time, taking notes, deadlines, etc.
- skills related to specific content, e.g. reading for meaning,
- the more meta-cognitive skills, e.g. skills needed for confronting new concepts.

Outside the UK, there are similar debates over the relationship between skills and the HE agenda. Barrie (2006, 2007) analysed the perceptions of Australian academics as their community attempted to clarify the purpose of higher education in a changing world, and defining what they called ‘generic graduate attributes’. Such a term encapsulates skills, knowledge and abilities of graduates, beyond the subject-specific knowledge usually associated with disciplines. Again, these are graduate qualities and skills that should be applicable across a range of contexts, with an implicit value for employment. In the absence of a normative national approach to defining the attributes, the Australian community reflected a wide range of attributes, from the technical to the more holistic. Barrie’s conceptual framework makes distinctions between conceptions of graduate attributes, including those abilities that students bring with them to university, and those that allow them to translate and transform their university learning.
With this backdrop of conceptual and policy interpretations of skills, HE institutions are faced with the challenges of implementation. Practitioners within HE are not (as) bound by a national curriculum and therefore have latitude in interpreting how to implement the range of skills. In the UK, the QAA do have certain expectations that HE institutions will embed key skills into curricular design as part of the validation and review process. However it is debatable just how explicitly the transferable skills are to be implemented. The QAA (2006) place emphasis on “creating conditions for the achievement of… skills”, including those classified as cognitive and transferable. The focus of the quality assurance procedures seems to be more on the learning outcomes as specified in programme documentation, and in reference to QAA benchmark statements. Academic regulations and quality assurance mechanisms within HE and FE have shown different expectations on the rigour of mapping transferable skills. There is some suggestion that those who assess the quality of NVQs and HNCs have relied more heavily on explicit evidence of skills acquisition as gathered in portfolios (QCA, 2008).

As to the more pragmatic issue of how and which study skills to deliver, there is no shortage of advice. Targeted funding of L&T in HE in 1990s led to the establishment of bodies with the remit to disseminate best practice in the UK. Most notable were the Institute for Learning and Teaching (predecessor to the current Higher Education Academy) and their related Subject Centres. More recently, significant funding has been given (in England) to set up Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs). These organisations regularly
publish guidance and case studies on a wide range of pedagogic issues, including study skills (HE Academy, 2008). The case studies provide evidence of not only the widespread efforts to bolster study skills, but also the range of techniques and resources available. The emergent field of study skills development in HE is further reflected in the range of standard university textbooks such as Cottrell (2008) or Northedge (2005).

Given the flexibility for implementing skills development, institutions must wrestle with some fundamental choices of how and where to change their practices. In a comprehensive meta-analysis, Hattie et al. (1996) show a long history of educators using targeted ‘interventions’ to support specific skills alongside the standard HE curriculum. These interventions range from developing the cognitive skills of writing essays through to the more meta-cognitive skills of managing one’s own learning, all with varying degrees of success. The question for curriculum designers then becomes where within the students’ learning experience to employ these interventions.

In the UK, which operates a predominantly modular approach to curricular design, the temptation is to add a new module devoted solely to developing skills. Allan and Clarke (2007) describe a continuum of practices throughout universities where some choose to adopt such a ‘reductionist-oriented’ free-standing modules while others ‘embed’ the skills into subject-specific modules. Many universities concentrate efforts on developing skills during the first year of undergraduate studies and during induction weeks (Harvey, et al., 2006). Some
universities also choose to invest in external support units whose remit is to provide additional skills development outside of the curriculum (ALDinHE, 2008; Cash & Hilsdon, 2008).

However, there is considerable debate within the pedagogic community as to whether skills can or should be relegated to separate modules and external support units (Cottrell, 2001; Gibbs, 1992; Ramsden, 2003; Wingate, 2006). On pedagogic grounds, they each argue that the development of skills is most effective when it takes place within the context of the subject being studied, rather than being independently taught. Intellectually, many students struggle with the abstraction of transferring lessons learned in one context to another. Many of the researchers who have led skills modules recount how students often don’t fully engage with the module because they could not see the relevance (Allan & Clarke, 2007; Hattie, et al., 1996; Wingate, 2007).

There is a risk in offering a generic study skills module taught by someone not directly associated with the field of subject specialism. There are the practical aspects of not being respected as an expert by the students. Furthermore, Wingate (2007) reminds us that one of the purposes of HE is to instil an epistemological ethos in students. There could well be tension among competing epistemological stances if generic modules are led by ‘outside’ tutors.
Many 'learning developers' come from an educational background (ALDinHE, 2008; Cash & Hilsdon, 2008), a seemingly relevant position to take. Much has been said recently about the way in which research can inform teaching (Jenkins, 2004). It is only natural (and desirable) that those who research a subject inject their enthusiasm for research and their knowledge into the curriculum. Again, it is desirable that those who teach study skills should have a grounded understanding of pedagogy. It does raise the question however of whether study skills modules should teach the students theories behind learning. While a strong understanding of assessment techniques and learning styles is undeniably valuable in creating a module, it is questionable whether the topics need be made explicit to students. Students of education will have need of such concepts in their careers, however it is dubious whether other students would or should wrestle with the subject and vocabulary of pedagogy at such an early stage of their academic journey.

With all the pedagogical and practical opposition to developing skills outside of the subject-specific curriculum, it is a wonder why many institutions continue to do so. The development of any curriculum inevitably involves political negotiations among many parties with competing interests, within an arena of 'collegiality' which pits academic and managerial agenda against each other. As noted above, many academics have been quite vocal in their opposition to the skills agenda, in their attempts to protect the academic integrity of their programmes and their conceptions of HE. Entrusting skills development to a
core of practitioners well versed in educational theory and the ethos of ‘learning
to learn’ could offer a practicable compromise.

However, offering skills development in a separate module still does not avoid
the debate of embedding, where opponents argue that teaching the skills out of
context is doomed to failure. Nevertheless, some consolation is offered by
Wingate (2006, 2007) who makes an interesting semantic distinction between
study skills and study techniques. Skills, she argues, are best acquired through
a process of deep learning within subject-specific content, whereas techniques
include those little tricks such as formulas for structuring essays or learning the
conventions of referencing. The idea is reinforced by Hattie (1996) who
describes some of the necessary approaches to study skills as ‘simple
mnemonic performance’. Therefore, creating a module that concentrates on
techniques might be justifiable if acknowledging that true skills development will
occur within other parts of the curriculum.

These theoretical and practical aspects of developing skills have taken on even
more importance when confronting the profile of today’s university students. As
discussed below, there is a strong argument that university education must be
more explicit in reinforcing skills rather than concentrating solely on subject-
specific content.
2.7 The Changing Nature of Students

The nature and profile of students in HE has been changing, partly in response to government initiatives and partly in response to wider issues such as demographics and globalisation and changing attitudes toward the purpose of higher education. In the early 1960s, only around 8% of the UK population went to university, reflecting on elite education system (Longden, 2002). Successive governments have since pushed forward policies of widening access, with the aim of attracting those students who may have been previously discouraged or excluded from considering a university education. The Blair government had announced expansion targets of 50% of all 18- to 30-year-olds to be in some form of HE by 2010; in 2006/2007 the participation rate was around 40% (DIUS 2008). The government had explicitly targeted under-represented socio-economic groups and mature students. Whereas in the 1980s, the majority of HE students came directly from A-level study in sixth forms, now there are multiple pathways. There has been an expansion of Further Education (FE) colleges, many of which have formalised agreements with HE institutions to facilitate the transition. Industry is also forming partnerships with FE and HE so that some of the learning that takes place during employment can be recognised within the context of university degrees. Therefore, students are arriving at universities in larger numbers and with significantly wider backgrounds.

The heterogeneity of the student population can often result in problems, especially for those sub-groups not traditionally catered for in traditional
universities. Students who have come directly from A-levels may be more prepared for the learning experience in British HE than their counterparts returning to education after many years, or those experiencing a British system (and language) for the first time. It is often pointed out that under-represented groups find the transition difficult. Bowl (2001, p. 141) describing the experience of three mature, black, working-class women comments that, ‘the onus seemed to be on the students to adapt themselves to the institution and its rules, rather than on the institution and its main players to adapt in response to the fresh perspectives which participants brought with them’. Archer et al. (2003) and Reay (2003) also discuss the mismatch between working-class students and the institutional cultures in HE. Mature students, whether new to HE or returning after a long period, as well as international students, often have trouble adjusting to the newer approaches to education. Many may well have expectations of a more didactic approach to learning.

This heterogeneity increases the risks of student dissatisfaction and withdrawal, a phenomenon clearly reflected in current efforts to retain students, whether expressed as governmental policy and targets or practical solutions of innovative learning and teaching (DfES, 2003; Gibbs & Jenkins, 1992; House of Commons, 2001; Yorke & Longden, 2004). However, problems of retention should not be seen solely in the context of a diverse student body. Some of the student attitudes are often characterised as instrumental and utilitarian (Ashcroft & Foreman-Peck, 1994; Ramsden, 2008).
At its simplest, instrumentalism refers to the ends justifying the means. A student may well see the university experience as nothing more than the means, i.e. a serious of tasks that must be endured, in order to achieve the ends of the larger prize of employment. From the student perspective, economic motivations are often more important than the pursuit of knowledge (Glover, et al., 2002; Lehmann, 2009). This instrumental approach often places them at odds to the expressed desires of those who design and manage education where the ultimate end would be a life-long commitment to learning and thinking. However, few can say with any certainty why many students appear to be taking the educational aspects less seriously. Disengagement almost becomes the subject of philosophical debates.

Instrumentality is a concept that helps explain behaviour of individuals as well as institutions. Philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and David Hume invoked it in the 18th Century when exploring ethics, morality and value judgements (Denis, 2008). As with utilitarianism and pragmatism, the morality of choosing a particular path is seen within the context of the morality of the end goal. Apart from the philosophical aspects, psychologists might address the same phenomenon in terms of motivation. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs reminds us that cognitive and self-actualisation needs are important, but there are several levels of more basic motives which must be satisfied before the more conceptual levels become a priority (Gross, 2005; Illeris, 2007). Others have categorised motivation in terms of *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* (Long, 2007). Intrinsic
motivation implies an approach to education for its own sake, whereas extrinsic
implies some form of external motivation, incentive or coercion.

It is ironic that the term ‘instrumental’ now has pejorative overtones when
applied to education. Paradoxically, John Dewey used it extensively in the mid
20th Century when justifying his influential approaches to educational reform
(Anderson, 2005; Field, 2007). Of course, this can be explained by the different
‘ends’ that were being debated. For Dewey, the end was a meaningful
education, i.e. an educational system and curricula which take into account our
understanding of cognitive development and society’s preferences for morality.
And educational historians such as Delanty (2001) remind us that universities
since the Enlightenment have taken on the reins as keepers of humanistic
values where the understanding of knowledge is an end in itself. For many of
today’s students, however, the end may be a less philosophical goal of earning a
living. It is questionable whether students will be engaging with the more
conceptual aspects of amorality and pragmatism when making the decisions of
how much time and effort to devote to their studies. Whatever the root cause of
instrumental and utilitarian tendencies, they run counter to our professed goal of
nurturing independent learners.

These philosophical debates may or may not bring us closer to the real-world
problems of students’ disengagement. More practical (or pragmatic) solutions
lie in pedagogic discussions. Engagement can be directly related to L&T
strategies, and educational policies. Jarvis (1998) points out how teaching
models based on the behaviourist theories, where there is an emphasis on measuring performance, have clear links to an instrumental approach. Others more explicitly point the finger to the educational approaches adopted in primary and secondary schools, and the institutional systems behind the policies, where education is characterised by ‘spoon-feeding’ and an overemphasis on preparing for examinations and achieving higher ratings in league tables (National Audit Office, 2002; Wingate, 2007). When discussing the impact of this new breed of students entering HE, such characterisations may seem divisive, running the risk of school teachers being understandably defensive. To their credit, increasingly there are attempts to counter instrumentality at earlier stages in secondary education (Jeffrey, 2003).

Within HE, the debate of instrumentality is directly related to the debates over L&T strategies, and specifically those involving a move away from the more traditional didactic approaches. It is not that alternatives to the ‘sage on a stage’ are more entertaining, but rather these alternative approaches address the issues of surface and deep learning, contextualised study, learning to learn, etc. Getting students engaged with a meaningful process shifts the focus away from seeing education as a means, and refocuses on education as an ends itself. A number of pedagogic researchers have investigated this phenomenon while invoking the terminology of student expectations (Byrne & Flood, 2005; Institutional Management in Higher Education, 2002; Laing, et al., 2005; Norton, et al., 2004). They have documented and monitored students’ perceptions and beliefs of the purposes of HE as they begin their studies. Many of these
investigators are entering into a process which attempts to align the expectation of the universities and students. They are, in effect, talking about aligning the ends, in an instrumental sense. These efforts to bring about change are laudable, if somewhat inconclusive. Given Perry’s depictions of absolutist attitudes amongst new students, and the gradual shift toward relativist attitudes, it is questionable whether the alignment of expectations can be achieved quickly, or whether it occurs gradually during the students’ cognitive development.

The literature on instrumentalism confirms the phenomenon and the tendency of first-year undergraduates especially to respond to their education in such a manner. It does not appear to be a unique or recent occurrence, despite a resurgence of the terminology of instrumentality, a concept well grounded in philosophical theory. It does however provide a framework for identifying and debating the behaviour. Neither the philosophical musings on human nature, nor the blaming of governmental and institutional policies however will bring about the necessary changes at the modular (or perhaps even the curricular) level in their first semester. The central debate then becomes whether to utilise the students’ utilitarian tendencies, where learning is reduced to a rather Pavlovian model of ‘learn this – receive this credit’ or whether to concentrate efforts on the very difficult weaning process of producing autonomous learners. Alignment of expectations implies a certain level of meta-cognitive skills and a shift away from absolutist approaches to learning – a tall feat according to the psychologists and educationalists mentioned earlier.
2.8 HE: The Nexus of Pedagogy and Organisational Behaviour

As reflected in the literature, new pedagogic approaches are having effects at many levels, from government policy to classroom activities. However this new ethos of pedagogy, and its resultant policy requirements, is also affecting how universities are managing their operations, introducing new initiatives, allocating resources, re-structuring roles and responsibilities, etc. The relative success of these new initiatives depends not only on the underlying pedagogy, but also on the organisational behaviour. Therefore organisational behaviour becomes an important framework for analysing some of the issues identified above, especially in reference to the development of academic skills. Of particular interest here are the practical issues that may inhibit the efficient operations, common to all organisations.

Academics are never short of voicing disapproval of their own management, and much as been said recently about managerialism in HE (Barry, et al., 2001; Deem, et al., 2007; Lafferty & Fleming, 2000; Murphy, 2009). Much of the criticism questions the appropriateness of applying an audit culture of targets and accountability to the traditional academic structures which have promoted an ethos of academic freedom. Nevertheless, these debates rarely tackle the practicalities of bringing order to a large workforce.

The relatively recent massification of higher education is well established (Gibbs & Jenkins, 1992; OECD, 2002; Ramsden, 2003; Yorke & Longden, 2004). Universities are more likely than ever to fall prey to problems of large
organisations. As outlined above, the task of developing skills is often spread across the organisation, where responsibilities are shared across faculty, libraries and support units, and within faculty, shared across modules and lecturers.

The phenomenon of ‘right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing’ is well reflected in literature for business studies or organisational behaviour, whether described as ‘compartmentalisation’ or ‘ineffective internal communication’. Pettinger (1996) recounts the traditional approaches to hierarchical management structures, whether pyramid or flat, and the corresponding challenges to communication between units. Hardy (1993) even identifies poor communication laterally and vertically as major sources of conflict and barriers to efficiency. Both point out the almost inevitable tendency for compartmentalisation where units turn inward and concentrate on pursuing their own objectives, influenced greatly by internal targets and opportunities for individual career advancement. An overarching term for this phenomenon is the ‘Silo Effect’.

Whilst academics may debate the appropriateness of audit cultures and managerialism, a more fundamental debate is also taking place surrounding century-old approaches to corporate organisation. Many point to the limited life expectancy of the traditional corporate structures which can be traced directly back to the theories of Adam Smith who championed the division of labour and increasing specialisation (Hammer & Champy, 2001; Handy, 1993). Great
strides were made in the Industrial Revolution by compartmentalising the workforce so that they could become increasingly efficient in fewer areas of the manufacturing process. These theories were put into place with much success by Henry Ford and his mass production techniques. The ideas were given even more credence when Taylor and others applied scientific principles to maximising efficiency (Cole, 2004). However, with the recent increases in competition, the dominance of the consumer, and the rapidity of changes brought on by globalisation and technology, the limitations of traditional corporate structures are becoming apparent. Modern corporations need to respond quickly to change in order to survive. Traditional structures are seen to mediate against this and many are calling for a leaner approach to corporate structures (Womack, et al., 2007).

Hammer (1997) puts forth the ideas of reengineering the corporation, where the emphasis is not on specialisation, but on the overall processes of achieving a satisfactory product or service. The ideas behind reengineering represent a continuation of previous initiatives such as Total Quality Management (TQM) which claim that the solutions lie in more fundamental changes in the ethos of organisations, whether it's placing the customer at the centre of all decisions (Aguayo, 1990) or focussing on the role and location of all employees within the process (Hammer, 1997). Either way, self-contained functional units tend to focus inwardly, and not on the bigger picture.
Theories of reengineering have resonance with HE’s attempts to improve learning. It could be argued that proponents of deep learning are advocating a move away from a strict reliance on specialisation, whether in the form of subject specialists or even external specialists of learning development. A sound curriculum would be delivered by a team with knowledge of their field, plus knowledge of the pedagogy. The new ethos also ties in nicely with the idea of student-centred learning in that the process of HE is very much about the students’ journey and the ability of the organisation to respond to the needs of the student along that journey.

And from an operational standpoint, process orientation would suit an academic organisation with its historical departmental divisions between academic, administrative, library and support staff. If the acquisition of factual information and the cognitive development of a student is the overall process that is to be achieved, then it stands to reason that everyone in contact with the student needs a strong understanding of and focus on that process. Operating within strictly compartmentalised units can easily result in a ‘Silo Effect’.

### 2.9 Additional Secondary Data

This section describes an investigation into additional secondary data which also provided useful perspectives which could feed into the subsequent research. Specifically, it looks at discussions and conversations held within a community of practitioners who are dedicated to skills development in the UK. It is distinct from the literature review in that it is using unpublished material as a
source. Again, this particular analysis is separate from methodologies of the next chapter which are considerably more in-depth and placed within their epistemological contexts. Nevertheless, this early investigation provides insights into the issues which influenced the ultimate conclusions.

Pedagogic conferences and workshops provide a wealth of anecdotal evidence that most universities are experiencing similar situations when attempting to develop skills, often involving additional support. While ‘learning development’ is an implicit responsibility of all lecturers, there appears to be an emerging community of those whose jobs are specifically focussed on developing the more generic aspects of a curriculum. One example of this emerging trend is the Learning Development in Higher Education Network (LDHEN) and their subsequent Association of Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE). The organisation holds an annual symposium and hosts an on-line discussion forum, providing a database of evidence for the many issues that confront the community (ALDinHE, 2008). The JISCmail discussion board was established in 2003 and at the time of this preliminary research (early 2008) had over 1000 postings, over 500 subject heading, and around 350 participants, many actively contributing. The LDHEN periodically compiles data on the profiles of its members, looking for early indications on the mechanisms and structures within respective universities for supporting student learning. While there was no quantitative evidence readily available, a reading of the discussions and a live discussion at an LDHEN symposium would suggest that
the majority of the participants are employed as support, as distinct from academic lecturers.

These discussion boards then provide a valuable source of secondary data to analyse, in order to understand, among other things, this emerging field of practitioners. Coincidentally, at the time of this exercise, the organisers of the discussion board were also conducting an in-depth qualitative analysis of the postings. The analysis discussed below is perhaps less sophisticated in its qualitative methodology than that proposed by ALDinHE, yet correspondences with its authors indicated similar approaches and findings. Their subsequent conference paper contained many similar observations and served to reinforce major themes found here (Cash & Hilsdon, 2008).

In order to identify the major issues confronting this community of learning developers, the threads with the most postings were identified, from the inception of the listing until December 2007. This crudely measured the overall interest in a subject, assuming that the more responses a thread received, the stronger the community felt about it. It is recognised that threads often veer from the original topic, and that the overall population of potential contributors was expanding through the years. Nevertheless the process of reading through all headings and applying such a semi-quantitative approach allowed themes to emerge. The list of the more popular threads was originally segregated into ten themes. Some issues were discounted as being outside the interest of this project, for example matters concerning the running of respective organisations,
or the posting of general announcements or job opportunities. The remaining themes that seemed most relevant to this project were placed into the four following broad categories:

- The How-To Issues
- Conceptual Issues
- Organisational Issues
- Emotional Issues

As would be expected in an emerging field, participants spent a good deal of time sharing tools and requesting advice, in short, asking each other how they did their jobs. Recurrent *how-to* topics often focused on educational resources that could be used to improve writing, referencing, avoiding plagiarism, supporting dyslexia, diagnostic and formative assessment, motivation and engagement, etc. As discussed in the literature review and using Wingate’s terminology, many of the efforts could be classified as developing study *techniques*, i.e. using repeatable rules, accepted formulas and structures. Again these are perhaps distinct from the more conceptual strategies for developing skills which would involve strategies to foster *deep learning* within the curriculum. Many of the contributors to the discussions operated from a central support unit, rather than subject-specific departments. While this analysis made no attempt at quantitatively correlating the location of the staff and techniques used, the discussions highlighted a significant amount of work being done to address development outside the curriculum. As for delivery of these study skills and techniques, there was much emphasis on VLE and other
mechanised approaches. This of course highlighted limited financial resources in the face of large numbers, and the desire of organisations to do things economically.

There was much discussion over the concepts of education and learning, many highlighting the semantic distinctions between teaching and developing learning. The practitioners demonstrated a good level of understanding of many of the pedagogic discourses as described in the previous chapter. In many ways, these discussions act as a mechanism for values clarification within this new community. They reflect the evolving interpretations of higher education and, perhaps more importantly, the roles of lecturers and other key players within the process.

Members showed a good deal of curiosity over how their respective institutions organised and managed their learning development activities. Some discussions compared institutional policies and rules, others compared where the activities were located within the organisational structure, whether the support was central or local within departments. One particularly interesting thread discussed the profile of a learning developer and how an individual could evolve in their career, given that many in this community were not employed on a standard lecturer’s contract. This highlighted that L&T support is increasingly recognised within the management structure of universities, and the career ladders. Whereas conducting research has been the traditional path to
advancement, universities are at various stages of recognising the contribution of individuals dedicated to L&T (DfES, 2003).

Related to the last point on career advancement, there were some recurrent themes that reflected an amount of frustration or marginalisation. It would appear that many participants felt that learning development in general, and centralised support in particular, were perceived as marginal activities within the organisations. Worse still, there were similar issues of offering a service that could be perceived as a deficit model, where students who underperformed in the traditional subjects were segregated to study with others needing remedial help. These views would seem to confirm that many of the emerging concepts of pedagogy and the value of skills enhancement as discussed above are not shared within organisations, and that some lecturing staff still prefer what could be considered more traditional approaches. Not surprisingly there emerges a parallel between L&T support residing outside of traditional management structures and the enhancement of skills outside the traditional curricular structures.

Overall, this exercise served to reinforce many of the conceptual themes identified in the literature review. There is a clear shift away from the traditional didactic approach and toward a more flexible style of learning which elevates the design and mechanisms of a curriculum as much as the subject content. It is arguable whether the discussions showed evidence of institutions strategically embracing the newer pedagogies, or whether they were simply
filling the gap in order to support the more mainstream models of learning. Nevertheless, the emerging community clearly embraced the newer discourse, no doubt in part due to many of the individuals’ backgrounds and training in education. On a less conceptual level, the discussions shed light on the operational issues confronting HE institutions as managed organisations.

Equally important in the context of this change management project, the secondary data acted as a benchmark for The University’s efforts to develop academic skills. In many respects, The Faculty would appear to have an enviable track record with similar initiatives, in that many of the anecdotes corresponded to stages that the home university had already gone through. Therefore, this current project could be seen more as fine tuning, in which there is the luxury of building upon several years of experience and applying an iterative form of action research.

2.10 Conclusions and an Emergent Conceptual Framework

Both the literature review and the secondary data highlight a newer paradigm of learning within the context of higher education, serving as a conceptual framework for further investigations. While this paradigm may not have earned itself a distinct moniker, it does seem to be characterised by a consistent set of concepts. There is recognition that learning, even at the HE level, is a developmental process. There is a value placed on experiential learning and the process of acquiring knowledge. There is an emerging recognition if not status of skills even at the higher cognitive levels. Specifically, there is an
emphasis on the cognitive and even meta-cognitive skills. And within this new framework, it becomes difficult to disaggregate the development of skills from the development of learning.

The new pedagogic discourse is grounded in psychological and philosophical debates that stretch back hundreds of years. However, the last several decades have seen an evolution of these ideas as applied to higher education. These ideas stem from a diverse background in the UK, the US, Canada and Australia and are typified by the work of, inter alia, Biggs, Ramsden, Gibbs, and Cottrell. The current discourse is characterised by terminology such as *learning to learn, student-centred learning, assessment for learning* – all terms laden with connotations which seek to distance the field from what it perceived to be traditional didactic or university-style approaches. This shift away from didactic methods moves educators toward a more explicit and managed approach of experiential learning, where the student is no longer expected to be the passive recipient of transmitted knowledge. Implementing this newer ethos has resulted in a wide variety of learning and assessment methods. Locally in the UK, this discourse is in part supported by institutions such as the QAA and the HE Academy, but seems to be common across much the wider international community. Outside of the strictly academic circles of journal publications, there is evidence that the discourse includes multiple players, whether library staff, administrative support, personal tutors and other levels of education. While this multiplicity of players is clearly a strength, it can present new challenges from an organisational standpoint, where HE institutions have a
history of dividing their operations into academic and administrative, with fairly clear (if not contentious) job descriptions. And this variety becomes all the more relevant when confronting the widening diversity of the student body. A common theme uniting these concepts is the focus on developing skills, one area that all subjects can (or could) agree upon. The language of skills development has permeated government and academic policy, not without some resistance. Nevertheless, universities are now expected to be able to explicitly elaborate on their chosen approaches to enhancing these skills.

Given the multiple influences of evolving pedagogies and management styles in HE, academics are asked to develop new ways of thinking about an age-old problem: how best to teach (or develop learning). This literature review highlights many of the more theoretical. However perhaps more relevant to any change management project are those aspects typified by the nexus of pedagogy and organisational behaviour. Accepting that pedagogical theory must live within a framework for implementation, there must be a corresponding emphasis on management processes and the real-world events that stymie effective implementation. Problematically, management systems within HE live within a historical context of academic freedom and a turbulent transition to more corporate systems.

Universities, as organisations of academics, administrators and managers, must face the challenges of the new skills agenda on a variety of fronts. Practical responses include additional support for study skills development in the form of
specialised support units, continued support from library staff, new roles such as personal tutors, and the development of curricula and the development of staff to deliver it. This multiplicity of missions and key players leaves the process open to predictable organisational phenomena such as the Silo Effect. Organisations and individuals must develop proactive strategies for dealing with such organisational barriers to success.

Our current understanding of these areas leads to specific questions to be posed within the context of an individual institution. Given the multiple players and methods within the field of skills development, any given organisation should seek to understand the perceptions of the players and their respective contributions to the processes. Not only is it important to understand what their jobs are, but also where their jobs are: not in just a physical sense, but also within an organisational/corporate structure that consists of processes, job descriptions, lines of communication and all the trappings of large, modern institutions. And beyond the organisation itself, these perceptions need to be understood within the context of student experience. By understanding the players and their perceptions, it should be possible to identify those areas and practices which, if properly supported, should lead to a more efficient and effective achievement of goals, in this case, the development of academic skills.

What remains is to explore the details of how The University as an organisation is implementing their policies and how the key players have responded to the various challenges.
Chapter 3: Methodology

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3.1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 1: Introduction, the overarching framework for this change management project can be considered action research, a term which can encompass both methodology and underlying philosophies. This chapter, however, is devoted to the more specific methodologies used for generating primary data within this process. The chapter begins with a very brief description of the approach, and then presents a theoretical framework which explores the epistemology and conceptual issues that frame the research methods. It will then return to the chosen methods, illustrating the decision-making process and procedures in depth, giving the reader enough detail to reproduce the methods if necessary. The final section will discuss the piloting of the methods, the lessons learned, and the adjustments made during the subsequent investigations. Again, the purpose of the research was to explore how all key stakeholders within The University and The Faculty contribute to the enhancement of study skills, in order to identify success factors, barriers to effective implementation and any policy issues affecting the processes. Central to the exploration is the nexus of pedagogy and management issues.

The chosen method consisted of semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders within The Faculty and the various support units throughout The University. The interviews used a form of visual projective techniques in order to focus discussion and elicit perceptions of the participants’ roles and relationships with the organisation and with the student experience. The data
that was generated was qualitative in nature and analysable using inductive
techniques.

3.2 Theoretical Framework: Stances and Justifications

The methods that we choose for any research project exist within a background of beliefs and philosophical traditions. Academics who write about research methods often try to organise these ideas by putting them into a framework for better understanding. Saunders et al. (2007) for example describe a Research Onion, with the different layers, starting from the epistemological and more philosophical concepts on the outside, and the more practical tools of research nestling deep inside other philosophical concepts. Similarly, Crotty (2005) promotes a hierarchy of four research elements which starts with the research method which is part of a strategic methodology, which is understood through a theoretical perspective, all of which embed a particular epistemology. Both authors acknowledge that the terminologies used in describing the various levels are confusingly interchangeable, and don’t always fit well into categories. This may well be because the concepts evolved in the fields of philosophy rather than the field of practical research methods. Nevertheless, such a hierarchical depiction of the relationships provides a convenient tool for justifying and analysing any given research approach. The following discussion uses a hybrid of the frameworks from Saunders and Crotty. It begins with a justification of the wider epistemological and philosophical concepts, and leads on to the methodologies that have historical precedent, and then on to the specific tools.
3.2.1 Concepts, Philosophies and Methodologies

Fundamental to placing research methods into context is the underlying epistemology, and its rather contentious variations. Many authors describe the paradigm wars of the last century between the followers of quantitative and qualitative methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, 2005; Hoben & Tite, 2008; Miles, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Adherents of both sides have sought to justify their stances by invoking the epistemological and even ontological ideas of positivism versus interpretivism.

The positivist or rationalist camps maintain that knowledge, understanding or truth is best uncovered through a systematic application of objective procedures. The interpretivists or phenomenologists have long countered that knowledge, or even reality, has an element of subjectivity, and that meaning can be constructed by the observer. The research tools used by both camps incorporate these basic assumptions. It is not surprising that basic texts of qualitative methods (e.g. Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Miles, 1994; Patton, 2002) seem to be disproportionately dedicated to justifying philosophical stances. This is no doubt due to the historical context of the 1990s and the aforementioned paradigm wars that seemed to consume academia.

Nevertheless, there is a sense of moving on. Phillips (2008) speaks of a more recent *rapprochement* between the two camps, and the growing use of mixed
methods from both sides. Similarly, Hoben and Tite (2008) plea for a strategic détente between these divisive paradigms. Cousin (2008), more bluntly, advises researchers to not get overly involved in the paradigm wars, and to tread a middle path. Collis and Hussey (2009) acknowledge both sides by reminding us that beliefs and epistemologies exist along a continuum rather than distinct camps. And Creswell (1994) recounts an increasingly flexible approach which relies on pragmatism, where a researcher keeps an open mind and chooses the best tool for the job, leaving the philosophical discussions of knowledge and reality and concentrating on the job at hand.

The overall epistemology for this particular research is predominantly interpretivist. Rather than setting out to prove or disprove a particular hypothesis, it seeks to build theory, acknowledging the value of personal subjectivity and case-specific phenomena.

Saunders (2007), Collis (2009) and Crotty (2005) point out the rhetorical and stylistic writing conventions inherent to interpretivist or phenomenological tradition, in which first person is considered acceptable. In this case, I will adopt the convention. This would be justifiable due to the obvious personal nature of my involvement with the work-related project, and the overall characteristics of a Professional Doctorate. An interpretive stance acknowledges the subjective interactions between the researcher and the researched. And this Professional Doctorate is structured to highlight the importance of reflection, as evidenced by the process of Personal Development Planning, discussed in later appendices.
Writing in first person also has the advantage of clearer sentence structures which avoid the ambiguities of the passive voice.

An interpretivist and qualitative approach seems to be most appropriate for this particular project for a number of reasons. First of all, it is in the area of social sciences. Both the science of education and the science of management deal with predicting and analysing human behaviour and social interactions. Social scientists have been fighting for the recognition of qualitative methods for years, whether the observational techniques of the ethnographers or the discourse analysis of the socio-linguists (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, 2005; Miles, 1994).

The qualitative approach also has an appeal because of the scale of the project. A purely positivist approach would rely on an objective collection of a statistically significant amount of data in order to generate a testable conclusion with generalisable theories for application. This project is focussed on a very distinct set of circumstances within one university, with a limited number of players. It would be possible to expand the scope of a similar project in order to uncover similar trends in other universities, perhaps with the intention of deriving policy recommendations for universal application. However, I would hope to generate recommendations for this particular set of circumstances. (As pointed out in the literature review, there are already many academic critiques of governmental attempts at applying consistent managerial and curricular educational policies across universities. I’m more interested in bringing about change at the micro level).
Finally, following on from the above ideas of focussing on one particular set of circumstances, an interpretivist stance seems all the more justifiable because of the nature of this professional doctorate, which by definition is based on a change management project which I have personally been involved with for a number of years. A positivist/rationalist approach would require using research tools whose main purposes were to ensure complete objectivity, therefore not contaminating the theories with personal judgement or bias. Granted, it would be possible to divorce myself from my intuitive understanding of the issues, but why maintain the pretence that much of what I know is not based on what Schön (1991) would call *knowledge-in-action*?

The *in-situ* nature of a professional doctorate also makes it difficult to use deductive reasoning. A truly positivist/rationalist approach would involve constructing a hypothesis and an appropriate experiment, where controls are identified and variables are manipulated. In this current project, many of the important factors are simply beyond my control. While I might have some input into steering academic policy and management procedures within the institution, they are (and should be) a result of a more complex set of negotiations involving many players and, admittedly, political expediency. In other words, it would be difficult to ‘experiment’ with the various phenomena that interest me most. I could however use the present case study to derive new theories, using the most epistemologically sound methods. And it would appear that the interpretivist legacy offers the best fit.
Again, the distinctions between deductive and inductive approaches are at the heart of the paradigm wars. A deductive stance implies constructing a research strategy which seeks to remove the researcher in order to reveal an objective truth that is waiting to be uncovered, whereas inductive implies that truth or theories for portraying truth will be constructed or interpreted by the researcher. Saunders et al. (2007) and others point out that, in practice, a research strategy can be a combination of both. This is gratifying, because a great deal of what informs this project is experiential. The notion of using a purely inductive approach and qualitative methods, in which a researcher comes with a completely open mind, might be appropriate for exploratory investigations in which the researcher is not an expert in the field. On the other hand, in this project, I come with years of hand-on experience. Having previously conducted action research of varying levels of ‘scientific’ rigour (Redding, 2009), I have developed personal paradigms for explaining the phenomena that I have experienced. Therefore, there is an element of a deductive approach entering here, in that I am testing some pre-conceived notions. The new research for this project will also be inductive insofar as it is looking for clues that could impact on an evolving set of personal conceptions, theories and paradigms. Therefore, within the context of a professional doctorate, qualitative inductive methods are important tools for modifying our understandings, not defining or uncovering them.
3.2.2 Methods and Tools

Within this framework of interpretivist epistemological stances, there are standard sets of methods that have evolved through the years. Interviews have an established history as an appropriate qualitative method. As a tool, it has been used by social scientists ranging from linguists to market researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, 2005; Patton, 2002; Saunders, et al., 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The interview is markedly different from the quantitative questionnaire in that it often looks at a limited and perhaps less representative population. Therefore from a positivist perspective, it would seem to have limited use in producing generalisable results, unless used on a large scale. However, even the positivist camp would acknowledge its usefulness in exploratory investigations which could generate theories and hypotheses for future testing. The interpretivists however can see the interview as a legitimate means to an end. Fontana & Frey (cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 47) remind us that the "interview becomes both the tool and the object". Constructing meaning comes from a deep analysis of limited, context-specific data rather than statistical analysis of large amounts of quantifiable data. Again, this epistemological stance seems to fit well when analysing this case study which looks at a particular set of circumstances.

An interview is a tool that can be used with varying degrees of structure and repeatability. It would be possible to construct an interview with a series of prescriptive questions, designed to gather data which fits nicely with preconceived areas of interest. However, the more structured the interview, the
more it comes to resemble a quantitative questionnaire. Again, methodology
tools exist along a continuum of epistemological approaches. A semi-structured
interview lies toward the qualitative end, yet acknowledges the need for some
repeatable structure in order to ensure a level of objectivity and repeatability or
simply to maintain focus.

The specific methods that I chose for conducting the semi-structured interviews
included a series of themed questions or prompts and the use of projective
techniques (details of both in the next section). The broad themes were based
on the literature review and admittedly some personal experience.

*Projective techniques* is a term that is used rather loosely in this project. ‘Use of
projective techniques’ sounds perhaps more academic than simply stating that I
asked the interviewees to draw several charts and diagrams whilst being
interviewed. Yet, there is a rich history of using such visual techniques in
research methodologies. And understanding their practical and philosophical
implications can give insight into current practices, no matter the depth to which
they are used. *Projective techniques* in its purest sense can be traced back to
famous practices of Rorschach (Gross, 2005; Piotrowski, 2005) who would ask
his patients to look at ink blots during their psychoanalytic sessions. The ink
blots were abstract figures which allowed the patients to ‘project’ meaning onto
them. The theory held that the process would allow the doctor/researcher to
delve into the subconscious in order to uncover personality traits or internal
conflicts, as understood within the framework of psychoanalysis (Donoghue,
2000). As far as using projective techniques, I’m not particularly interested in uncovering the id or ego, nor does my epistemological stance align with the Freudian theories. Nevertheless, it is relevant in that a projective technique is a simple application of hermeneutics, or a method for discovering or uncovering a truth.

*Projective techniques* can also be associated with feelings and perceptions. It has a record of use with market research, where the investigators want to know more about how a customer feels about a particular product, or how they perceive its value or quality (Donoghue, 2000; Webb, 1992). Again, the emphasis on the emotional is perhaps less important to me, although there is value in looking at some of the emotional aspects of my interviewees insofar as many emotive issues could manifest themselves as barriers to effective systems and organisations.

The use of visual techniques seems to be evolving alongside the relatively recent field of qualitative methodologies. The early qualitative methods promoted by Robert Park and the Chicago School were primarily text-based or verbal, i.e. they relied heavily on interpreting the written or recorded word and how we use language in order to construct meaning (Creswell, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Stanczak, 2007). Visual methods have also been used by sociologists and anthropologists to explore relationships between human existence and perception. And more recent use of arts-based inquiry has been associated with activism and advancing a particular political goal. Stanczak
(2007) describes the rise of photography and video in research, where images are used to trigger different insights in the viewers. These methods are primarily concerned with using images that the researcher or somebody else has captured or reproduced, either drawings, photographs or artwork. The image is no more than a tool which draws the participant into a process of exploration.

I find these processes appealing perhaps less for their theoretical and epistemological stances, than for their practical and pragmatic value. From the outset, I was concerned about interviewing fellow academics, for fear that the interviewees would try to ‘second guess’ the questions and offer appropriate responses. It is fair to say that many people involved in higher education have an analytical mindset, if not also a working understanding of how structured research operates. Therefore, there is the increased risk that those being interviewed could try to steer the discussions toward a particular outcome or political stance. Jupp (2006) warns the social researcher of similar risks posed by acquiescent effects where the interviewee gives what they feel the interviewer wants, or social desirability effects where they try to portray themselves in a desirable light.

The whole question of second-guessing is somewhat reminiscent of the Hawthorn Effect, an established phenomenon in which the researcher affects the behaviour of the observed during an experiment (Lancaster, 2005). This phenomenon however doesn’t really seem as relevant here because it was
grounded in the positivist tradition of ensuring complete objectivity. Nevertheless, even the qualitative practitioner would need to guard against injecting undue bias into any proceedings.

Therefore, combining these projective techniques with interviews serves a number of practical and pragmatic purposes. Primarily, it serves to maintain focus on a limited number of issues. It is easy to point to the diagram when leading the conversation in a particular direction. And since the diagram is generated by the interviewee, it probably has added authority and legitimacy in their eyes. The interviewee is more likely to want to return to a particular point that they authored. As with Rorschach’s approach, the techniques offer the possibility of exploring the subconscious. And while I wouldn’t expect the process to produce a revelation previously hidden to the participant, I can see how the process would make it easier to give out information in a methodical manner, without the distractions of an unstructured conversation where less-than relevant tangents may occur. The visual aids maintain focus.

Another aspect that sets my version of projective technique apart from those mentioned above is that in my version, the drawing itself does not become the object of analysis per se. It is a mechanism that provides the interviewee with some structure for reflection and gathering thoughts. To launch directly into a verbal interview could result in responses which were ‘off the top of the head’. The task of drawing and deciding on what to include gives the interviewee time to think about the subject before verbalising it. The drawing that is produced
can be used during the interview. It can also be used after the interview; however, I am less interested in analysing it to determine ‘Why was it drawn in that particular way?’ Again, I can see how it could shed light on an individual’s perception of a situation and perhaps illustrate their world view. However, as discussed below, I choose to concentrate more on the contents of the interview than the resultant drawing.

3.2.3 Tools for Analysis

Therefore, the primary tools for gathering the data are a semi-structured interview, as supported by a form of projective technique. The method of analysing the data is then guided by the same overall qualitative epistemology. Interpretivists and post-positivists have evolved a number of ways of interpreting the spoken word. The data can be seen as a whole or dissected to uncover meaning. *Narrative analysis* is a way of looking at the structure of the overall interview, seeing it as a story with a beginning, middle and end (Collis & Hussey, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Saunders, et al., 2007). This however did not seem as appropriate as the other methods which require a dissecting of the information, as I’m more interested in the structure of the organisation more so than the structure of how it is described to me.

Similarly, the methodologies of *discourse analysis* look at the stories, or rather the discourse, surrounding various issues. Interviews can provide the data for such analysis. Practitioners describe the difficulties in prescribing procedures to apply to this methodology (Creswell, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Jupp,
2006). Rather, it is an open process which invites reflection, subjectivity and possibly intuition. This approach, as promoted by Foucault and other post-structuralists, seems valuable for uncovering wider philosophical insights into being and knowledge construction, and has a wider recognition in the fields of linguistics and semiotics. However, at this stage of my investigations, I would feel more confident in using a structure that methodically pulls out the themes. I am not so concerned about being able to verbalise existential concepts, but rather to put into place a series of concrete actions in the future. Therefore, the research strategy must be equally grounded in the real world. It is possible however, that I could use a form of discourse analysis at later stages of analysis, to derive wider meanings. Discourse analysis is often used in determining relationships among the discourses surrounding a particular issue. This could well be relevant in discussing the various roles within an organisation such as The University. While I’m less interested in Marxists’ interpretations of the failures of predominant managerial and neoliberal paradigms, I can see value in analysing current attitudes.

Other approaches to dissecting transcripts seem to go down the quantitative route of literally counting the occurrence of words and ideas in a transcript. But again, these approaches are based more on a positivist perspective. They provide evidence of the usage of language, the prevalence of ideas and concepts, etc. However, such a mathematical approach on a limited number of interviews would not be appropriate.
The field of *grounded theory* seems more attractive in that it offers a structure for analysing data in a wide variety of settings such as market research. Its application and relevance is not without limits in this project, but it could serve as a starting point. Most texts on qualitative methods cite the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and/or subsequent interpretations of Strauss and Corbin (1990) (see for example Creswell, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, 2005; Jupp, 2006; Patton, 2002; Saunders, et al., 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Strauss offers a step-by-step method of analysing qualitative data which involves iteratively reviewing data and applying a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning.

At the heart of their methodologies is the concept of *coding* data, or uncovering themes and placing the data into categories. The raw data comes from interviews which have been *purposefully* selected. The transcriptions of interviews are then subjected to a series of analyses which are continually being compared to the evolving theories. Coding is further categorised as *open*, *axial* and *selective*. *Open* coding is where the researcher should most guard against imposing preconceived theories. This then might be less relevant in my research in that I have already embraced an amount of subjectivity in my strategy. This tension is recognised by many practitioners. Collis (2009) advises that researchers should approach the data not so much with an empty mind, but an open one. Even Glaser (as cited by Collis) made an important distinction that the labels that we give categories are highly subjective, and
therefore need justification to place them in context. (The next section will have details on the categories used in this project).

Axial coding refers to the iteration of coding which seeks to find relationships between categories and arrange them in subcategories. This process of analysing and arranging is the beginning of theory construction, in that we are adding meaning to the data. It is also a useful step in the generation of hypotheses which can be tested using other methods. While my project is not going down the positivist route of hypothesis testing, it can still embrace the framework of iterations of axial coding in order to derive and modify theories.

The final category of Strauss and Corbin’s approach is selective coding which involves further refinement of categories and choosing predominant themes. It seems to be distinguished in a temporal sense in that it occurs after months of living with the data. This would fit in with discussions of how we learn found in the literature review. Cognitivists who follow Piaget describe how our brains are assimilating and accommodating new information by adopting new schema. Similarly, in reference to Vygotsky, such a step-by-step methodical approach could be considered scaffolding that help us acquire new understandings. Living with data allows time to accommodate and assimilate new ideas, especially if these emergent themes did not align with existing schema.
And finally, *grounded theory* incorporates the notion of *saturation* in which the researcher returns to the same data and applies new theories and coding in an iterative process until they are satisfied that the data will not yield anything new.

In some ways, *grounded theory* seems overly prescriptive. It may well be because it evolved during the paradigm wars when opponents of qualitative methods were uneasy with the lack of repeatability and scientific rigour that the new field seemed to be promoting. Therefore, a strict use of these techniques would appear to be more defensible. It also seems to be a tool that could also lend itself to the *management* of researchers, especially those who may be new to research, or those conducting large projects. Large-scale projects could well involve teams of researchers, including graduate students or recent graduates who might have the competent skills, but lack life experiences. Therefore, controlling the quality of this research might entail adopting a more objective epistemology, and the subsequent procedures would focus on ensuring objectivity and consistency from all the data collectors. I would suspect however that those who initially design the projects are, in fact, incorporating a great deal of subjectivity at an early phase, based again on prior knowledge and preconceived paradigms. Again, the lines between philosophical distinctions of positivist and interpretivist become blurred.

Therefore for the analysis phase of my project, I chose to use some of the ideas behind *grounded theory* as a way of approaching the data, but without the same level of structure. It would not be appropriate to call my methodology pure
grounded theory primarily because of the subjective nature that I admit to using during the design phase, and the limited number of iterations that might constitute saturation. Practitioners such as Miles (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Miles, 1994) seem to admit that not only is grounded theory highly subjective in practice, but also that it is a loose approach to analysis which could be more generally described as three phases: data reduction, data display and conclusions. The process of analysis actually starts before reduction when we design the research strategy. They would say that data reduction occurs in an ‘anticipatory’ way when we design the conceptual framework. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) demystify the analysis somewhat by describing the process as one which involves reading the transcripts over and over again until you start to find patterns across different people’s talk, images, metaphors and figures of speech that keep coming up. They go on to emphasise that the researcher develops a coding system of their own. I find it gratifying in that the process of inventing your own methodology not only makes it more meaningful for yourself, but it also allows a closer match to the context of the project.

### 3.3 The Methods

Given the philosophical and epistemological characteristics mentioned above, interviews and qualitative analysis seem justifiable in the context of this research. This section now describes the details of how the interviews were structured, how they were conducted, and some of the mechanics of how the data were analysed. In theory, it should provide enough detail so that it could be reproduced, i.e. it shows a practical framework for conducting further
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research. Subsequent chapters on findings will contain more detail on data analysis, as would be expected with a qualitative procedure that relies on iterative passes of analysis.

3.3.1 Participants/Key Players

The first major concern in approaching the interviews was choosing appropriate interviewees. This project is about improving how The University and The Faculty develop academic/study skills within their first year undergraduates. Again, I recognised early on that there were a number of individuals and units that were involved in the process. Therefore, it was possible to choose at least one interviewee from each area. However, I needed to clarify the scope of my choices. As most educational theory would indicate, learning doesn’t just take place inside a classroom or as directed by a designed curriculum. For example, students can receive valuable help from friends, family, employers and general life experience. Nevertheless, as one of my interests is the management of developing learning, I decided to confine my scope to those areas over which The University and The Faculty have some direct influence and those who had some clear contractual duties in that area. Presumably these other outside sources and their relative contribution could be reflected and/or acknowledged during in-depth interviews.

In order to focus the selection process, I constructed a matrix which summarised who I thought would be appropriate to interview (see Appendix A – Profile Matrix). This matrix not only served to illustrate to an outside observer
the overall developmental process but, perhaps more importantly, it ensured that their inclusion is consistent and justifiable, and it allowed me to reflect on where these various players were in the context of this organisation. The matrix has three criteria or characteristics for each interviewee:

- **What we know about them which could have a bearing on the project.** In other words, why in very general terms it would be obvious to include them.

- **Their presumed relation to study skills.** Before the interviews I had a set of assumptions about their involvement with study skills which may or may not be completely accurate.

- **Reasons for including in research.** What I think is most notable or unique about their role. Admittedly, there was an element of convenience/purposive sampling in all of the choices. In other words, I knew them and I knew that they were not only approachable, but would provide a professionally objective viewpoint which was not overly skewed by second-guessing or a desire to promote a particular agenda. Nevertheless I was aware of what some might see as a lack of objectivity. Yet, if I were to truly take on a post-positivist epistemological stance, this would be acceptable, as long as I were to continually reflect on the nature of this subjectivity. Again, it’s not about deriving a generalised statement of staff’s perceptions or beliefs; it’s about going to the best source for extracting data to build understanding and theory.
Therefore, I chose five main interviewees and one pilot interviewee. I had also considered interviewing a student, but then I decided that it would not yield the data that I was most interested in. The literature review has provided information on student perspectives, most notably those sources related to student expectations (e.g. Glover, et al., 2002; Laing, et al., 2005; Lehmann, 2009). This current investigation is more concerned with the employees and roles within an organisation and how they go about actively developing the skills.

From a positivist perspective, this could be considered a limited sample size, with questions arising over the thoroughness and representativeness of the possible data that might emerge. However, as I chose an interpretivist approach, I feel more confident that such purposive sampling could and should result in data rich enough to provide insight into the context-specific phenomenon. And the current qualitative discourses remind us that it is not just the external data that helps us arrive at conclusions, but rather the subjective interaction of the insider-researcher. Recognition of my own input is central to validating any conclusions with this approach. Schön (1991) reminds us that practitioners acquire their expertise through knowledge-in-action; and Whitehead (2009) reinforces the advantage of action research as an approach which allows the researcher to place their own ‘I’ into the research question. Whereas I may have had qualms about a limited sample size because of my background in the more positivist fields of science and engineering, the more
qualitative approaches allow me to appreciate the richness and depth of select samples.

The following expands on the justification for inclusion, as provided in my matrix:

**The Lecturer** is primarily responsible within The Faculty for designing and delivering modules on marketing. She has experience with curricular design for large and small class sizes, and well over five years experience. You could argue therefore that she has already learned her craft well enough to be confident and able to verbalise many of the concepts around teaching. She also has an *implicit* relation to study skills. She has participated in Induction Week, an initiative where The Faculty had attempted to front-load many of the academic skills development in first-year students. Therefore, she knows of the importance of considering skills outside the context of subject-specific knowledge. Overall, she was included because she is an academic involved with curricular design, using some innovative L&T techniques e.g. blended learning, and is eager to improve students’ abilities in a variety of areas.

**The Personal Tutor** is a member of a team that was created several years ago within The Faculty which offers one-on-one sessions with students on a variety of pastoral and academic issues. Her job description has explicit links to improving academic/study skills. While her post is relatively new, she has already had a considerable number of hours with a range of students, dealing
with a wide range of their issues. She was included in the interviews because she is, in effect, operating outside the curriculum. She is not directly involved with programme design (yet). And she deals directly with students who struggle with study skills.

**The Librarian** is responsible for the library facilities (sometimes referred to as Learning Centre) specifically within The Faculty. She is responsible for managing staff and a team of advisors who act as focal points for students with subject-specific queries in the library. She has had some input into student induction and occasional lectures. She and her team are an obvious focal point for students conducting text-based research.

**The Academic Skills Coordinator** manages a relatively new initiative within The University to provide centralised academic skills support across the university. She is developing a team who can work with programme teams who request help with supplementing their curriculum through the use of ‘interventions’ designed to improve particular skills. She was included because of the focus on skills development, but perhaps more importantly because her team represents centralised support that operates outside of the conventional curriculum as developed by the subject specialists.

**The Pro Vice Chancellor (Learning & Teaching) or PVC** has an exclusively managerial role and overall responsibility for L&T issues across the university. She has a strong understanding of pedagogic theory and practice, as well as an
understanding of strategic planning and day-to-day management issues. Her inclusion in the interviews is vital for understanding how developing skills is managed at the macro level, and how the various departments and players at the micro level may or may not function.

In addition to these interviewees, I chose to pilot my methods on another member of the central Academic Skills team (details of the pilot in subsequent section).

3.3.2 The Interview Preparations

In designing the semi-structured interviews, I had to prepare a series of guidance notes for myself and visual aids for the participants. Again, I was able to summarise these in a matrix which could act as an aide memoire during the interview. This matrix (see Appendix B Aide Memoire) was divided into a series of tasks for the interviewee, explicit prompting questions and themes to explore, and implicit questions and themes that I would hope to emerge from the interviews. The visual aids would guide the interviewee into drawing the images that I would hope to act as a projective technique.

Central to guiding these interviews, I wanted to explore where the interviewees perceived their roles in the organisation, and the relationship between their job specification and the development of study skills. For this, I co-opted the common organogram, a pictorial representation of how an organisation is structured, depicting line management responsibilities. It seemed to me to be
an image and tool that most people in business would recognise. It is a graphical representation of physical and conceptual relationships which could and should show perceived and actual arrangements. More importantly, I wanted the interviewees to draw it, not so much to test them on their awareness of The University’s structures, but to bring out those issues which they felt most relevant to the discussions. Therefore, in order to use this tool, I had to make sure that the interviewee did in fact know what they were. So I prepared two examples of other organograms (see Appendix C: Examples of Organograms) and in my introductory speech (which was by and large consistent) I had to make sure that I introduced the concept, the visuals and reinforced the idea that accuracy would not be important.

(As an aside, after having embarked on this home-made interpretation of a projective technique, I came across a text book on management consulting in which the author recommended using organograms when discussing projects with clients (Margerison, 2001). As a reference point, this writer displayed little interest in epistemological justification. Nevertheless, the method rang true as it was being put to practical use, and the writer’s credentials showed knowledge-in-action, and all the more appropriate for this professional doctorate.)

The organograms would allow me to explore themes from management and organisational perspectives. However, I also wanted to investigate similar themes from the student perspective, or rather, from the interviewee’s perception of the student perspective. As outlined in the literature review, many
of the newer approaches to HE pedagogy invoke the notion of the student experience. Rather than asking the interviewees verbally about this concept, I chose to have them draw a second diagram. Again, I chose to use a visual tool that is perhaps more common in engineering or systems analysis: the flow diagram. Used in considerably more complex situations, it is a graphical tool which depicts the sequential events that occur in, for example, a manufacturing process or any set of repeatable procedures. It typically uses boxes to represent key events or stages, plus lines and arrows to represent identifiable inputs and outputs that affect the product or process. The value here is not to reduce the student experience into an industrialised commodity, but simply to identify those major stages (as perceived by the interviewee) in which the student is most impacted during their time in HE, specifically in relation to study skills. And again, the act of drawing and the resultant images are secondary to the themes that emerge during the interview. Admittedly the interviewees may not be as familiar with flow diagrams as engineers and systems analysts. Nevertheless, I suspected that I could introduce some real-world examples to illustrate the point and then ask them to creatively come up with their own version, without worrying about accuracy. The examples used are found in Appendix D: Process Flow Diagrams.

Having put together the visual aids and decided upon introductory themes, I then used the matrix to plot out the actions and topics that I would reasonably expect to occur during the interviews. I also prepared a Participant Information Sheet and Participant Consent Form (see Appendix E: Ethics Forms). Their
basic structures were from The University’s Research Studies Manual, and outlined the purpose of the research and their rights as a participant. I did feel it important to add explicit warnings on the subject of anonymity. Given that the resultant write-up would suggest the identity of The University, The Faculty and the specific job titles, it would be relatively easy for a reader to determine who said what in many cases. I therefore made it clear that if the participant wanted to remain completely anonymous, it would still be possible to participate, but that they should explicitly discuss this aspect at the outset. (None had any objections.)

Therefore, the material needed for each interview included:

- Participant Information Sheet
- Participant Consent Form (two copies, one to keep)
- Examples of Organograms
- Examples of Process Flow Diagrams
- Blank A3 paper to draw on
- Coloured pens, pencils and markers
- My matrix/aide memoir
- Digital recorder

Each interview was meant to last no more than one hour. Before starting the recording I would give the participant a chance to read through the information sheet and sign the consent form. After beginning the recorded interview, I
would rely on the matrix to provide the ‘semi-structure’. The following is a summary of the information found in the matrix.

The interview and activities were divided into three main sections. The first activity would be for me to describe organograms as a tool and ask them to describe their role and position within the organisation by drawing their own version, regardless of detail or accuracy. They would then have to present it back to me, with specific emphasis on its relevance to skills development. According to my aide memoire, the explicit prompting questions that I would allow myself *(if the opportunity arose)* might include:

- When you support study skills, what precisely are the mechanisms and procedures that you use?
- What are the barriers to your success?
- How does widening access affect your role?

There would also be *implicit* questions that I would *not* allow myself to raise, but would watch out for. If the subjects naturally came up, I would pursue them. These included:

- How pivotal is their role perceived?
- Marginalisation (i.e. is there any evidence that they see their role as outside the core mission of the university)?
- How explicit is communication between areas of the organisation?
I felt that it was important in drawing boundaries between explicit and implicit questions in order to prevent myself from leading the conversation too much. In some ways these boundaries might be too artificial and prescriptive, yet I felt I needed some mechanism to allow the interview to go in a more natural direction.

In the second stage of the interview, I would ask them to repeat the process of drawing an organogram, or modify the previous version, in order to concentrate on others within The University who might be involved in skills development. Again, the explicit questions that I would allow myself were:

- What are the mechanisms and procedures for ensuring the development?
- What are the relationships between the two organograms?

And implicit questions and themes might involve:

- Lines of communication, formal and informal between the various departments and roles.
- Their perceived degree of influence on students, staff and The University procedures.

The final stage of the interview would require them to change subjects somewhat, asking them to portray the student experience using a flow diagram. This task would be more conceptual in that there isn’t a right answer, it would merely be a way of illustrating a concept. Therefore, the participants would be
given free rein to describe the student’s journey through university, concentrating on where learning occurs and where skills are developed. The resultant drawings would be used to elicit conversations. The matrix/aide memoire would suggest explicit questions such as:

- Where are study skills developed?
- Where are your explicit input points in the process?
- Where are others' input points?

As for implicit themes, the matrix would remind me to listen for:

- Unprompted views on the importance of the curriculum.
- What is their sense of the Student Experience?
- Ownership of overall process?
- Where they feel the most influence.

This then is the overall framework for approaching the interviews. Again, I was mindful that a semi-structured interview should not have too much prescriptive structure. Yet, I also felt that having a matrix would provide an aide memoire and perhaps even build up my confidence when confronting an unknown situation. In other words, just as I would ask the participants to use drawings as a form of projective technique as well as a crutch, in the same vein, I would use the matrix as a crutch that I could confidently choose to use or dismiss during the interviews.
3.4 The Pilot and the Evolving Methodologies

As constructed, the above set of procedures provides a roadmap for generating data. However, it is a very incomplete roadmap. The format of a traditional dissertation might suggest that a pilot study is needed to refine the methodology. But, as I will argue, while a pilot is important at the early stages of research, it’s the overall process of collecting all of the data that defines the methodology in this case.

It almost strikes me as an artificial distinction to separate the methodology stage, the pilot stage and the data collection stage, at least when applied to qualitative research. With quantitative or positivist research, the distinctions seem justifiable. Such a researcher can develop a set of procedures to generate data that is focussed, representative and analysable. They can test those procedures during a pilot stage to see if they do in fact produce usable data and guard against any unforeseen results or anomalies or artefacts. If and when the researcher is satisfied that all faulty procedures have been ‘fixed’, the researcher can then separate themselves from the process and, essentially, put faith in the methodology as a separate entity which will objectively uncover a truth. They can then move on to the discrete stage of data collection with fewer concerns for the methods. And a subsequent write-up could reflect these discrete stages.

However, I struggled with applying this pattern to the looser qualitative methodologies. Yes, a pilot stage offers the opportunity to learn important
lessons. However, the methodology is still not fully formed. Some of the accepted qualitative approaches such as grounded theory as outlined above do place emphasis on a recognisable set of procedures that constitute a set methodology. Yet, as mentioned, I found their iterative processes of data manipulation to be considerably less important than their process of data interpretation, which remains loosely structured, if not nebulous. In short, it is very difficult to find a methodology which fully describes exactly how the data is analysed for meaning, which is probably why the literature is prone to fuzzy wording such as ‘allowing the data to speak to you’ or ‘mining rich data’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Therefore, this section not only describes the pilot interview and the lessons learned, but also acknowledges that the methodology was still not fully formed. Rather it would continue to evolve during the ‘real’ interviews. This section will briefly discuss aspects of the subsequent interviews only insofar as the process is concerned. The content and meaning of the later data and its specific interpretation is dealt with in a separate chapter.

The pilot interview was conducted with a member of the Academic Skills team, the central unit led by the Academic Skills Coordinator. I had already planned to interview the Coordinator as part of the more in-depth analyses, but chose to pilot the procedures on the team member first. The team member, who had been in post for under a year, would be expected to have some overview of the workings of The University as an organisation, but considerably less than other
scheduled interviewees. On the other hand, all the members of that team do have credentials and experience with student support in one form or another. Therefore I knew that she would be able to contribute to the discussion enough to allow me to gather some data while I concentrated on the procedures.

The first challenge in conducting the pilot was in establishing a safe space for allowing the interviewee to speak freely. Those who write about interview techniques often speak of making the participants feel at ease or establishing an appropriate environment (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Saunders, et al., 2007). In practice, this has to be balanced with expediency of the participants’ timetable and the availability of rooms, unexpected distractions and the cooperation of managers. The promise of a one-hour interview proved to be acceptable to both the participant and her line manager. Clearly a participant is more likely to open up if they see value in the process and, importantly, if they feel their line manager sees value in it. In this case, we conducted the interview in the manager’s office.

Setting the mood also required a certain amount of chit-chat before starting the interview proper. Determining the amount of small talk was probably more a matter of subconscious social skills rather than a conscious effort, but important nonetheless. The proceedings became more formal with the production of the Information Sheets and Consent Forms. As the consent was in writing, it seemed to add an element of legitimacy or authority to the process. This could be seen as both good and bad: it does concentrate the discussions on the
topics, but also lends an air of unnecessary formality, where responses could be filtered to ensure compliance with some sort of corporate behaviour. I had also been worried about how the digital recorder would be perceived, as it too can have overtones of authority and compliance. There is always going to be a power relationship between interviewer and interviewee (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, 2005; Saunders, et al., 2007). It would stand to reason that it would be all the more compounded by the power relations within an organisation where both work. Nevertheless, this proved to be less of a problem from the viewpoint of (any of) the interviewees. Perhaps it is down to the confidence of the interviewee, the value of socialising or, perhaps in the case of recording, an acceptance of a certain amount of intrusion in today’s society. At any rate, I felt it necessary to explicitly talk about the recorder, beyond simply asking if they minded.

Once the forms were signed and the recorder was turned on, the task was for me to give just enough information to guide the interviewee through the activities which would generate discussion, without being too prescriptive. The interviewee’s act of drawing the first organogram gave me some good insight into the mechanics and value of the exercise. First of all, there was the amount of time that it would/should take for the interviewee to produce a drawing, and the resultant awkward silence during that time. The silence proved to be less of a problem, and if anything was a good opportunity for me to collect my own thoughts and start formulating some ideas based on clues in the drawings. The interviewee herself took to the tasks and would spend time choosing which
pens to use and how to draw basic ideas. At times, my temptation was to hurry on the process and perhaps guide the content. But of course, a basic tenet of qualitative research is that much of the data must be allowed to emerge on its own. I therefore had to resist the temptation.

On reflection, the process of drawing was very useful, as well as informative. The activity allowed the interviewee to play, in its most basic child-like sense. And this ties in with the more conceptual areas of heurism as mentioned in the literature review within the context of education. Play, in a heuristic sense, is about discovering and learning. As I’m not that interested in the participants discovering something new in this process, I would still like to think that they are discovering ways of expressing some of the ideas and organising their thoughts before entering into a recorded conversation.

I still wrestled with wanting to influence the drawing during each of the activities. Perhaps this is because I have a working understanding of the tools of organograms and process flow diagrams. And my use of these tools is coloured by a positivist/rationalist background that uses such tools when scientifically engineering a manufacturing process or in bringing order to the chaos of managing people. In those traditional contexts they are tools of control, where accuracy is important for ensuring a successful completion or successful communication of information. However, in this project, the tools were never meant to be a mechanism for accurately depicting a situation, or controlling anything. I found the pilot interviewee’s second drawing to be
considerably vague and conceptual, and she herself commented on that aspect. So, while my personal preference would have been to focus on expressing ideas in a certain way, I felt justified in suppressing the temptation, and accepting that a different form of expression should be equally valid in eliciting usable data.

Another area where the pilot helped me hone the process was the use of my matrix/aide memoire. I had set out with the full understanding that it was only meant to be a reminder of the general themes rather than a script of questions. And this turned out to be the case. I had to experiment with the mechanics of using the matrix: physically where to put it, how often to refer to it, etc. I was a bit concerned that the interviewee not see it, since it contained the column of implicit questions. It would not have been appropriate for them to see those questions partly because they could then become leading questions, but also because some dealt with personal perceptions of self-worth. I was only interested in those issues if they were to naturally come up. I had to trust my instincts that I’d be able to identify enough clues during the discussions to make a judgement as to whether certain issues should be pursued.

The other aspect of using the matrix that became obvious in the pilot (and increasingly in other interviews) was that the explicit questions in my matrix became less important. I found that the act of concentrating on the drawings gave enough structure to cover those themes found in my initial questions found in the matrix. They did still have value in that they allowed me to look at them
afterwards and reflect on whether they were covered and/or to remind myself to do a better job during the next interview.

Perhaps the most important result of the pilot is that it forced me to confront exactly how to manage the data in order to start analysing it. I had chosen to digitally record the interviews and had meant to take concurrent notes which would help me analyse later. Some researchers talk about the value of writing down summary notes as opposed to taking dictation during interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). However, I soon found that taking meaningful notes to be a distraction, if not confusing. Perhaps it is a form of multi-tasking that comes with practice. Nevertheless, I realised that I would have to concentrate on conducting the interview and hope that the analysis and dissection would occur afterwards. This then led to the difficult decision of how and whether to transcribe the recorded interviews. I had hoped to avoid transcribing the entire interview or perhaps even having it transcribed professionally, rationalising that I could take notes during the repeated playbacks. However, after trying it, I found that the mechanics of stopping, starting, rewinding and re-playing segments was irritating and ultimately counterproductive. Anecdotally, many fellow researchers have said to go on and transcribe everything yourself. And some practitioners explain that the analysis begins with the familiarisation that occurs during transcription (Creswell, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Therefore, after the pilot, I began to fully transcribe all interviews, a process made easier by the recorder’s digital format and readily available software for playback.
The question then became: to what extent to use software for analysis. As I had planned to use a somewhat methodical approach to code the data through iterative passes, it would be possible to use a specialised software package such as NVivo. Having experience with learning EndNote in depth, I knew that all researchers ought to base the decision to adopt new software with something akin to a cost/benefit analysis. This would mean comparing the number of hours needed to learn the software against the number of hours potentially saved when using it. Before conducting the main interviews, I had determined that most all of NVivo’s functions of organising and processing data could also be accomplished on paper, using post-it notes, coloured pencils and a keen eye for organisation. However, NVivo seemed to offer the extra advantage of keeping everything tidy, and speeding up searches. While I did not conduct a rigorous analysis, I did decide to use NVivo, swayed in part on supervisor’s comments and part on my aptitude and curiosity for working with software. In retrospect, I’m glad I did as the data is now tidy and accessible. However, I’m still convinced that the use of such software needs to be judicious. Strauss and Corbin (in Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) warn how researchers are prone to concentrating too much on method, seeking to quantify and mechanise a repetitive process. In the same vein, researchers can put too much emphasis on the use of software, concentrating on making it do what you want, to the detriment of focussing on the data itself.
On the surface, using software seems to be a practical decision, and yet it invokes the epistemological paradigm wars mentioned above, in which there was early resistance to qualitative methods due to their perceived lack of ‘scientific' rigour. The fetishisation of method could get in the way of conducting the research itself. The qualitative practitioner must find the right balance of methodical repeatability and the confidence to embrace the chaos of real-world data. A tendency to rely on mechanisation and automated procedures could be fuelled by a positivist trust of objective and dispassionate process, however it could equally be fuelled by simple expediency: anything that speeds up the tedium of data manipulation leaves more time for the more creative aspects of analysis. While the paradigm wars and their underlying epistemologies are vital to understanding and choosing appropriate tools, at times a more pragmatic approach (in the philosophical and everyday sense) is more useful for accomplishing the task at hand.

A product such as NVivo is designed to accomplish many tasks that a researcher from either camp would appreciate: the ability to correlate predetermined parameters, adding notes to texts and images, assigning code or ‘nodes' to blocks of text and images, and searching and sorting large amounts of data. In this project, I used NVivo’s coding tools, with occasional annotations. The process of assigning ‘nodes' was similar to the Strauss and Corbin's open and axial coding, in that I was able to identify four major themes or inductive groupings early on. In part, these were pre-conceived areas based on the literature review and personal experience.
The ideas that started with the pilot were further refined with the subsequent interviews. The detailed analysis of those interviews is in the following chapter, however, it is worth noting the process of coding, before discussing the resulting contents of the interviews. After transcribing all interviews directly into NVivo, I divided the codes into four themes with subthemes (or tree nodes in NVivo’s terminology). Certain transcribed text seemed to stand out naturally and could be highlighted and linked to one of the predefined nodes in NVivo. Several additional subheadings were added during the process. The resultant ‘tree nodes’ were as follows:

- Concepts, Terminology surrounding Study Skills
  - Broader academic interpretations
  - Broader life skills
  - Developing the more conceptual, analytical aspects
  - ‘How to’ techniques
  - Year 2
- Explicit Barriers
  - Lack of Communication, Forums
  - Mixed Abilities of Students
  - Time, Money, Resources
- Multiple Influences
  - Academic Tutors
  - Central support, PT, LRC, Student Services
  - Silo Effect, specialisation, tunnel vision
- Roles, Responsibilities, Systems within an Organisation
  - Position, links within hierarchy
  - Recognition, appreciation, respect for role
  - Strategy

In what can only be described as a messy process of numerous re-readings of transcripts, making notes in NVivo and on printouts, writing in a reflective journal, and re-visiting earlier chapters, I eventually threw out my original
coding and devised new tree nodes. NVivo did make it easier to collapse existing nodes and transfer some material to new nodes. This was the aspect when the cost/benefit analysis of learning the programme became profitable (as it were). The new nodes were:

- **Location of Academic Skills – When, Where and Who**
  - Embedding, internal vs external
  - Key players, multiple roles
  - When, induction, years 1, 2 and/or 3

- **Pedagogic Mechanisms for Developing Academic Skills – How and What**
  - Role of experiential versus didactic methods
  - Conceptions and definitions of study skills

- **Changing Nature of Students, responding to changes**
  - Instrumentalism
  - Mixed abilities
  - Managing expectations

- **Organisational Behaviour**
  - Strategic role
  - Roles, recognition, appreciation, understanding of others
  - Positions and links in hierarchy
  - Lack of communication
  - Silo effect

This new organisation of data and themes became the basis for the subsequent analysis, as discussed in later chapters.

### 3.5 Conclusions on Methodologies

Adopting a qualitative or interpretivist framework allows a researcher to approach the messy business of understanding humans and their organisations. On the one hand, it gives us freedom to approach uncertainty and construct our own knowledge and understanding based on case-specific information and personal experience. On the other hand, such lack of defined structure can prove to be unsettling, with all the uncertainties surrounding just
how to analyse resultant data. It’s almost as if such a stance replaces faith in objective methodologies with faith in intuition. Granted, invoking concepts of faith almost has religious overtones. Perhaps it is safer to say that faith can also be seen firmly in the realm of philosophy. And it is philosophy that allows us to discuss research methods in terms of epistemology and ontology.

Therefore, the next chapter discusses the resultant data that was produced from these methods.
Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

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4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the results of the interviews whose process was discussed above. It is presented according to the themes that emerged during the interviews, and as developed during the coding and analysis of the transcripts. As summarised in the previous chapter, the resultant categories were:

- The Location of Academic Skills Development: The Who, Where and When
- The Pedagogy of Developing Skills: The What and How
- The Changing Nature of Students: Responding to External Challenges
- Organisational Behaviour: the Internal Challenges

The analysis is presented with a number of excerpts from the transcripts where the following conventions are adopted:

Ellipses in the form of ‘…’ indicate natural pauses in speech or the discontinuation of a line of thought, as opposed to edits and omissions. Where the transcript is edited, the text will indicate a break.

Square brackets in the form of ‘[ ]’ indicate editorial clarification or word substitution.

Specific names mentioned in the transcripts have been anonymised by substituting an initial and underscores, for example J______.
4.2 The Location of Academic Skills Development

As would be expected, it is clear that academic skills are developed by a number of different players throughout The University. The interviews yielded various perspectives on the participants’ roles in supporting this development and their respective places within the organisation and within the student experience. With little or no prompting, they were all able to provide information which could be categorised in traditional organisational or management terms. In other words, when discussing organisations, it is common to speak of defining roles, job specifications, duties and tasks, planning and scheduling, etc. From the outset, academic skills development was framed as a function within an organisation or a service to be provided. Therefore, the first category of analysis dealt with the location of study skills within The University as an organisation: the Who, the Where and the When.

4.2.1 The Who

Clearly, the discussions of who deals with study skills within the organisation were influenced by the predetermined choice of interviewees. As such, these interviews were never expected to reveal surprises, as they were already focussing on the most obvious key players. Nevertheless their discussions shed light on the level of awareness of their own role, the clarity of their roles and their place within an organisation where others share similar responsibilities.
Each of the chosen participants was able to describe their contribution toward the development of study skills, whether the role was perceived to be front-line or managerial. By and large, each acknowledged it as one of their central ‘duties’, and was able to describe that responsibility in relation to those who they report or to those who they manage. In other words, there was a sense that their roles had been specified, if not negotiated, within The University’s management structures. As for clearly describing their ‘place’ on an organogram, it is no surprise that many of them were quite clear as to their immediate location. For example, the Librarian clearly understood the hierarchies and responsibilities within the central management unit which oversees library and information systems; the Personal Tutor and the Lecturer understood the faculty management structures; etc. Not surprisingly, the Pro Vice Chancellor (Learning & Teaching) or PVC, whose duties are almost exclusively strategic and managerial, had the clearest and perhaps most precise understanding of the various management structures for the entire organisation.

For each, the enhancement of study skills was only a subset of a larger set of duties:

- The Personal Tutor has a wider remit of providing pastoral support and guidance on a wide set of issues.
• The Lecturer has the more obvious and traditional role of an academic: subject specialism and lecturing, plus other scholarly activities such as research and enterprise.

• The Librarian is responsible for the smooth operation of the library and promoting overall ‘information literacy’.

• The Academic Skill Coordinator manages a team located centrally who support academic schools and develop resources to be used by students.

• The PVC has managerial responsibilities including the negotiation of resources, coordination of strategy and guiding its implementation.

Perhaps more interesting were the discussions in which the participants talked of their roles within the organisation as a whole, and the nature of other roles that enhance study skills. When developing their organograms of The University, several mentioned the difficulties of pin-pointing the roles and responsibilities related to developing study skills. At the strategic level, the PVC easily identified those areas for which she had line-management responsibility, noting that pervasive nature of study skills.

... so I suppose, from my point of view... I suppose I would be overall responsible for that [development of skills] within the organisation. Then I suppose below me, M______ has a certain responsibility in terms of the Learning Centres. Yeah? And what they provide. And I suppose C______ has a responsibility in terms of her enhancement role. And I suppose P______ does, if any of these issues are going to be included in any guidance or any Academic Handbook, or sort forth. Yeah? So Academic Handbook issues. And then I suppose T______ ... Academic Development and inclusion in any new programmes really. So it
is in many senses a cross-cutting theme. And maybe that's why it becomes more difficult...

The PVC has identified a wide variety of responsibilities at the strategic level. The individuals listed are in turn responsible for teams who coordinate much of the administrative, support and quality assurance activities within The University. Arguably, these departments only support study skills indirectly, in that none of the team members would be classified as academic or lecturers, and most do not deal with students on a day-to-day basis. Some of them within the Learning Centres (aka the library) have direct contact with students, and their stories are represented more fully in distinct interviews. Nevertheless, the above excerpt demonstrates not only the pervasiveness of connections with study skills, but also the admitted difficulty of pinpointing it.

Continuing the theme of elusive pervasiveness, the Lecturer also commented

OK, so I really see study skills... although they're kind of uhm... [writing]... I see them out... not out on a limb... I see them as multi-tendril... kind of thing, like this...

She seems to be speaking not only of the individuals that affect the enhancement of skills, but also the very notion of skills development appearing throughout the organisation. It reiterates the idea that this development is a shared responsibility, as disseminated into numerous roles.
Other interviewees struggled, or showed hesitancy in pinpointing the roles, and made a point of acknowledging the many players. The Personal Tutor, whose job descriptor is probably most explicit about supporting study skills, still made a point several times of saying her role was ‘working in parallel’ with other roles and activities.

Those key players who were involved in the interviews were clear about their respective roles. Yet there was a range of perceptions about the number of similar roles within the organisation. Not surprisingly, the more strategic and managerial the position, the more likely they were to identify the wider range of key players. For example, in the same excerpt from the PVC above, there are at least four high-level departments with some association with study skills. She went on to identify additional areas outside of her direct control, for example Student Services, the International Office and, of course, the academic Schools/Faculties, each of which resides, as it were, in a different part of the organogram. Similarly, the Academic Skills Coordinator was able to identify a wide range of key players, including a lesser-known Royal Society Fellow: an established writer who is currently being externally funded to offer support to students who wish to improve their writing skills. The Academic Skills Coordinator’s ability to identify the wide range of players is, no doubt, partly due to her efforts to actively seek out the others in order to negotiate and clarify the roles, a recurring theme in her conversations.
At the other end of the spectrum were those interviewees who identified (or gave credence to) a smaller number of players, as illustrated in this excerpt of the interview with the Lecturer, when asked to expand on all the organisational areas which touch on development of skills:

But I don’t think there are all these areas. I think there are lecturers, and the personal tutors. I don’t think there are all these other people, are actually directly involved. I think, you know, as far as the input to students. I know that strategically you may be involved… presumably you’re involved with like Personal Tutors kind of area. So strategically maybe, but from my point of view it’s just kind of… the options are personal tutors… my preferred option for lots of them...

The Lecturer has identified two main players (lecturers and personal tutors), and has made a point of limiting it to the two. This of course shouldn’t be interpreted necessarily as ignorance of surrounding roles. Rather, it is more a reflection of a viewpoint that is focussed on the student, the curriculum and the traditional classroom setting. As mentioned elsewhere, this is not an unrealistic assumption given that students tend to focus on what is required of them in classes. By concentrating on the curriculum, she is identifying those who, in her words, are ‘directly involved’. From a very pragmatic viewpoint, she is limiting direct involvement with the formalised taught aspects of the curriculum. And to be fair, the rest of the interview demonstrated that she is a lecturer who takes on some of the responsibility for developing skills within her module, and works closely with the personal tutors. Interestingly, this closeness is expressed operationally and indeed physically as she goes on to point out:
... we know people on this floor... you know the L&T, lots of people, I don't know them. But the personal tutors, I know if that I've got a problem with one student I was really concerned about I'd go and see J____, and even though I'm not absolutely sure it's her area of expertise I know that if I go see her, she'll be able to meet the student...

Again, she’s mentioning the closeness of the relationship of the external support in the form of the personal tutors. She also alludes to the Learning and Teaching Development Unit, a centrally managed unit who have provided her with help with some of her curriculum design, roles that are perhaps indirectly related to study skills support.

Arguably, some roles were not represented among the chosen interviewees. Nevertheless, across the interviews, a consistent picture emerged of key players: lecturers, personal tutors, library staff and advisors, the Academic Skills Team within the library and information department, Student Services, International Office, Student Union, plus those providing strategic and enhancement support to staff. As with the Lecturer, there did appear to be a range of perceptions on the relative contribution of the many players. And again, the importance was usually related to the proximity to the curriculum and scheduled classroom contact. Some interviewees were able to express learning in broader senses. For example, when the Personal Tutor was describing the student learning experience, she briefly considered including those responsible for accommodation (the Accommodation Office within Faculties) in her drawings. She dismissed the idea in order to concentrate on the more obvious players. However, it could be easily argued that
Accommodation does play a role in helping students develop study skills, especially in the first year. As an organisation, The University does take on a certain level of surrogate parenting within the residential halls. Those who work in the halls no doubt take on more pastoral than academic roles, however it would be easy to imagine a scenario where a student receives much needed advice on organising their time and focussing their energies from these surrogate parents.

Therefore, as an organisation, The University does have a number of defined roles that are relevant to developing these skills. The next question however is where within the organisation this occurs. It is not so much a matter of physical space, but rather where within the student experience and where within the structures that The University designs and maintains.

### 4.2.2 The Where

In concentrating on depicting The University as an organisation and depicting learning within the student experience, the interviewees all touched on the idea of when and where the learning occurred. This led to interesting discussions on whether it was internal or external: internal in the sense that it was part of the curriculum or taught element of the student experience; or external in the sense that it might be something outside of the classroom or not directly connected to an assessment that contributed to the degree. These discussions were also characterised by concepts of embedding and deficit models.
Embedding refers to explicit actions taken by the module tutors during a traditional ‘class’. In this way, the enhancement of study skills is integrated into the learning experience along with the subject-specific knowledge. For example, it could be that a lecturer devotes part of a semester to exploring a subject and then sets an essay for the student to explore further. The essay is a mechanism for assessing the students’ comprehension of the facts and their ability to reason. The lecturer might well devote some of the class time in making it quite clear as to what they were looking for in the essay: whether structure, formatting or Harvard Referencing. They might even give guidance on how a well-structured essay would deal with the analysis. They would be therefore developing skills while imparting subject knowledge, i.e. embedding skills into the curriculum. In many of the interviews, there was a strong preference for embedding and integrating academic skills. In other words, it should take place in the curriculum and the class.

For the Academic Skills Coordinator, the preference was quite clear:

So our remit is very straightforward: It's to embed.

In other words, development should not take place outside the context of the curriculum. Her strong preference is that the students receive instruction and support in class, rather than via an optional drop-in service. This opinion is coming from an external support unit who have evolved recently and, according to the interview, have struggled to define and portray their role in a specific way.
Her preference for embedding comes with a high degree of pedagogic justification. When pressed on whether their mission was to embed skills into day-to-day operations, she responded

Yes, where possible we want to go work right inside a curric... a timetabled curriculum with a whole group. So we're not offering it as a choice to students. It's just there. It happens to them.

It is telling that she amends herself when locating it in a curriculum. It’s not just a curriculum; it’s a ‘timetabled curriculum’. This distinction can make a difference within the students’ eyes in terms of legitimacy. A timetabled session is seen as part of the programme: it’s one of the classes, and therefore it ‘counts’ in some way. Timetabling is equally valued in an institutional context, as the timetabling system is a tacit mechanism for allocating resources and communicating the arrangements of who goes where. There is a legitimacy imparted to a timetabled session that all other facility users must respect. Therefore, the Academic Skills Coordinator seems to be saying that the types of study skills activities she supports are those that are recognised by the student as well as the staff and the overall organisation.

Personal Tutors are also outside the curriculum in the traditional sense. Yet the interviewee also expressed a preference for development within the curriculum. When asked to clarify whether the students' skills were being developed within regular modules, the Personal Tutor added:

Yes, I mean, yes... no, not necessarily within the modules, with any of their modules... it's really when they actually get around
to... to doing anything that they’re going to realise what kind of 
skills they to need. You know, for example when they do 
Research Skills modules, they’re assigned tasks that heighten 
awareness of what kind of skills they’re going to require. Thinking 
when I take my Personal Tutors hat off and put my lecturing hat 
on... really the academic skills I would have thought from a 
student point of view are taught to a certain extent by the lecturing 
staff. You know, you make them aware you’re very conscious of 
the fact that they’re not use to working this way, they might get 
guidance from their academic tutors, this is how we go about 
research, these are the kind of information that you should be 
using, this is how we write an essay. I would expect that most 
academics tutors, most teaching staff would go through with them 
so that it’s embedded within whatever module they happen to be 
teaching.

This seems to be saying that even with the concept of embedding, it’s not 
necessarily ‘taught’ but ‘planned for’ within the curriculum. The curriculum 
includes assessment as a formal mechanism. Much of the work on assessment 
physically takes place outside of the classroom; nevertheless it is seen as 
integral to the curriculum.

This is more than passing the buck back to the lecturers. It is an 
acknowledgement that perhaps the lecturers are keepers of the curriculum and 
have the most control over its design and implementation. The lecturers, per 
se, may not do the actual skills development, but they can ensure that their 
modules promote it. This could simply involve designing explicit assessment 
tasks which take place outside the classroom. It could also involve making 
space within the curriculum for such delivery. The Librarian is often invited to 
speak to students during lectures. She goes on to point out:

But we do understand that it means sacrificing some of your 
teaching time which isn’t always easy. We generally have one
session of about an hour tops, where we try to give all this information [on how to access library resources]. We know it doesn't always stick. And we do have an L&IS information literacy group now, which is chaired by J____. It has ISD staff and [The Academic Skills Coordinator’s] team in there, to try and get it integrated in the courses, which is actually what we’d like because, maybe as you were saying, with plagiarism and referencing, if you just tell them once in a session, Yes, that's very nice, yes, they’ll... nothing really sticks, you need to use it and do it...

At the strategic level, the PVC alludes to the process of embedding and developing these skills:

I suppose to many, in many respects it should start from the bottom up really. Because I suppose these module leaders and programme directors have a much clearer understanding of the skills that are required in their particular discipline, or their particular areas. So there is certainly a customisation kind of process that has got to occur with whatever centralised discussion there is around study skills. I think that the programme level discussions are probably key in the programme committees, and perhaps through discussion of the external examiner reports, or student feedback. That's got to be a key place where this happens.

This demonstrates a presumption of academic staff taking the lead on it.

Development is characterized as ‘bottom up’ and a process within the organized curriculum, as opposed to something imposed from outside or as a bolt-on extra.

Teaching in a traditional sense might concentrate on subject material, leaving study skills outside. But here we see a traditional stance of the Lecturer, tempered by an acknowledgement of the importance of skills development:
... we’re all student focussed, but the actual connection with the student will be mainly at my level, at the lecturer’s level... I put it like that [indicating the drawing] and the students’... the study skills...this is where it’s kinda J____’s unit [the personal tutors]... this is where it’s kinda good because she has good connections at all levels... I think it’s great that we’ve got that because if I know I have a particular problem with a student, I know that I can go to her and say this particular student... and I do, you know, go with pastoral problems, academic problems, and say I have a concern with a student, and I can highlight it, without going through all the officialdom of kinda, you know, and I’d much prefer to do that than... prior to having that unit, it was very difficult to know who to go to really. Because, you know, you could go to the heads of programmes, but you know, they’ve got a lot on their plate and they’ve got no better skills or time than I have if I couldn’t deal with it. And the good thing is, study skills thing is they do have J____ and I think her personality is quite good at making connections. So she has good influence.

The subject of embedding is further reflected by the idea of using a dedicated module, such as Research Skills or Professional Development. On the one hand, skills development is within the curriculum and therefore recognised to an extent by the students. On the other hand, it is somewhat separate from the subject that the students has come to study. In terms of embedding, a dedicated module is a bit of a compromise as reflected in this exchange with the Personal Tutor, when debating the design of a curriculum and whether study skills live inside or outside of it:

No I think it should be embedded in the curriculum, if I’m being honest. Uhm... I think... I think having dedicated modules is a good idea, as long as they are contextualised. I think having units like this are also excellent. Although I have found that it is really important that academic skills awareness is embedded in the curriculum, no matter which subject.
Again, embedding is portrayed as the most efficient mechanism. Few interviewees made mention of separate modules dedicated to study skills. Student induction was occasionally cited as important; whether it was a credit-bearing module was of secondary importance. This is understandable, as it is questionable whether students during their first week are motivated by the complexity of a modular structure and credit accumulation. The aspect of learning within context seemed more important, as if to say the context would be the primary motivating factor for getting engagement, as opposed to curriculum.

Therefore, among the interviewees, there was a strong preference for embedding skills enhancement within the curriculum. There was however consistent acknowledgement of the need for some external support. At its worst, this extra support was characterised as ‘remedial’ or ‘deficit models’ in which skills development was relegated to secondary importance or stop-gap measures for a marginalised segment of the population. These issues are addressed further in subsequent sections on organisational behaviour. There was also the question of skills enhancement ‘for whom’, raising the issues of segregation and meeting the needs of individuals. Again, these issues are discussed in sections below on the changing nature of students. For now however, the discussion continues to focus on when such development can and should occur.
4.2.3 The When

During the interviews, the participants were asked to describe the student experience using a flow chart, depicted by a series of boxes representing things that happened to the students. The boxes were arranged sequentially showing the journey from enrolment to graduation. The participants were also asked to discuss how The University as an organisation has input into the learning process, especially in reference to the development of study skills. This tool was helpful in bringing out the ‘when’ aspects of development, and also highlighted some unexpected themes.

Almost all interviewees emphasised the critical importance of the beginning of the students’ journey, often expressed as an induction. Certainly the lecturing staff, the personal tutors and the library staff have been directly involved with such a process which usually takes place in the first week of the semester in Year One. Historically, the induction period has covered a large amount of information aimed at getting students settled, helping them navigate the various systems, and generally setting out the broad expectations of life at university.

The Librarian highlighted some of the challenges of the formal induction. In her drawings, she depicted the process as having a large number of varied inputs, e.g. library, Blackboard, IT, Academic, Student Union, etc. And one of the resultant outputs was ‘Confusion’. This points out one of the common results of an over-ambitious induction which seeks to include too much information in a relatively short amount of time, with an audience of bewildered students who
are undergoing fairly radical life changes. In her interview, the Librarian went on to describe:

We generally have one session of about an hour tops, where we try to give all this information. We know it doesn't always stick.

Again there is a growing realisation among staff that although they have fulfilled their obligation of imparting vital information, including the importance of good study skills, it is often questionable whether the students have fully absorbed it. This seems especially true within a busy induction period. As the Personal Tutor described, during what she called Freshers Week, the students are also being subjected to social development and cultural orientation. Students are making new friends and adopting new lifestyles. Nevertheless, across the interviews, there was an agreement that the development of study skills starts at the very beginning, and there is benefit in concentrating heavily in the first year.

Perhaps more surprising were the discussions of the changing nature of that development throughout the students’ years at university. Year Two of a three-year programme came up several times as having special significance. This was an unexpected development in that there seems to be very little literature devoted to the subject, with most emphasis in research and subsequent quality enhancement initiatives devoted to the first year. The interviews provided some interesting perspectives on the relative importance of Year Two, most notably from the Personal Tutor, the Lecturer and the Academic Skills Coordinator.
The Personal Tutor was able to describe well the evolving nature of the students across the typical three-year programme, especially in relation to their acquisition of study skills:

I think most students come to university not with the expectation that they'll develop academic skills, but that they're going to develop life skills as well, at least that's what their parents hope. Second year... they're going to obviously have had some experience, but hopefully they're going to be further developing their study skills, the level of assignments are going to go up. Hopefully they are going to be a little more well-rehearsed in research methods, report writing, giving presentations, etc, etc. They may also have a work experience placement, which will give them opportunities to apply those skills in the workplace, and hopefully further development there. Second to third year, you usually see a substantial research project which I think, when most students, when they are confronted with that they felt they will never get through, or how could they possibly write something like that. So I think it's probably quite a steep learning curve at this point.

Here, the Year Two students are characterised as having mastered, if not the skills, then perhaps some of the basic techniques that they need for success at university. In the second year, they have the opportunity to respond to different stimuli, especially in the case where students are undertaking a work placement. However, in this and other interviews, there seems to be less urgency on the students' part to actively develop their skills. On the one side, this could be interpreted as having achieved a level of confidence. On the other hand, it could be a cause for concern if the students are perhaps resting on their laurels. As the Personal Tutor points out, the final year often has significantly
more onerous tasks such as a dissertation. She goes on to characterise the pressures:

Starting from Year One to the end of first ... We do see second years, but I’d say they’re less likely to see us than first year and third years [referring to the voluntary visits to the Personal Tutors]. The first years are more likely to feel they’re in crisis mode, in the sense that it’s all very new to them. The second years generally have a little more experiences... But with the third year comes career concerns, dissertation concerns, exam stress, particularly with finals... they feel quite a bit of anxiety about that. So, although we do still see second years, we do support second years, I’d say primarily in my experience, it comes from this period to this period [indicating early in the first year].

Again, these pressures are more commonly manifested in the first and final years. The Lecturer recounted the early contacts with first-year students and identifying those in most need of developing their study skills, those who appeared, as above, to be in crisis mode:

... if we’re going to do it properly and we really are going to support students... because the bad students, the student who really do not have... they have very poor skills... actually get help. Because they are the red light students, and you go Bwahhh!!! get down to J______ [the Personal Tutor coordinator].

So, it appears obvious to the staff and to the students that the first year is critical to the development. And yet, this urgency might result in the second-year students being overlooked. The Lecturer goes on to describe the differences encountered with Second Years:
... So that by Year Two their skills should have been improved to an extent to which they can cope with just the academic input. But they have to be monitored. You have to monitor and maintain them... But ideally by the second year, is when they're being assessed for their degrees, they should have achieved these skills.

And later:

... because it’s really important, because today in the exam board, it’s such a shame that so many students don’t do well in the second year. And they then get a much lower class degree because of their second year. So it’s really important in year one that they really, really get a battering of these skills. So that by the third year when they actually ‘got it’ their degree is spoilt by their second year.

These exchanges reflect upon the typical programme design in which overall degree classification is calculated by using the marks in the final two years. The marks of the first year are ignored as a way of acknowledging that many students may not have yet mastered studying at the university level. The Lecturer however is pointing out that the repercussions of still not having mastered good study skills by Year Two are even greater in that it could reflect on their ultimate degree. Therefore there is an increased need for The University as an organisation to monitor and enhance those skills.

These ideas are augmented by the observations of the Academic Skills Coordinator:
So you arrive in second year. And this is where the problem really, really hits. Because I think many learners don’t understand that [pointing to Year Two and Three in the drawing] is higher than this [Year One]. They assume university will be three times this [Year One]. It will be three times the first year. That's not my quote by the way. It's from [name], in Podiatry, who said he recognised this problem with his students. Could we think about a way around it. So you got this big jump from here to here. Then suddenly in second year all this is taken away and this is where learners will be more vulnerable and exposed. Because they could get failed because of poor study skills. But because you don't have embedding in the course, end up in these remediated situations which drives them, for better or for worse to the doors of people like this Royal Literary Fellow or, you know, if it's available, that kind of casualty management support from their own department or school.

Again, it highlights that the organisation seems to have structures in place to support first year students more so than other years, and that Year Two seems especially vulnerable. She goes on to differentiate the needs of Year Two students in the following:

But what I think, going back to the ideal, what I think should be happening in Level Two, is you should start to have learning enhancement. ...put into all courses, aspirational study skills. So working on the premise: you could do better if... So the push rather than the picking up. Pushing students to do better rather than picking up the casualties.

In general, all of the interviewees acknowledged that the development of these skills was a continual process, not something confined to an induction period. Each was able to identify inputs throughout the overall student experience when The University had the opportunity and obligation to support the students who were undergoing a process of cognitive development. As an organisation, there
appears to be more emphasis on the early days when the students’ needs are often more apparent, and often characterised by the more dramatic language of ‘crisis mode’ or ‘casualty management’ or even ‘Bwahh!!!’. This sense of urgency has perhaps overshadowed the equally important task of slowly and methodically addressing the needs of the evolving students, especially in the overlooked Year Two.

4.3 The Pedagogy of Developing Skills: The What and How

In general, among the interviewees, there was a consensus on what was meant by study skills or academic skills. Not surprisingly, they were all familiar with the notion of developing skills as a particular goal of pedagogy, especially now in higher education. Whereas some may not have been familiar with the esoteric vocabulary of the pedagogic discourse, they were certainly aware of its importance within the academic field, as well as the organisational strategy of The University. The discussions highlighted what constituted study skills, the various assumptions behind the concepts, and the methods used in developing them.

The list of skills that falls under the category was almost taken for granted during the interviews. Most alluded to activities such as improving time management, conducting research, writing essays, team work, speaking in public, developing workplace skills, etc.
Some made a distinction between the purely technical aspects of study skills and the more conceptual ones. In speaking of the types of support that might be made available to help students with their study skills, the following exchange occurred with the Academic Skills Coordinator:

We’ve got a large number of staff/student facing roles... who sit on the Library Issues desk and in two campuses, these computer barns, and they sit behind these desks called ‘Help’. So students come and ask for help. I think it's a bit difficult at times, especially for this group [pointing to a box labelled IT].

PR:
The IT?

Academic Skills Coordinator:
The IT [Help Desk], to distinguish between technical issues and study issues. And I'll give you a rather funny, but silly example: School of Sport. Somebody has got this bee in his bonnet about very complicated pagination in dissertations. Now, they want the student to start in roman numerals, go to arabic numerals, have blank pages... To do that requires advanced Word skills, which I've had to learn to do this, and the desk staff in Cyncoed get a month of harassment from sports students who can't do this silly pagination. It's got nothing to do with the content of the dissertation, and they end up doing it for the students after student.

This illustrates a skill needed by students which is perhaps less-than academic, yet is equally demanded by the students, as well as some academics. There is little pedagogic justification for learning such as skill, yet it is still needed by the student and The University is devoting resources to developing such a skill. It seems to fall under the very loose banner of study skills only insofar as it is an
‘other’ skill which will help succeed in an assessment which is part of the curriculum. Arguably, it could be classified as an IT skill, a recognised subcategory of academic skills. Yet true development of this skill should involve directing the students to use the help function of Word, or analysing the more intuitive aspects of the software.

This sense of ‘otherness’ is reflected by the Lecturer when she is describing her role:

Lecturer:

So, there’s the Year One student coming in. And the able students, after induction they’ve got good study skills. Academic input and good academic achievement. So they’re like the starting point. They’re like kinda the pre-1990 students I’d say. These [indicating a subset of First Years] are students with poor… inadequate skills.

PR:

Sorry, back up right quickly… so, academic input, what do you mean by that?

Lecturer:

You just need academic input.

PR:

I’m sorry, how do you define that?

Lecturer:
This is the old thing of you just ‘teach’ them. We [meaning lecturers] don’t look particularly at the skills. For instance, when I went to university, it was assumed that you could write essays. All those … you didn’t have any… skills…

So at its simplest, study skills or academic skills are those other skills not directly related to the subject specialism. More often, interviewees identified study skills as those which would help in orientating students to the academic world. This was especially highlighted when a number of interviewees mentioned the needs of international students who may be faced with a significantly different approach to learning than they were accustomed to.

The vagueness and all-encompassing nature of study skills was commented on in most interviews. The elusiveness of these activities was all the more compounded by the observations that study skills themselves are expected to evolve throughout the student experience, with an increasing emphasis in later years on the more evaluative skills.

Some discussions took on the more meta-cognitive aspects of skill development. As the Academic Skills Coordinator pointed out, when describing the efforts within one School:

What they’re teaching the student is strategies to deal with study and learning issues.
This meta-cognitive distinction will affect the strategies and the methods used by the organisation to improve academic skills. Whereas it is important to teach the skills themselves, it is all the more important to help the students recognise that they too can learn to improve their own skills. In pedagogic parlance, universities should begin to concentrate on helping students in ‘learning to learn’. This approach to independent learning relies on a certain objective detachment and higher cognitive skills on the part of students.

In a broader and more conceptual sense, several interviewees explored the notion that academic skills were those skills not associated with the technical or even vocational aspects of university life. Rather, they were associated with becoming more ‘academic’ as reflected by the Personal Tutor:

PR:

And therefore the curriculum is the mechanism for…

Personal Tutor:

I think, yeah, the curriculum should be the mechanisms for it. I think they need to be engaged in academic development, as well as business skills/subject knowledge, whatever the subject they’re studying. Subject knowledge is important, but they could do that in a college. They come to university because it’s an academic institution…

PR:

Loftier goals…
Personal Tutor:

Well, not even loftier goals, but just to be able... it sounds romantic and nonsense... to just be able to contemplate life in a certain way... in their everyday surrounds and how systems work and how governments work, how the world works on all sorts of different levels. I just think that needs to be embedded from the very start.

This suggests that these skills are not merely associated with enhancing performance, but also with belonging to a community. This idea was reinforced by the Academic Skills Coordinator:

I think we should have agreement at all levels of what the role is of academic... I prefer to call it academic skills. Study skills tend to be associated with homework you know, academic skills, you know, is more about being an academic animal. There should be an agreement across all levels of where we work about what are the acceptable levels of academic skills. How do we go about implementing those, where are they. You should be able to look into any course from the outside and say, Aha I can see the study skills profile inside this course.

This exchange reiterates that, on a conceptual level, being an academic student in HE requires skills that go beyond learning and repeating tasks, it is about modifying the way we think. The idea of becoming an academic creature is further emphasised by the Personal Tutor:

But that doesn't change the fact that they are serving an apprenticeship in an academic community. And they are academics, albeit newbies, but they are academics, and we should be facilitating their development as much as possible: interesting them in research, showing them that they are capable of writing. Because of course, most areas of academia, particularly science, which is the one I teach, it's viewed as very mysterious, and it's the preserve of geniuses. And it's not. I think
we should be encouraging students to take an active interest in how academia works and how they can contribute, even get their degree and leave. I think it means we’re turfing out better citizens, for want of a better description.

The whole concept of academic skills becomes increasingly murky and conceptual. And the question of ‘how’ to enhance this more conceptual side of skills is problematic. In general, The University as an organisation attempts to develop all skills through the mechanism of the curriculum, along with imparting subject-specific knowledge, with additional support from services outside the traditional Schools/Faculties. The Lecturer, Personal Tutor and to an extent the Librarian work directly with a curriculum that includes a specific module devoted to academic skills. As discussed in previous sections, the interviewees acknowledged the importance of more fully embedding the development within subject specialisms and not isolating it in specific modules. There was however very little explicit discussion of ‘how to’ develop skills in the sense of in-class activities, e.g. practical exercises, learning logs, or formative assessment. Nevertheless, given that the interviewees all had some background in educational theory or at least significant hands-on experience, it is not surprising that they all showed inclinations for teaching methods more readily aligned with theories of experiential learning, rather than didactic.

The Librarian has already acknowledged above the frustration of knowing that simply explaining important library skills to students ‘doesn't always stick.’ And the Lecturer describes the ‘Aha’ moment as something that probably doesn’t happen in the classroom. As the Personal Tutor says:
...it’s really when they actually get around to… to doing anything that they’re going to realise what kind of skills they need.

The implication for ‘how to’ is clear: the student must be actively engaged in learning and testing their own abilities in order to learn. This then implies that those pedagogic theories aligned with experiential learning will have an important part to play in designing the curriculum.

On the other hand, it might well be premature to announce the death of the didactic approach as an effective means of teaching in HE. Interestingly, the Lecturer describes a system where some students already have a particular set of skills which allow them to benefit from the more didactic approach:

It [teaching and learning] would just be purely academic. You just come along to the lectures. You give them notes, you give them lectures, you give them guidance, but no other… they don’t … they’ve already got the skills. Which I’d say is kinda 50% of our students.

The suggestion here is that didactic approaches can still be effective for those students who have already mastered one set of skills and academic conventions. And those students who don’t know how to benefit from the didactic approach will need to have their study skills developed. This might include help with taking and reviewing notes, organising information and learning to pose appropriate questions. If such study skills can be developed, students could become the independent learning that we want, and benefit from the more traditional aspects of academic lectures. The Lecturer continues with a cautionary note:
So that by Year Two their skills should have been improved to an extent to which they can cope with just the academic input. But they have to be monitored. You have to monitor and maintain them...

Therefore, the What and the How of developing skills leaves the organisation with serious challenges. For improving simple ‘techniques’ (e.g. accessing good sources, using Harvard Referencing, following a set format for essays and reports) there is a preferred pedagogical preference: designing a curriculum that actively engages the students and compels them to repeatedly experience the skills in order to improve them. For the more conceptual aspects of developing the academic creature, it is difficult to pin-point the ‘manageable’ activities to put into place. There seems to be a certain leap of faith that this occurs organically throughout the student experience. The curriculum remains a key instrument for methodically embedding the conceptual and other skills. An increasingly rigorous assessment strategy then becomes a ‘manageable’ instrument for bringing about a change.

4.4 The Changing Nature of Students: External Challenges

During all of the interviews, there was some allusion to the changing nature of students, i.e. the perception that those currently entering HE were, as an over-generalisation, not quite the same as those traditionally entering twenty years ago. This difference could be manifest through their displayed levels of motivation, engagement and, more relevant for these discussions, the level of
academic skills that they arrive with. None of the interviewees framed their discussion with a negative depiction of students, nor did they bemoan the fact that the students should be better equipped. Nevertheless, there was a general recognition that this phenomenon existed. The interviewees themselves demonstrated this without any explicit prompting on the subject of this changing nature.

This recognition of the changes was often reflected in casual remarks resembling the cliché of ‘when I was as student...’ As the Lecturer put it, “For instance, when I went to university, it was assumed that you could write essays.” A number of the interviews were accompanied by various gestures and rolling of eyes to indicate not so much exasperation of current students but of acknowledgement of changing times. It’s perhaps worth noting that most of the interviewees were significantly over thirty years old. It’s also probably fair to say that all of the interviewees were themselves academically strong. All had received specialist degrees in higher education (a job requirement), many from the historically more elite universities. Therefore they have already proven themselves academically strong. They also have chosen a career in academia. As a workforce, it would be expected that they personally had stronger academic skills and therefore higher expectations for incoming students. Nevertheless, this disparity was never manifest as dejection or incredulity.

The phenomenon of the changing nature of students is well established in current pedagogic literature, as discussed in previous chapters. It would be
expected that those whose jobs are directly related to such pedagogic topics would be somewhat well versed in the debate. Similarly, while those whose jobs are only tangentially related to pedagogy, e.g. subject specialist lecturers, may not be familiar with the pedagogic debates, they would have a sense of its occurrence through simple on-the-job experience (or as Schön would say knowledge-in-action). Therefore, within these interviews, the subject presented itself implicitly as well as explicitly.

Surprisingly, in retrospect, the one subject that did not surface explicitly was the question of why students might be different than their academic predecessors. The discussions in the literature review invoked the notions of instrumentality and utilitarianism as ways of categorising the phenomenon of changing students and a differing mind-set. None of the interviewees referred to or chose to discuss the reasons behind the changing nature, or who was to blame for the current predicament. This is gratifying in several ways. First of all, their discussions showed that they acknowledged the changes. They were not ignorant of the changes. They could see the differences and they were aware that part of their job was to respond to the changes. They could see that within an organisational structure, their prescribed role was to respond to the change. Any display of ignorance of the situation would have been indicative of systemic (if not personal) failings to rise to the challenges.

Secondly, the absence of any discussion of instrumentality could be seen as an institutional and personal focus on practical solutions. Instrumentality is a
conceptual construct which gives a label to a phenomenon. The term gives some historical context for its occurrence, and grounds it within previous philosophical and psychological debates. Interesting as it may be, explicit discussion of instrumentality may not provide practical solutions. In other words, debating whether people are motivated by pragmatically achieving an end or whether they are guided by higher principles doesn’t necessarily lead on to a debate on how we provide a more meaningful educational experience.

Therefore, the interviews were able to illustrate some points more by what was not said, rather than what was. However, other issues were more explicitly raised. There was a sense in several interviews that students had one set of expectations that may not have aligned with those of the staff. As in the above discussions, the Personal Tutor framed this when characterising the students as:

... they are serving an apprenticeship in an academic community. And they are academics, albeit newbies, but they are academics, and we should be facilitating their development as much as possible...

This is indicative of a perceived mismatch on the point of higher education, with staff trying to emphasise the importance of intellectual development and many students trying to gain a more vocational advantage. These perceptions might be all the more coloured by the fact that this discussion is taking place in a School of Management. By their very nature, the business-related programmes have a more vocational slant. It would be understandable that students came in
order to learn many of the more practical aspects of business, rather than seeing it as an opportunity to explore the more intellectual deconstruction of current practices. These conflicting expectations were only implied in the interviews and were not as explicitly measured as in studies mentioned in the literature review.

A theme more explicitly reflected and evidenced was the range of academic abilities exhibited by incoming students. This does seem to be a tangible measure of their changing nature. As above, staff may have an expectation of the set of skills that students have or should have when they come in. However, the interviewees all expressed a strong understanding that not all students had these skills. Most all commented on the widening participation agenda and the overall heterogeneity of the student body. This became one of the more important discussions of the challenges of improving academic skills, and how an organisation should implement a practical set of measures to mitigate against it.

The heterogeneity of students was expressed in several ways throughout the interviews. When plotting out the student experience in general, the Lecturer tended to categorise students into two distinct camps. One group was associated with the more historical depiction of university students:

They’re like kinda the pre-1990 students I’d say.
This refers to the period in the UK when there were clearer distinctions between institutions whose remit was to provide classical academic instruction and institutions such as polytechnics and FE colleges who were seen as offering more practical instruction. This is clearly an acknowledgement that students entering into pre-1990 universities had to have demonstrated a consistently higher level of academic achievement. The Lecturer went on to characterise the requirements of this group of incoming students in her current classes. When referring to the preparation of her lectures, she acknowledged a more traditional approach as:

> It would just be purely academic. You just come along to the lectures. You give them notes, you give them lectures, you give them guidance, but no other... they don't ... they've already got the skills. Which I'd say is kinda 50% of our students.

The needs of this subgroup are different than others. In many ways, their learning and development means less input from lecturing staff. The Lecturer went on to differentiate the *other* incoming students.

> These are students with poor... inadequate skills.

It's notable that the manner in which this characterisation was delivered was judicious and diplomatic, with a clear hesitation in choosing the words: *inadequate* being perhaps less pejorative than simply *poor*.

The Personal Tutor also highlighted distinct subsets of students when discussing the various needs of international students:
You’ve also got the cultural orientation, particularly for students that are new to the area. Not necessarily foreign students, but obviously particularly those that have got an international background. And that’s very much a learning process, you orientate yourself to a new country and a new culture. And a lot of these students are exposed, even if they’ve got academic experience prior to coming to [The University], it may be a different way of working.

Again, she’s highlighting the different needs of the different subgroup: cultural orientation as well as introducing different ways of learning.

All of these discussions of heterogeneity were accompanied by a suggested or actual organisational response. In other words, there must be a practical solution for dealing with the variety in students’ abilities. A recurring proposal was often typified by concepts such as segregation or similar terms. This is the idea that you physically separate students according to their abilities and needs.

The Lecturer envisioned a system whereby:

… I don’t know whether it would work, but in some classes, where there’s clear… where there’s so much difference in the abilities of the students… I don’t know whether it’d be worth… you know, we separate the HNDs from the degree students.

And later:

if you could split them up, not by alphabetical order but actually by ability skills.
At several points in the interview, she justified the expediency of segregation not just on the grounds of effectiveness, but also as a means of keeping the more advanced group engaged:

... it’s not fair on some of them who go yeah… [because they already understand a concept]

or

... some of them are committing hari-kari, it’s why some of them are not turning up, it’s not the daft ones who don’t turn up, it’s not the ones that don’t have the skills that don’t turn up, it’s the ones who have got the skills that go ‘Oh she’s not going through this again’...

The segregation was most often seen as achievable through a mechanism of testing. The PVC invoked the standard pedagogic terminology of ‘diagnostic’ assessment whereas the Lecturer essentially described the same process: early in the year, students would be tested on their skills and understanding of certain issues. This would then provide data and a mechanism allowing the organisation to segregate students into similar bands of ability for specialised instruction. The organisational response would be to provide different classes tailored for different levels. The logistical and financial implications for this are obvious: the organisation would have to provide the bespoke resources to accommodate.

There was also a sense that some students would, in effect, segregate themselves, in that some would seek out the external services that were offered. Whereas the cohort in total would be expected to attend all classes
equally, those needing extra support would take advantage of the additional tutoring.

Much of the discussion of segregation was flavoured by whether it was an acceptable process. As with the term *segregation* itself, many of the other terms had very negative connotations. *Ghettoisation, stigma* and *Lowest Common Denominator* were all used by some interviewees when referring to the subgroup that might need special treatment and additional support. There was an acknowledgement that the very process of treating them differently might have led to their lack of confidence with academic matters in the first place. Similarly, several interviewees introduced the concept of a ‘deficit model’ where these extra services are designed to respond to a particular deficit not supplied by the conventionally designed curriculum. The services offered for example by the Personal Tutors, the Library Information Services and the Academic Skills Unit could be seen as fitting a deficit model, despite the concentrated efforts by many to avoid the label.

Given the recognised importance attached to the development of these skills, all interviewees were keen to ensure that it was not perceived negatively, and that any organisational implementation of support would be positive and effective. A potential compromise in this linguistic and organisational paradox was offered by the PVC when describing the negative perceptions of segregating students:

> Or you could talk about *individualised* learning, which is a different way of talking about differentiation, because what you're really saying there is that you're catering for individual needs rather than
ghettoism or deficit models. You know, a lot of the theory is around individualised learning. What do I as an individual need to promote my better learning skills...

This seems to say that we need a change of ethos and perspective more so than change of operations. As outlined in previous chapters, the newer approaches to the pedagogy of HE require a fundamental re-examining of the purpose of universities and education. Current terminology such as ‘learning-to-learn’ reflects a shift in attitudes. Similarly, the above excerpt reminds us that all learners are individuals and that emphasising skills is not a topic for remedial studies.

Overall, the interviews reflected that the heterogeneity of the students and that their mixed levels of academic skills pose serious challenges to how an organisation can efficiently and effectively improve them. Not only do these concerns serve to highlight the relative importance of the how and who discussed above, but they also show the complexity of managing the overall process. There was little explicit discussion of the obvious financial and logistical impacts of segregation. Operating a parallel or deficit model, whether depicted positively or negatively, is already acknowledged in the current management structures. Funding for Personal Tutors, library advisors and an external Academic Skills team shows a level of commitment to support in addition to that commonly provided through a traditional curriculum. The implication is that all current players need to respond within current (if not diminishing) budgetary constraints to manage a system of segregation and/or
external support. Doing so requires a smooth running organisation, free from some of the ‘behavioural’ problems outlined below.

4.5 Organisational Behaviour: the Internal Challenges

The final category for analysing the interviews is organisational behaviour. The success of enhancing skills development within an institutional context depends very much on how the organisation is operating. For the sake of analysis, an organisation can be considered an entity, albeit a fictitious construct. There are a number of predictable phenomena that can be seen in many organisations, and these have been the focus of many studies within the now established field of organisational behaviour. Although we might treat the organisation as a fictitious construct, much of the structure and procedures are quite tangible in the form of systems. And the ideal of the organisation is often set out in explicit strategies. On the other end of the spectrum however are the human players that make the organisation work (or not). This section therefore looks at those aspects of the organisation which contribute or detract from the successful development of skills. The understanding of organisational behaviour is perhaps more important than the understanding of pedagogy in determining success.

4.5.1 Managing a Bureaucracy

As pointed out in the discussions above, the interviewees were aware of their respective roles within the organisation. What also came out was the role that strategy played in orchestrating skills development, and its relative success. As
with any organisation, strategy attempts to organise and manage resources, whether human or budgetary. As the PVC was keen to emphasise:

We're trying to do the best... in a very complex scenario. And we're also resource bound, aren't we. That's something we haven't talked about at all. But we're very resource bound.

It's almost a given that organisations in the public sector will have serious financial constraints. (It's interesting to note that these discussions took place during the summer of 2009, before the new British administration’s debate over HE funding and accelerated budget cuts.) Therefore allocation of budget is at the heart of many strategic decisions. The Lecturer did point to the success of some of the new support initiatives, and in doing so, she framed the improvement as down to “a concentration of finance there”. However, given the finite resources, much of the strategic analysis is looking at effective use of existing human resources.

The discussions did not centre on the idea that ‘this model is wrong’, rather they reflected some of the inevitable consequences of organisational behaviour. Within large organisations, there is a tendency toward increased bureaucratisation. The PVC, in her upper-level strategic role, described the situation where roles had evolved and extra managerial levels were emerging. She described how a Director of Learning and Teaching, as conceived:

... should have a strategic role in being models or leaders of good practice and so forth and so on. So I don't think that role is always
working to optimum effect, because those people have many masters and many perspectives.

Specifically, she was referring to how their roles often evolve into more “day-to-day management” issues. Additionally, she discussed the relatively new level of Heads of Department, which operates within the hierarchy between the Directors of Learning and Teaching and the lecturing staff.

This tendency toward bureaucratisation is also reflected in the language of the lecturers and tutors, not so much as a complaint against bureaucracy, but rather as casual usage of language to identify their place. The Personal Tutor refers to “people at the coal-face”. Others talk about “direct contact with actual students” or “on the front line”. These phrases acknowledge distinctions within the hierarchy.

It’s possible to graphically depict these key players within a hierarchy. Note that Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2 are not necessarily representative of line management responsibilities. Rather, it shows a flow of information, responsibilities and working relationships. For example, the PVC was describing a situation in which some vertical relationships (circled area) are all dealing with developing academic skills, as partly influenced by organisational policy, partly by local programme teams.
Figure 4.1: Vertical chains of communication

The PVC’s discussions highlight the horizontal divisions (dashed lines) within this vertical chain. Similarly, organizational analysis could consider vertical divisions. As depicted below, many of the ‘front-line’ staff along the bottom row share similar responsibilities for enhancing academic skills. The managerial challenge then becomes organising the various units to achieve a common goal when there might well be vertical divisions between these units (again, dashed lines).
4.5.2 The Silo Effect

As discussed in the literature review, the Silo Effect is a phenomenon in organisations in which employees tend to operate to maximise the efficiency of, and serve the best interest of, the individual units, resulting in a certain inward-looking behaviour. Surprisingly, this phenomenon did not manifest itself strongly within the interviews. There was definite evidence of vertical divisions and subsequent problems. However the more negative connotations of a Silo Effect were not manifest in the interviews. The Silo Effect in its truest sense refers to a self-serving instinct and a counter-productive tendency toward competition between units. The closest example of this came during and exchange with the Academic Skills Coordinator. She was describing some of the misperceptions about her team’s role within the organisation.
On my second day here at The University I went to see the Head of Disability in Student Services to say, ‘Look, this is what we’re doing’... it was a territorial discussion. I wanted to make it very, very clear that we were not rivals and competitors.

This depiction of a ‘territorial discussion’ was not so much characterising divisions between units, but rather an exercise in roles clarification. In many ways it was a pre-emptive attempt to avoid competition between units.

Other interviews mentioned problems of communication between units, as discussed the next section, however there didn’t seem to be the sense of competition or wilful ignorance of the other units’ needs or missions. This could be attributable to a number of factors. It could well be the commitment of individual staff; it could be the relative size of the university where it is possible after several years with some effort to meet everyone; but it could also be down to the nature of their job and their common goal. And it is this focus on the student that seems to be the key difference.

In an industrial and manufacturing setting, the job of the organisation is to produce some sort of widget. Workers are tasked to concentrate on inanimate objects, parts that may be combined in a later process to produce a whole widget. Division of labour in its classical sense focuses the workers’ attention on a repeatable process in one step of manufacturing the widget. To an extent, universities also employ repeatable processes to produce students. However, invoking the same managerial language and assumptions when talking about students and widgets highlights significant differences. Discounting the
admittedly dehumanising aspect of calling a student a widget, it is precisely the sentient aspect of students that helps the organisation function. An inanimate object neither knows nor cares where it is in this process. Students are far from inanimate. These widgets keep us informed of their stage of development. They give us constant feedback (assuming they are successful in communicating with staff). It is therefore less likely for academic workers to lose perspective of overall process. With very little effort, a member of staff can determine where the student is along their journey.

All interviewees were eloquently able to discuss the end-game: to produce graduates with a set of skills and a specific knowledge base. The exercise with flow diagram showed they all had very good sense of the student perspective and the overall journey. Within an organisation displaying symptoms of a Silo Effect, you would expect to see some evidence of departmental-centric behaviour, whether fighting over budgets or competition that adversely affects the overall process. However, none were evident. It would be nice to say that this attitude was a product of an active management practice; however, it seems more likely to be a product of an animated widget and staff with an inherent interest in the student perspective.

4.5.3 Communication within a Bureaucracy

If the interviews did not demonstrate evidence of a pure Silo Effect in action, they did display classic symptoms of a large organization that is struggling to communicate effectively. Those involved in the development of academic skills
offered unsolicited examples of this, and yet many also gave examples of coping mechanisms.

In describing the increasing managerial levels, the PVC firmly identified this as a problem for vertical communication through the hierarchy.

Whereas over the period of years, I think each school has put in another tier. So they've put in place Heads of Department, your School [Faculty] being a good example. You didn't have that formal structure of Heads of Department say four years ago, but now you have. So in a sense, there's another level to communicate through, and with. And I think that's causing us some problems. That's my rationalisation...

In terms of communicating horizontally between various units and departments, most interviewees cited examples of where it had been a problem. These problems were compounded by what was often referred to as ‘general ignorance’ or ‘confusion’ over the specifics of each other’s respective roles. However, the overall indication was that the participants weren’t so much ignorant, but rather more aware of the limitations of their detailed understandings.

The Personal Tutor went so far as to say the lines of communication were good amongst the key players in her field. It should be noted however that she was primarily highlighting the links between the Personal Tutors and the lecturing staff. Other key players outside the School were less evident in the interview.
The Lecturer spoke of lines of communication between the student and support services. She saw herself as a referral service between the student and others within the larger organisation who could offer more support. This characterisation of referral reflects the need for someone within a large organisation to take on the role of communicating between units and translating the bureaucracy into understandable guidance. In effect, she has had to cope with the horizontal communication issues within the organisation, whereas the student neither knows nor cares about such hierarchical distinctions.

At times, this lack of communication and awareness manifested itself in terms of suspicion. The Academic Skills Coordinator was up-front about this when describing early encounters with various units who provide external and individual support to students with special needs:

I think the issue is... again, it's "what's happening in the room" question. What's this person really doing with the student? Is it ethical; is it even amount to collusion with the work? So... big question mark there...

Most discussions of communication were also accompanied by unsolicited examples of coping mechanisms and mitigating measures. As above, the Lecturer discussed interactions with the Personal Tutors based somewhat on social networks. The Librarian described directly approaching the module leaders in order to provide information to students. The Academic Skills Coordinator displayed perhaps the most proactive communication strategy,
often, with tongue in cheek, invoking aggressive if not bellicose language of ‘invading courses’.

These strategies for coping highlight the personal, if not psychological, impacts on those roles and individuals within the organisation involved with skills development.

4.5.4 Individuals within a Bureaucracy: Value Recognition

The development of academic skills is an organisational activity that is prone to the hardships of any project within a large organisation: ineffective communication, compartmentalisation of tasks, tendencies toward increased bureaucracy, etc. However, this particular activity seems to have an added complication in that those charged with the tasks may feel undervalued and alienated from the mainstream activities of the organisation. As discussed in previous chapters, there is evidence at other universities of staff perceptions of feeling outside of the main mission of a university, i.e. the teaching of subject-specific knowledge, research and enterprise, etc.

While the sense of alienation within the current interviews was nowhere near as evident as that demonstrated in the LDHEN data, there were indications of similar frustrations and some marginalisation. Perhaps not a major cause for concern, it still raises the question of whether marginalisation and employee’s perceptions of value could hamper effective implementation of policies such as developing skills.
On of the most dramatic illustrations of this sense of marginalisation came from the Librarian, and is reproduced here in full as its narrative structure is not only entertaining, but also implies that she had thought this one through before and may have been preoccupied by its implications.

PR:

OK, so perhaps you can explain, or add to that, or perhaps talk me through what you mean by people who do all the work, advising.

Librarian:

I suppose... a simple... there was a picture in one of the libraries of... it was like a pyramid ... I think it used characters from Winnie the Pooh and Alice in Wonderland. And at the top you had the boss, the sort of person in charge of the library saying, “If it wasn't for me then nothing would happen and no meetings would be had and nobody'd know what was going on.” And then beneath, you'd have the second tier, sort of the advisor level, saying “Well we deal with the students. And we provide information literacy. And they wouldn't be able to use the resources you've bought for us.” And underneath you've got assistants going, “Oh well I'm not that important. I just shelve the books, and stamp the books and keep the issue desk running, make sure everything where it should be, so I'm not that important.” But if that person walks away the whole thing collapses. And it's a very accurate illustration that I think that assistants can be taken for granted. But they're the ones that keep everything running. They man the desks, they shelve the books, they probably know more about the ins and outs of their own library...

The anecdote would not seem to be atypical of hierarchical systems and their resultant impact on employees’ morale. Clearly, the somewhat pejorative role of ‘Shelf Stacker’ is among the key players involved in developing skills. They
are often front-line, coal-face providers of advice to students, arguably with more contact time than lecturers. They are also in a position to provide the data on which issues are coming up the most often with students, which concepts they are struggling with the most. Yet it is questionable how often that viewpoint is heard, let alone reflected in the standard organisational procedures. Committee structures do exist for feedback in the form of programme committees and learning and teaching committees, but these do not usually involve front-line staff. Therefore, there remains potential for feelings of marginalisation.

4.6 Summary of Results

The analysis of the interviews explores how one particular organisation has approached the development of academic skills within their students. It provides factual data and perspectives; however, more importantly, it allows a more holistic overview of the organisation. In keeping with a more qualitative or phenomenological stance, the interviews give us insight into what can be described as the narrative or the discourse which comprises the range of perspectives operating here. This narrative portrays a community of practitioners that is dealing with many of the pedagogic concepts outlined in the literature review.

There is evidence that practices at The University are part of larger national efforts to manage learning. Just as Dewey’s theories influenced primary and secondary educational policy at a national level in the 20th Century, there is now
a corresponding shift of national policy in HE as influenced by Dearing, the QAA, the HE Academy, and typified by academics such as Biggs, Cottrell, Gibbs and Ramsden. This shift seems to be manifest as well in the increasing professionalization of the lecturer as learning developer. Whereas the lecturer has historically been seen as a subject specialist with an expected output of research or scholarly activity, there is now an increasing focus on the teaching aspect of their jobs, and a recognition of the other roles within the organisation who contribute to the process. In this case, the professionalization is perhaps more evident because of the choice of interviewees. Nevertheless there is evidence of a recognised status within an organisation. And as with other professions, there is an implied level of standardisation, qualification and training.

By design, the participants were those who were already more likely to distinguish differences between ‘teaching’ and ‘developing learning’. This places them comfortably within the context of the evolving pedagogic approaches found in HE. Namely, there is an emphasis on learning to learn and student-centred learning. This would seem to be a critical step in any organisation wishing to develop academic skills. By participating in a newly established discourse such as student-centred learning, educators are better able to maintain focus on goals and invoke appropriate learning methods.

Throughout the interviews, there may not have been an explicit reflection of the pedagogic roots of Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner and their fields of cognitive
development and constructivism. Discussions did however reflect their approaches to education as a *process*. The development implies an interaction with students who are not simply receptacles of information but rather malleable minds whose thought processes follow general patterns. These patterns, while elusive, can still be taken into account when designing the learning environment. Experiential learning was certainly evident implicitly and explicitly during the interviews, as was an understanding of the relationship between curriculum design and learning theory.

Not surprisingly, the skills agenda as outlined in the literature review was also well represented. This would, in part, be expected as a response to policy initiatives that have been in place for over a decade. The resistance to such policy seen in many of the critiques of the 1990s (e.g. Holmes, 1998; Hyland & Johnson, 1998) has not seemed to have taken hold. (Similarly, there is little evidence of the anti-managerialism debate within this limited community.) There is however little or no evidence that the skills agenda has become the basis of curricular design, at least, not to the extent envisioned by proponents of embedding such as Wingate (2006) or Allan & Clarke (2007). The selected staff are understandably fully aware of the agenda or the skills *perspective*.

Overall, the interviews paint a picture of an organisation responding to the same pressures and influences as others and using a variety of expedient methods to develop the learning skills of their students. Some of the efforts could be considered remedial and outside the standard curriculum, and some represent
political compromises as a result of interactions with a number of other forces and players within the institution. The narrative also portrays an emerging community of learning developers, not unlike the LDHEN as described above. As a community, they share resources, perspectives and even interact socially. The outright ghettoisation is not evidenced in the staff nor their more targeted students. In general, the negative aspects mentioned in the literature review associated with this new field have not been as apparent.

This loose community is part of a wider organisation and therefore becomes an important element to manage. Organisational behaviour leads us to expect that certain aspects of the job will be problematic, such as alignment of missions and communication. While the mission of developing skills seems well focussed, there do appear to be areas where communication could be improved.

As a process, the methodology has succeeded in providing rich data and a narrative of a particular phenomenon. As an interpretative approach allows for, if not actively encourages, personal reflection, I have observed a number of aspects of my own role as a researcher/participant. In retrospect, I can still see tendencies toward a positivist approach. The methods and tools that I prepared, such as the aide memoir, the guiding questions, the matrices, could be seen as tools to ensure consistency and even guard against undue influence. It is as if I were trying to somehow remain objective. Nevertheless, I would say that whereas a positivist stance shouldn’t completely reject elements
of subjectivity, it should be equally valid that a qualitative stance should not exclude elements of objectivity. Within the latter approach, there will always be a tension between balancing the desire to create conditions to allow rich data to emerge, and allowing and accepting the own ‘I’ of the researcher to emerge. Therefore, while I may not always have been explicit in my own reflective analysis on all matters, my own background of positivist training have perhaps equipped me with skills to subsume some of my personal reflections within the style of the objective observer. If we are to take Schön’s depiction of practice based knowledge, we can acknowledge that we learn through experience inductively and deductively, with reflection playing a key role. Perhaps I feel more comfortable with Schön’s approach than with Whitehead’s his depiction of the own ‘I’ in living action researchers. Whitehead would appear to be more explicitly and personally reflective, whereas Schön seems to be more focussed on the knowledge creation. Nevertheless, the methodologies pursued in this project have allowed me to explore my own circumstances, as well as those of the organisation and the particular phenomenon.

Therefore, the question remains of how our understanding of the facts and narrative can then feed back into an organisation. The next section will continue the overall theme of action research and will attempt to readjust paradigms, focus on change, and reflect on newer initiatives being put into place.
Chapter 5: Theory and Application

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5.1 Introduction

The purpose of a Professional Doctorate is to bring about change, as guided by current academic discourses and targeted research which produces contextualised primary data, as illustrated in the previous chapters. This chapter returns to the evolving themes and paradigms that began in the literature review and the analyses of secondary data. It attempts to present those themes in a new form that can be applied in the real-world scenario, and frames the discussion in terms of a new paradigm. It discusses the implementation of concepts and paradigms by invoking the field of change management and its relation to the sector of higher education. It also discusses the case-specific interventions that occurred during the academic year 2009/2010, subsequent to the primary data collection (and admittedly concurrent with some of its analysis).

5.2 New Theories and Analytical Tools

The analysis of the primary data served to reinforce the overriding concepts and principles which could be said to have the greatest influence on determining the success of developing skills within the undergraduates in The Faculty. These main themes are primarily pedagogical, but also have a role in determining how The Faculty can implement improvements, in many ways the realm of organisational behaviour and management theory.
The emergent analytical tool which should guide future efforts involves three main Conceptual Pillars: Embedding, Experiential Learning, Embracing Instrumentality, and can be represented by Figure 5.1.

These areas are shown as overlapping because they could easily exist separately, or not at all. The challenge is to bring about change so that the key players and the institutional processes conspire to bring all three of these together in the student experience.

The concept of Embedding is well established in the literature review, with academics and practitioners (such as Cottrell, 2001; Gibbs, 1992; Ramsden, 2003) emphasising the cognitive difficulties of students trying to learn skills as abstractions outside the context of an applied subject. Many of the interviewed staff also expressed a preference for this pedagogic approach. The question then becomes how best to embed within the context of a particular institution and programme. On a conceptual level, this involves an understanding of
strategic management. Within this particular institution there are defined corporate structures and processes for guiding the development of a curriculum. Embedding could or should occur at the planning stage. However, due to the nature of the official planning process, it is often more likely to occur at the implementation stage. Current QA/QC procedures for programme validation tend to concentrate on the bigger, often more conceptual issues: e.g. determining appropriate learning outcomes, apportioning credit, allocating contact hours, identifying broad categories of assessment types, etc. In practice, details of teaching, learning and assessment methods may be determined significantly after the validation events. It is here where module teams are most vulnerable to the practice of retrenching into potential silos. Furthermore, this idealised QA/QC scenario also assumes that module design is starting from scratch, when in fact that occurs relatively rarely. Therefore there needs to be a mechanism at the local level that relies less on the recognised corporate validation events and cycles.

In addition, this overall preference for embedding does not necessarily imply that the onus is simply on those who create and manage the curriculum, i.e. the lecturing staff. Student experience is not synonymous with a curriculum. Although the curriculum may be the primary vector for a university to develop skills, it is not the sole vector. Other significant mechanisms exist in the form of external support. Embedding must be seen as a responsibility of those other players as well.
Whatever the mechanism, it is predictable that embedding skills will always be a challenge within the context of higher education. There is a tension between all those that surround the student experience: lecturers often have a tendency to push skills development out of the curriculum, and external units often have a desire to push it back in. The key comes in acknowledging and understanding this tension and managing its occurrence, while juggling all those factors common to universities: subject specialist agenda, academic freedom, time constraints, etc.

**Experiential learning** here refers to pedagogical practices which require the active involvement of the learner, as distinct from what is often seen as traditional HE, didactic approaches. In short, it is just plain good pedagogy, at least according to prevailing theories, whether the cognitive approach of Bruner or Kolb, or the more philosophical methods of Socrates. Given the choice of how we manage the learning experience, we should choose those methods which allow the students to experience, play, test and engage with new ideas. This would appear to be all the more relevant for the development of academic skills, as skills by some definitions are improved through repetition, not unlike physical skills. Any model for improving an organisation’s attempts at developing skills must highlight this aspect, not as an indication of major trends in educational theory, but as an efficient and effective means to develop the overall student.
**Embracing Instrumentality** is perhaps a more contentious aspect of this model because it runs counter to our professed goal of producing independent learners. It could be seen a real-world compromise. It is a pragmatic, amoral solution that side-steps the other philosophical issues. In a sense, embracing the students’ instrumentality is instrumental in itself in that it is a means to our end of getting the students to engage in a process that could eventually wean them from such methods. Embracing this should not be seen as admitting defeat. On the contrary, it could be accepted as an acknowledgement of cognitive development. Many of the students will be at different stages of their own cognitive maturation, especially in relation to what are considered higher cognitive skills: e.g. criticality, relativism, conceptualisation, meta-cognition and reflexivity. It is important to understand the stage and mindset of many students as they enter university, all the more so of universities which cater for the widening participation agenda. A more traditional approach to universities would seek to minimise the effects of instrumentality, but a pragmatic model must embrace it.

Each concept could exist on its own, but here we are looking for a model in which the three are operating together. In practice, there could be a tendency for each phenomenon to be considered separately at different stages of design and implementation of a coordinated student experience. As with the Silo Effect, we could say that individuals and units within an organisation, left to their own devices, would tend to concentrate on the individual guiding principles as
represented by the circles in the diagram, and that tendency would push them apart.

If these Conceptual Pillars represent our aspiration, we have to ask ourselves which forces would help bring them about within an organisation in the real world. Therefore, in this emergent analytical tool, there is the additional aspect of the mechanistic which encompasses the conceptual. Therefore, this conception must recognise these **Mechanicals** which should surround the Conceptual Pillars, as illustrated in Figure 5.3.
It is possible to describe each of these forces within the context of well established theory. For example, **Managerial Processes** can be understood through organisational behaviour or paradigms which consider the relationship of power and control, invoking perspectives such as critical management. Similarly, **Curricular Design** has been the subject of pedagogical debates for a long time, influenced by over-arching epistemologies. And **Political/Social** refers to the more human side of interactions, as illustrated in the interviews with examples of informal communication and social bonds between units. As
such, this aspect is perhaps more the realm of psychology, sociology and cultural studies. However in this emergent model, I choose to somewhat downplay the conceptual and highlight the mechanistic. Therefore, the Managerial Process is concerned with systematic structures, as delineated in, for example, corporate documentation. It refers to the accepted tools that guide an organisation, such as timetabled and minuted meetings, paper trails, repeatable procedures, clear and accountable job responsibilities, etc. While there may be a tendency when discussing this aspect to invoke the negative connotations of an imposed management structure, there has to be an acknowledgement that there is a role for management processes when trying to bring order to chaos. And the vague nature of philosophical constructs such as those represented by the Conceptual Pillars could be seen as nebulous if not chaotic.

Similarly, the force of Curricular Design has to do with the practicalities of structure, whether negotiated or imposed. There are standard tools for creating and packaging an HE curriculum: units of study, timetabling, allocation of credit value, specification of methods, allocation of resources, etc. It could be argued that a decade of QAA’s Codes of Practice have resulted in a common vocabulary and a standardised if not flexible framework for curricular design across British HE. The curriculum then becomes a more tangible and manageable mechanism for steering looser concepts.
The final element of the Mechanicals, the Political/Social, is perhaps the least specific. It represents a force that operates when people get together to organise anything. It is less easy to prescribe or manage social activities. Staff will inevitably socialise and form personal relations. To put it simply, groups need to monitor themselves to ensure that everyone gets along. While academic studies might suggest underlying psychologies to predict behavioural patterns, in practice, it is down to simple vigilance on the part of participants to ensure that the human aspects of interactions are considered.

Therefore, the Mechanicals acts as the more practical forces which should balance the more conceptual aspects of the model, embracing the pragmatic and the philosophical. In some ways, this mirrors the paradigm wars discussed in the methodology section which described the shifting paradigms resulting from confrontations between positivist camps and phenomenologists, between rationalists and interpretivists. As discussed, there now seems to be a wider acceptance of a range of epistemologies, with practitioners choosing the best tools for the circumstances. So with this proposed model, there is an acceptance of nebulous intellectual constructs, countered by a rational use of traditional tools.

5.3 Change Management

The introduction of a new model, analytical tool or even new practices into an established organisation will always present challenges, as reflected by the field of change management. Classic business studies devote significant amounts
of time emphasizing that managing an organisation is not just about bringing order to an organisation, but about introducing change and continuous improvement (Burnes, 1992; Cole, 2004; Gilgeous, 1997; Mullins, 2007). The academic field of management and its relationship to change has been well documented since Victorian times when Taylor and his followers established the Scientific or Classical theories of management. Parallel to the industrial revolution and the strides in efficiency, the theories focussed on scientific and systematic procedures that would increase productivity. Management, in a historically hierarchical sense, could apply appropriate systems and procedures to bring about needed change. Under Taylor’s Classical approach, organisations were considered rational entities which should be designed scientifically. And employees working within these organisations could be motivated by the appropriate economic incentives. Throughout the 20th century, other theorists added to our understanding of how humans behaved within organisations. Maslow and his hierarchy of needs or Herzberg’s Motivator-Hygiene theories are widely quoted and offer frameworks for understanding how we react to situations (Cole, 2004; Mullins, 2007)

Increasingly, management theory took on a more psychological and sociological interpretation. This trend seemed to culminate with Organisational Development as espoused by Kurt Lewin (Cole, 2004; Mullins, 2007). Lewin and his followers studied the forces of change and how all organisations perform in relation to their environment, with the main pressures being external. They developed a simple conceptual model of change which involved cycles of
unfreezing, moving and re-freezing. Lewin is also credited with the practice of action research (as discussed in the introductory chapter). Although the theories had moved on since Taylor’s time, they still share the idea that change can be ‘planned’. Yet these early theories tended to focus on what the management did to ‘their’ organisations. As such, the theories would not seem suitable for a change project as this which is not being run from the management level.

As for who brings about the changes, most texts refer to a number of ‘change agents’ (Burnes, 1992; Gilgeous, 1997). The multiplicity of agents and their positions – from top down to bottom up, to change agents to change sponsors and teams – all reinforce the idea that it is no longer the sole role of management. This also ties in with the common concept of a ‘learning organisation’ which reminds us that it is the ability of individuals to adapt to change that will determine success.

As a field of study, change management has seen a widening of interpretations. Critical Management is an emergent field that challenges the more traditional, positivist interpretations of organisations. The theorists in this camp place a stronger emphasis on the cultural, political and moral ramifications which better reflect the complexities of the real world (Choo, 2006). Others similarly reject the straightforward order of the Organisation Development school, and opt for Contextual-Processual frameworks (Blackwell & Preece, 2002). Again, these schools of thought emphasise the complexity and dynamism within and
surrounding organisations, as well as the value of more subjective interpretations. These rejections of technical rationality mirror wider debates that took place in the general field of research, as highlighted in the methodology chapter, i.e. positivism v. humanism, quantitative v. qualitative research methods.

All of these theories, traditional or innovative, can be applied within the context of HE. Recently, there has been a flurry of activity and publication in this area, much of it from the HE Academy and their predecessor the Learning and Teaching Support Network, fulfilling their remits to support HE institutions at all levels, including strategic. The conceptual frameworks used to discuss organisations, management and change range from the traditional to the more innovative. Trowler et al. (2003) illustrate the tenets and relevance of Organisation Development and its many variations to the context of HE. They go on to practical aspects of implementation by identifying appropriate change agents in HE, opting for the ‘middle out’ level of departments and programme teams. Newer paradigms and frameworks have also been used to discuss organisational change. Seel (2005a, 2005b) and Blackwell and Preece (2002) argue that we need to be careful when choosing which theoretical framework to apply to HE. They advocate the more contextual frameworks that acknowledge the complexity of the environment and the cultural aspects of organisations.

Pennington (2003) offers some insight as to how and why HE is unique to the field of change management, focusing on the concepts of collegiality and the
‘fuzzy lines of accountability’. Hannan and Silver (2002) reflect on innovation and change within the context of increasing policy from governments and institutions. They too identify factors, unique to HE, necessary to foster change, e.g. the need for a degree of security within the community and parity between research and teaching.

This current project seems to be a good example of ‘top down, bottom out’: the former in response to QAA Codes of Practice and corporate implementation of a learning and teaching strategy; the latter in reaction to action research of working with newly devised procedures.

Many of the concerns highlighted in change management literature were less evident or relevant in the primary data. For example, there was little notable resistance to change among academic staff, or misalignment of underlying belief systems or epistemological frameworks such as student-centred pedagogies in HE. This could partly be down to the focus, level and audience of the research. I had purposefully chosen those who were already focussed on students. The scope of my proposed changes was not at the strategic level, but at the Faculty level, i.e. we were not re-structuring anything, there was to be no change in jobs specifications or duties. Any modifications were concerned with perhaps more day-to-day duties and interpretations of policies and common practice. Therefore the constraints were not so much those in the literature, but perhaps more down to will, time and coordination. Nevertheless, there is still value in reflecting on change management theory. It allows us to place
emphasis on where change is possible, and to focus on the multiplicity of change agents, more so than seeing it as a management issue or responsibility.

Therefore, the remainder of this chapter looks at those actions that resulted from the research (and admittedly the concurrent knowledge-in-action). It describes the evolving conceptual models and well as the simultaneous modifications to procedures within The Faculty.

5.4 Evolutions and Interventions

Within this study, the efforts to bring about change have concentrated on the skills modules (as opposed to changes in strategic policy at the corporate or faculty level). The modules in question had evolved considerably throughout the years. However further targeted interventions were needed to bring about more changes, as informed by the ongoing research. The following is a discussion of the evolution and the subsequent intervention.

By academic year 2009/2010, there were two specific modules which serviced all programmes within the Faculty: Research Skills 1 and Academic Skills for Business 1, which were continuing to converge into very similar modules (with some flexibility for programme-specific content). Their delivery pattern consisted of a weekly lead lecture and a one-hour workshop. They were led by a team of eight lecturers. The team had attempted to replace the lead lecture with additional workshops for smaller groups, but the cost-effectiveness of large lectures prevented it for the time being.
Up to this point, many of the emerging themes of this current study were becoming manifest in the skills modules. For example, instrumentality was already being embraced by our decision to design in a mark for participation, i.e. a portion of the overall assessment was determined by the level to which the students had engaged and kept up with the tasks and formative assessment throughout the year. In addition, much of the learning experience was highly structured, acknowledging that many of the students had come from the traditionally structured environment of secondary school, and that the ultimate goal of independent learning would be a longer-term process. Keeping the early stages of HE structured took advantage of instrumental tendencies, attempting to make it clear to the students which activities must be completed in order to earn the credit. Similarly, the emphasis on experiential learning was to an extent becoming more prevalent, through the emphasis on workshop activities. Clearly the compromise of having a lead lecture to several hundred students was counter to this desire; nevertheless the smaller workshops became the prime opportunity to engage the students and were the focus of the curricular design. Workshop tutors had not been given prescriptive lesson plans for each workshop, but rather were given flexibility on how to achieve broad learning outcomes for each session, with the encouragement to find their own appropriate balance of transmitting information and facilitating student activities. However, achieving this study’s third broad theme, embedding skills, remained elusive.
As discussed in the literature review, embedding in its purest sense would imply a curriculum which made no distinction between the teaching of subject specific knowledge and the development of skills. Within the context of The Faculty we did not achieve this, as the modular programme design was ultimately determined by collegiate negotiations which reflected a number of viewpoints. Nevertheless, we were determined to work within the given structure to embed where practicable. In other words, it is possible to embed skills within a structure which appears to have segregated their development.

Therefore the new approach involved changing the way we view the skills module within the context of the modular curriculum, or rather, the student experience. Within The Faculty’s programmes, students undertake six concurrent modules as represented by Figure 5.4. For any given week, students are expected to devote roughly the same amount of time and effort to each module. While there are broad thematic similarities in the individual modules, they operate as distinct units with differing contents and requirements. There is therefore the possibility of the Silo Effect in which modules operate in complete isolation. And there is the temptation for students to prioritise efforts according to their perceived value. This design may or may not be pedagogically ideal, but it is expedient and the result of numerous negotiations. Therefore, it represents the parameters we have to work in.
The new approach to the changes is to re-cast the skills module not as the sixth subject, but as a unifying bridge to the other subjects. In other words, the skills module is the one module which must devote itself explicitly to the requirements of other modules. The contents and sequencing of the skills modules should be dictated, where possible, by the contents and assessments of the other modules that the students are experiencing. This generic module can service the assessment needs and patterns of the other modules. Figure 5.5 shows how tasks within the skills module can align with the assessment in others. If for example another module requires a presentation, the skills module can devote several weeks’ worth of workshops to prepare and practice.
The practicalities of implementing this approach became one of the prime focuses of the intervention in that it required significant coordination given the complexities of the matrix of modules across the programmes. While all first-year programmes contained the same module by name, the contents of each workshop had to align with different programmes. There were at least eight permutations of patterns across The Faculty.
The intervention came during the Reading Week of the first term of the academic year 2009/2010, a time when there are no scheduled lectures. For academic staff it is a period of re-adjustment, catching up and for holding a series of informal meetings, in the sense that most of the meetings are not recognised within the more corporately controlled QA procedures. The purpose of the intervention was:

- to discuss the practical aspects of design and delivery of the module;
- to reinforce the idea that the modules should be outward looking, i.e. taking note of contents and assessment patterns of other modules;
- to reinforce the central themes of embracing instrumentality, embedding and experiential learning;
- to foster communication within and outside the module.

Up to that point in the term, most workshops had covered a fairly consistent syllabus, in which students concentrated on accessing appropriate academic literature, referencing correctly and avoiding plagiarism. For the remainder of the terms, workshops had the freedom to choose other appropriate skills, preferably in relation to assessments in other modules, thereby reinforcing their importance in the students’ minds. For example, if another module’s assessment included a presentation, the study skills workshops could spend several weeks prior to the deadline concentrating on presentation skills.

At this meeting, tutors concentrated on mapping out future activities and discussing what they perceived to be students’ weaknesses in terms of skills.
In a classic sense, this meeting concentrated on developing the curriculum. However, the second half of the meeting expanded its membership to include the other key players involved with skills development (at least those at the coal-face): Personal Tutors and library staff. The emphasis here again was sharing perceptions of students’ difficulties and effective remedies. Inviting these additional participants was key to the intervention, in that it shifted the focus away from the curriculum in the traditional sense and toward a wider understanding of the student experience. This proved to be effective as the participants shared their considerably different perspectives. Even the most anecdotal accounts of student activities outside of the classroom were very useful. For example, library staff talked about how often they had to re-stock specific ‘How To’ handouts that were available on display shelves: How to Reference clearly being the most popular. Similarly, the Personal Tutors had developed a tracking system to roughly quantify the recurring issues that students brought to them: from pastoral and financial issues to the more traditionally academic issues such as writing and referencing. It became apparent that each had developed tools to address particular issues. Whereas it could be argued that there could be efficiency gains in all groups sharing common tools, there is value in the various players developing their own versions, so long as they aren’t contradictory. Locally produced tools stand a better chance of adoption with an increased sense of ownership and familiarity.

The meeting therefore set out very practical goals similar to any corporately led setting: establishing timetables, setting tasks and responsibilities, general
dissemination of information, etc. How this fits into the more conceptual aspects of the above analytical tool is discussed in the next section.

5.5 Reflections on the Interventions

The intervention followed an ongoing evolution of the study skills modules. It also represented an ongoing evolution of this Professional Doctorate project. And it highlighted some of the difficulties of treating real-world scenarios as controllable experiments (as discussed in the methodology chapter). Nevertheless, this latest stage of this project brought together the concepts explored in the literature review, methodology and analyses of primary data, and tied them into the theories of change management.

The intervention can be analysed with three perspectives: the act of developing skills, the mechanics of change, and the shifting paradigms, each perspective becoming increasingly conceptual.

The contents of the intervention described above were fairly straightforward. They focussed on a taught module whose learning objectives were to develop academic skills. The modules therefore followed typical HE mechanisms for curricular development and implementation. In many ways, it tapped into previous discussions in this literature review concerning the nexus of pedagogy and management theory. Pedagogy gives us a basis for choosing techniques for imparting knowledge or developing skills, and management theory helps us plan and structure the learning experience inside and outside the classroom.
As a forum, the meeting did not concentrate on the more conceptual aspects of these theories, but more appropriately concentrated on practical solutions for implementation. These were facilitated by the fact that professional educators soon adopt shorthand for designing classroom activities and assessments without having to intellectualise the underlying pedagogies. There may well be a need to challenge these pedagogies if out of sync with progressive practices. In terms of the emergent paradigm of the previous sections, the Mechanicals of the situation were evident, however the Conceptual Pillars were perhaps more implicit than explicit.

Developing skills does imply methodical approaches which are designed at the local and practical level. Ensuring that the necessary players all contribute is a mechanical process that can be designed into a local meeting. Again, a meeting is repeatable process which delineates roles, responsibilities, action points, schedules and decisions. In this sense, a planning meeting was not out of the ordinary and would be expected in any corporate or academic setting.

If there are lessons to be learned however, they have more to do with how and where this process of planning belongs. Changing the scope for analysing this intervention, we can look at how The University as an organisation is attempting to bring about change. As mentioned, this meeting was not recognised as a formal process within The Faculty’s quality control process. Rather, it was a local initiative driven by expediency. In many ways, this is a good thing. As change agents there is value in ownership at a local level. As Seel (2005a,
2005b) and Blackwell and Preece (2002) above note, this seems to be all the more appropriate in the HE context. The local level, as represented by this meeting, seems best for bringing about the concurrent changes in the module and changes in the students.

A meeting is a standard tool within a management system, in this case a quality management system which is implicitly or explicitly trying to design and enhance the quality of the students’ learning experience. It is questionable whether such an intervention should however become a formal meeting within a wider system. It was its informality and flexibility which seemed to allow it to generate local solutions to the local context. The formality of a standard meeting with an agenda was a benefit in terms of determining participants, providing an initial focus, and setting time limits for decisions. However, as mentioned above, perhaps the greatest benefits were derived from the informal discussions that took place after the planning. In this case, the meeting can be seen as the mechanism for providing a creative space, as opposed to merely a series of regimented and methodical steps for implementation. The implication here is that The University as a wider organisation has a responsibility for facilitating these creative spaces as opposed to simply controlling an L&T strategy.

Again, shifting the analysis of the intervention to focus on the more conceptual, it is possible to see the process in terms of the emerging analytical tool. The model in question is highlighting the importance the Conceptual Pillars and the
underlying philosophies. As the primary data suggests, the current players are by and large conversant with progressive approaches to pedagogy, as would be expected from professional educators and specialists. There is still however a need to highlight and reinforce those aspects which seem appropriate for this context and in line with the emerging analytical model, i.e. embracing instrumentality, experiential learning and embedding. During the intervention, the question became how best to reinforce or implement these concepts. This then required an effective communication strategy. The process of developing a model or conceptual framework is that it forces us to put vague concepts into words and/or diagrams. If we can formulate them in a coherent manner to ourselves, we stand a better chance of communicating it to others. In this case it was the three pillars or perhaps buzzwords which not only encapsulate a body of literature, but also became a usable mantra. They are easy to repeat, and act as an aide memoire for guiding discussion, or act as a checklist for determining best fit of ideas.

Paradigm as mantra is a simple tool to remain focussed. It is a way of acknowledging and perhaps fostering a newer discourse, in a Foucaultian sense. Whereas Foucault may have characterised discourse in a more academic sense as a tool for linguistic interpretation or an encapsulation of world views (O'Farrell, 2005), in this context the paradigm as mantra is a way of simplifying the process and reminding ourselves of the shared narrative. And to a certain extent, this paradigm is already a shared narrative. As the primary data suggested, those players currently involved in skills development
appreciate the perspectives such as the student experience, and some were conversant in the ongoing debates within the pedagogic community.

So again, this underlines the importance of simplifying the message and reinforcing the important aspects during meetings. Paradoxically, this implies that we de-intellectualise the concepts in order to strengthen them in practice. *Paradigm as mantra* places the emphasis of repeating three words in order to get a point across.

This simplification is justifiable if we remind ourselves that our university is or aspires to be a Learning Organisation, the term invoked in studies of organisational behaviours (Cole, 2004; Handy, 1993; Mullins, 2007; Pettinger, 1996). Whether we view the organisation as an entity or a group of individuals, it is reasonable to think that adopting a new viewpoint takes time and effort. As Piaget might describe it, we are struggling with accommodating new ideas. And Vygotsky and Bruner would point out that there needs to be scaffolding to get us through this *zone of proximal learning*. In this case, a repeatable mantra and semi-formal meetings might provide the appropriate scaffolding. This reinforces the emergent paradigm and the balance between the practicalities of unifying forces and looser intellectual constructs.

The interventions of Academic Year 2009/2010 illustrate the stage of action research in which information from a data-gathering exercise and the feedback from previous iterations were used to adjust the next phase. Again, what
distinguishes this form of action research from its business-focused predecessors is the level of academic analysis required at each stage. The corporate world may not be interested in discourses and paradigms. Similarly they may not care about the subtle distinctions between teaching and developing academic skills. Nevertheless, both the worlds of academia and business appreciate efficiency in conducting projects and bringing about change.
Chapter 6: Conclusions and Epilogue

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6.1 Introduction

The nature of a professional doctorate is that of a moving target. Events continually change the subject which is being studied. This is all the more so in the case of post-recession HE which is seeing significant cut-backs, a shifting of resources, and restructuring at the national and local levels. Within the University under scrutiny, roles and practices are being redefined, many of which directly or indirectly relate to the area of skills development. For example, library staff are shifting some skills support to on-line help. In turn, other central units are now devoting more staff time to developing these self-directed resources. Similarly, other units are taking more strategic paths which hope to cascade good practice more efficiently. Even new players such as the Student Union are using some of their ring-fenced funding to provide, effectively, outsourced support for academic skills enhancement. The Faculty in question remains relatively intact, in that its local initiatives of Personal Tutors and dedicated skills modules continue. In fact, we eventually secured funding to redesign the unified skills module in Academic Year 2010/2011 as a two-hour workshop with no mass lecture. This maximises the experiential aspects of the student experience, and allows alignment with the wider range of programmes. Ultimately, some of the relevant players described in the methodology may well become less relevant as institutional priorities evolve.

Nevertheless, this moving target does not negate any of the lessons learned during the generation of primary data during the summer of 2009 or the interventions of Academic Year 2009/2010. Many of the lessons have already
been incorporated into practice. The interventions of the previous year have been repeated, insofar as they were the basis for the agenda for module planning meetings. And negotiating the seemingly less cost-effective inclusion of two-hour workshops was accomplished through persistence and a pedagogic justification which looked at overall curricular design.

The final conclusions can be seen within the context of the aims and objectives, possible recommendations and final reflections.

### 6.2 Review of Aims and Objectives

The aim of the project was:

> To achieve an integrated approach to developing academic skills within The Faculty’s programmes, taking into account the student experience as well as the multiple players within a complex organisation.

Each of the objectives provided a process which would support and expand upon this aim.

- to undertake a critical review of relevant literature on the theoretical underpinnings and practical approaches to academic skills enhancement in HE, with a view to synthesise a model of best practice;

The literature review highlighted the historical and conceptual aspects of pedagogy which are relevant to education in general, as well as the field of
skills development. More importantly, it drew attention to the emergent discourses surrounding higher education, notably, the move away from didactic approaches toward experiential learning, and the need for a more structured approach toward the design of teaching, learning and assessment. Within these discourses, there is a notable recognition of the role of developing skills, as distinct from the more generally accepted role of HE in imparting knowledge. And given that universities are complex institutions that must manage these and many other processes, there is a field of management theory which advises on the pitfalls inherent in any attempt to organise and implement initiatives. And while there may be an increased expectation for universities to operate along the lines of a corporate entity, there are significant aspects of their missions which continue to stymie management, whether the presumption of academic freedom or the nebulous nature of the end-product, i.e. the graduate (putting it in terms some would find anathema!). Nevertheless, on the narrower focus of skills development, there is evidence of increased activity both in theory and practical application, aided somewhat by a vocabulary which is increasingly recognised. Not surprisingly, the vocabulary of skills development is seen to act as a lingua franca across disparate fields.

- **to investigate current good practice within and outside of The University, critically evaluating against the models of best practice identified in the first objective;**
Again, the literature provided evidence of good practice outside of the University, in the form of case studies and research. There exists a corpus of work devoted explicitly to skills development in HE, alongside a prolonged debate as to whether skills should or could be ‘taught’ outside of the subject-specific curriculum. Within pedagogic discussions, there seems to be a preference for models of best practice which seek to embed skills development, rather than teach them separately. However, there appears to be an equal resistance from some subject specialists to even consider the value of skills development, setting the stage for battles over space within the curriculum. This has resulted in the emergence of external support units often staffed by generalists, or rather specialists in education. Networks such as the LDHEN show a developing community struggling to consolidate their craft in the respective institutions, while dealing with issues of marginalisation.

Given these benchmarks, the Faculty and University in question fare well, as confirmed by existing management structures, targeted funding, innovative approaches to L&T, and the primary data generated in this study, as described in the next objective.

- to explore how all key stakeholders contribute to the enhancement of academic skills in order to identify success factors, barriers to effective implementation and any policy issues affecting the processes;
The methodology for collecting and analysing the primary data focussed on the multiple players who each had a role in developing skills, plus an emphasis on the student experience. Before the analysis, predictable barriers to success might have been characterised as the lack of communication between organisational units, lack of clarity in job specifications, unfamiliarity with current pedagogic discourses, low moral, general disorganisation, etc. However, the data seemed to suggest a system that was working surprisingly well, perhaps more through informal and local lines of communication, rather than a corporately imposed management system. The resultant narrative did not provide evidence of a faulty system, but rather it suggested areas which were more amenable to the explicit development of skills, such as enhancing relations between lecturers and support staff, and clearer assessment strategies. It also highlighted the real-world responses to the implementation of theoretical constructs such as the newer paradigms of pedagogy. Whereas progressive pedagogic discourses would have us embedding or even doing away with skills development, the context-specific data reminds us that nobody is starting from scratch. Existing structures and social dynamics must be acknowledged and accommodated. In short, organisations must deal with the challenges of change management.

- to propose a new analytical tool for curriculum design within an institutional framework and make recommendations for institutional policy or other processes that impact on achieving an integrated approach to study skills support.
The resultant analyses have taken the emerging pedagogic paradigms and modified them to include pragmatic elements. There is a sense of accepting the instrumentality of some of the incoming students, as well as the practical if unpopular aspects of bringing order to the chaos of large organisations. While some of these might appear to be real-world compromises, they can equally be justified when taking into account our understanding of students who are at different stages of their cognitive development, and equally organisations at different stages of change. The new perspectives, paradigms or discourses have lent themselves to interventions at a local level in which the Faculty has attempted to reinforce core messages in the design of the skills modules, and build bridges to the rest of the curriculum and therefore the wider student experience.

Therefore, the overall aim of integrating academic skills development within the student experience has been successful to a certain extent. If we equate integrate with embed, then it has not been successful. Much of the explicit skills development still takes place in separate modules, and supported through Personal Tutors outside the curriculum. Nevertheless, as an organisation, the Faculty can ensure that these efforts are aligned by intentionally designing an appropriate module and coordinating the efforts of key players outside the conventional curriculum. This implies structured planning meetings before during and after the teaching terms in which assessments and skills are methodically mapped out in front of all key players. These meetings also
provide the opportunity to reinforce the key messages of experiential learning, embracing instrumentality and embedding (where possible). The clarity of the message and the functionality of its implementation seek to encompass and acknowledge the newer paradigm.

6.3 Contribution to Knowledge

The value of a change management project and resultant doctoral thesis is that it should contribute to knowledge or provide a new way of looking at existing knowledge. In this case, the unique contribution is reflected in theory, methodology and practice.

As above, the emerging model is an extension of prevalent pedagogical theories which are focusing on higher education. Yet, I have chosen to embrace certain dualities, specifically concerning issues of implementation, acknowledging the pragmatic issues for operationalising practice. This requires a shifting of perspectives: from purely pedagogical theory to a pedagogy placed within a complex institutional organisation which has its own personality, and whose behaviour needs to be understood within other theoretical constructs. The discourse that was uncovered during the analysis of primary data shows how organisations and individuals seek to implement solutions. Rather than focussing on ideological debates such as managerialism versus academic freedom, I am proposing that we concentrate on how organisations behave and continually look for opportunities to effect change, whether through a
corporately guided quality system or through the more organic and informal networks at a local level.

The methodologies used to gather primary data also serve to contribute to overall knowledge. Current approaches to research methodology have seen the blurring of lines between the quantitative and qualitative camps, acknowledging that tools can and should be borrowed from whatever source in order to produce the most appropriate data. In this project, I have used a combination of projective techniques, interviews and mapping exercises, tools developed in the disparate fields of psychoanalysis, ethnography and even engineering. This not only demonstrates that multiple epistemologies should be embraced, it also provides us with workable tools that can be used in other contexts. For example, I can see how producing process flow diagrams can be useful in describing the multiple influences on the student experience during planning stages of large organisational projects. The focus that it generates for research is equally applicable to project management.

As for contributing to practice, this project has generated guiding principals for modifying curricula, specifically concerning the difficult area of developing academic skills. Many of these principles are transferable to other contexts in that they seek to promote change at a local level and rely on translating pedagogic theory into simple reminders, i.e. paradigm as mantra. Simple organisational tools such as meetings and agenda can become opportunities to promote communication and avoid a Silo Effect. And in a more general sense,
this project reaffirms that practice is not only guided by better understandings of theory, but by *knowledge-in-action*.

### 6.4 Recommendations

After the formal aspect of this change management project and professional doctorate are finished, there are a number of initiatives that the Faculty, the University and researchers could consider.

The Faculty should continue to view the skills modules, if not all modules, as opportunities for conducting action research, seeking to continuously improve based on experience and current theory. At a practical level, the Faculty should continue the practice of convening module planning meetings, as guided by the established principles of flexibility of content and alignment with the L&T strategies of other first-year modules, and ensuring that all key players have an input. While there might be scope for formalising this step within more corporately recognised systems, care should be taken to keep the informal and local nature of the gathering. And while tools such as specified agenda items, minutes and action points help maintain focus, the meetings should also promote the less structured social interactions in order to share good practice and improve communication. There may also be scope for piggybacking the gatherings onto similar and perhaps higher profile meetings. For example, the Faculty is currently implementing policies for monitoring attendance across all first-year modules, an initiative prompted in part by external regulations for foreign students. Piggybacking increases the profile and uptake. Periodic
meetings are also being planned to discuss participation, in order to identify students most at risk. These initiatives often involve the same front-line staff dealing with non-specialist areas.

Future research projects could focus more on skills development in the second year of undergraduate studies. The interviews discussed above highlighted that there seems to be disproportionately less effort spent on ensuring that second year students re-activate and build upon the academic skills that were acquired in the first year. Concentrating on the first year is understandable within the context of the often difficult transitions between school and higher education. It has also become a focus of management initiatives in terms of retaining students – a statistic that is actively gathered and reported. Conversely, the development of basic academic skills would seem to be less crucial in the final years of undergraduate studies. Students should have mastered the challenges of time management, research, writing and revision techniques. Furthermore, the forces of natural selection inevitably come into effect. Clearly there is still scope for developing academic skills in the final year, especially the more meta-cognitive and analytical skills. Yet it would seem that those would, by their very nature, need to be developed within the subject specific context. The second year therefore seems to be somewhat overlooked in a three-year programme.

Related to this current project, there could be value in conducting longitudinal studies, following cohorts through an undergraduate curriculum. It would be expected that the various subcategories of academic skills would be highlighted
at different stages, and that students would struggle with more elusive skills as they become more independent learners. It would be interesting to pinpoint the events and methods during which students make progress in the more meta-cognitive skills. This would build on the work of Perry, Ramsden, Gibb and others within the specific context of this particular institution and its current L&T strategies.

6.5 Final Reflections

My final observations tend to be more on the conceptual and philosophical side of this project. Rather than being concerned with skills development per se, they deal with the broader aspects of bringing about change in HE. Specifically, they concern my on-going preoccupations with competing or parallel theories that have followed this research. In the early stages, the initial problems and research questions were described in terms of divergent viewpoints. I chose to look for common ground when discussing the Nexus of Pedagogy and Management. These appeared to be two distinct fields of study with considerably different perspectives. On the one hand, the field of education and pedagogy seemed to be grounded in a robust and highly academic background, with a strong history of theory, linking with established academic fields of philosophy and psychology. There are clearly real-world applications for these theories, but it is still easy to typify much of the discourse as academic, in every sense of the word. On the other hand, management studies would seem to start with the practical and pragmatic, with a focus more firmly on application. There are of course examples within the field where management is treated on
a more conceptual level, notably critical management. Nevertheless, my interests lay in bridging the various fields in order to find workable solutions. This idea of competing or parallel viewpoints became a recurrent theme throughout the stages of the project. The balancing act became an attempt to embrace multiple paradigms and parallel narratives that occasionally intersected. This became all the more apparent in the explorations of methodology.

My explorations of methodologies and epistemologies were overshadowed by the paradigm wars between adherents of traditional, rationalist positivism and the more recent proponents of interpretivism, phenomenology and the more qualitative methods. It was surprising to see battle lines drawn under such clear banners of epistemology. My interpretation of the recent events was based on the amount of coverage in academic journals and research text books, where there seemed to be a disproportionate preoccupation within the academic community for defending the polar stances. (While surprised and perplexed, I took some solace in trying to apply a Foucauldian understanding of how the discourse reflected power relations.) These battles seemed to have moved on; so that by the turn of the century, we hear more academics speaking of détente and rapprochement in the study of research methods (e.g. Hoben & Tite, 2008; Phillips, 2008) (the terminology itself being another clue of bellicose nature of the previous debates). Nevertheless, what struck me most was the possibility for academics to embrace a range of parallel epistemologies, and be a part of multiple discourses.
During my phase of interventions and managing change, again I was confronted with competing ideas. This time, it was our more academic aspirations of creating independent learners versus the more pragmatic approach of using the students’ utilitarian and instrumental tendencies. Clearly there is a need to intellectualise this duality: partly to join into the discourse of a pedagogic community, and partly to fulfil requirements of a doctorate. Yet during the phase of implementation, there is also the need to simplify, hence the use of buzzwords, mantras and a general de-intellectualisation of the concepts. This seems to highlight the challenges of bringing about change within HE. Quite a bit has already been said about how difficult it is to manage academics, notably the conflicts of academic freedom and the charges of managerialism. However, less seems to be said about the difficulties of dealing with highly intellectualised goals. The danger is perhaps best summed up by the catchphrase ‘Paralysis of Analysis’.

Therefore, in bringing about change, especially in HE, there would appear to be value in embracing divergent debates. Perhaps more than embracing, we should be thinking about bringing together the academic aspects of whichever discipline and the pragmatic aspects of management and compromise.

I am reminded of an eloquent essay by Bruner (2006) in which he reflected on two of the most powerful influences on pedagogy: Piaget and Vygotsky. He described their considerably different personal backgrounds and outlooks.
Piaget was characterised as intellectually stoic, single-minded and perhaps stereotypically Protestant. On the other hand, Vygotsky came from a more Jewish, literary, Eastern European tradition that was more sceptical. Piaget was scientific, Vygotsky was interpretivist. Bruner had no qualms with embracing both of these thinkers. He described this duality as:

“fruitful incommensurability”

It is perhaps in that same spirit that I now see embracing parallel discourses in order to bring about change.
References


References


Appendix A: Interviewee Profile Matrix
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>What we know about them which could have bearing on the project in general.</th>
<th>Their presumed relation to study skills.</th>
<th>Reasons for including in research.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>J_________</td>
<td>Lecturer 12/06/09</td>
<td>Primary responsibilities for designing and delivering modules on marketing.</td>
<td>Some experience with induction week training. Has explicitly taught focused training skills during induction week. Has used Personal Tutors quite a bit.</td>
<td>Involved in actively designing a curriculum. Known for some innovative L&amp;T techniques. Eager enough to want to improve students' abilities in whatever area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C_________</td>
<td>Personal Tutor 19/06/09</td>
<td>Relatively new to post, yet considerable number of hours with a range of students, dealing with their problems, academic or otherwise.</td>
<td>Job description with explicit links to improving academic skills.</td>
<td>Operating outside of the curriculum. Not directly involved with programme design. Deals directly with students struggling with study skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S_________</td>
<td>Academic Skills Team Manager 07/07/09</td>
<td>Manager of relatively new initiative to provide centralised academic skills support across university.</td>
<td>Explicit role in supporting academic skills. Remit advertised as working with programme teams requesting help with ‘interventions’.</td>
<td>Centralised support, outside the conventional curriculum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A_________</td>
<td>Head Librarian</td>
<td>Responsible for library facilities at The Faculty. Responsible for managing staff and advisors. Strategic and practical experience.</td>
<td>Focal point for students using libraries. Some input into induction.</td>
<td>Often a focal point for students when studying and doing research.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Aide Memoire
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tasks for Interviewee</th>
<th>Explicit Prompting Questions, Themes to Explore</th>
<th>Implicit Questions and Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defining your role in supporting study skills within The University.</td>
<td>When you support study skills, what precisely are the mechanisms and procedures that you use?</td>
<td>How pivotal is their role perceived?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe your job in The University using organograms.</td>
<td>What are the barriers to your success?</td>
<td>How explicit is communication between areas of the organisation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where is your role in the chart?</td>
<td>How does widening access affect your role?</td>
<td>Marginalisation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describing who else is involved with developing study skills.</td>
<td>What are the mechanisms and procedures for ensuring the development?</td>
<td>Lines of communication, formal and informal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe using organograms, identify where development occurs.</td>
<td>What are the relationships between the two organograms?</td>
<td>Degree of influence on students, staff and procedures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe the “Student Experience” or where learning occurs.</td>
<td>Where are study skills developed?</td>
<td>Unprompted views on the importance of the curriculum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process flow diagram to chart activities of students as they go through university.</td>
<td>Where are your explicit input points in the process?</td>
<td>What is their sense of the Student Experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Where are others’ input points?</td>
<td>Ownership of overall process?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Where they feel the most influence.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: Example of Organogram (Organisational Chart)
(note: originals expanded on A3 paper for better visibility)
Appendix D: Process Flow Diagrams
(note: originals expanded on A3 paper for better visibility)
(Source: Eckenfelder, 1980)
Appendix E: Ethics Forms
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Title of Project: Study Skills – An investigation into the mechanisms of integration within and external to curricula

This project is exploring the ways that universities seek to improve students’ abilities to study at an HE level. We want to gather the views of the many key players who are involved in supporting the processes. The project is part of a Professional Doctorate leading to an EdD. When the project is complete, the results will be appropriate for informing academic and management staff within HE at the strategic level.

The project is being organised by Peter Redding within the Cardiff School of Management. If you want to find out more about the research, or if you need any information to help you make a decision about joining in, please contact Peter via email or telephone (see bottom of page).

Your participation in the research project:

Why have you been asked?

We are asking a wide range of people who we recognise as being important in helping our students with their study skills – whether directly or indirectly. Your
participation is entirely voluntary, and The University will not discriminate in any way against anyone who does not want to take part.

**What happens if you want to change your mind?**
If you decide to join the study, you can change your mind at any time. We will completely respect your decision. If you do change your mind, please contact Peter Redding and preferably document your decision in an email or letter.

**What happens if you join the study?**
If you agree to join the study, then we will ask you to participate in an interview which should last half an hour. During the interview we will discuss your role within the university, as well as your views on student learning and the student experience in general. The interview will be recorded if you give us your consent (sound only). If not, the interviewer will rely on written notes.

**Are there any risks?**
We do not think there are any risks involved. The interviews will be conducted in a stress-free environment.

**Your rights**
Joining the study does not mean you give up any of legal rights. In the very unlikely event of something going wrong, The University fully indemnifies its staff, and participants are covered by its insurance.
What happens to the interview results?
The interviews will generate notes, audio recordings and visual records. These will be reviewed by Peter Redding alone. The data will be analysed for various aspects that have been highlighted during his previous research. As part of a doctoral dissertation, the results will be open to the public.

How we protect your privacy.
If you feel any of the information you give us during the interview should be confidential, you may tell us so, and we will treat it as such. As much of the interview will be discussing your role within the institution, it may be possible for you to be indirectly identified in the write-up of the dissertation. If you wish to remain completely anonymous, it may still be possible to participate, but you should discuss this aspect explicitly at the outset.

All information that we gather will be stored electronically in password-protected files.

You will be given a copy of this sheet to keep, together with a copy of your consent form.

Contact Details:
Peter Redding
Work phone: 029 2041 7176
email: predding@uwic.ac.uk

The University PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Study Skills – An investigation into the mechanisms of integration within and external to curricula

Name of Researcher: Peter Redding

Participant to complete this section. Please initial each box.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, without my relationship with The University, or my legal rights, being affected.

3. I understand that relevant sections of any of research notes and data collected during the study may be looked at by responsible individuals from The University for monitoring purposes, where it is relevant to my taking part in this research. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my records.

4. I agree to take part in the above study.

__________________________
Name of Participant

__________________________
Signature of Participant

__________________________
Date

__________________________
Name of person taking consent

__________________________
Signature of person taking consent

__________________________
Date

When completed, 1 copy for participant and 1 copy for researcher
Appendix F: Personal Development Portfolio

This section gives an overview of the Personal Development Portfolio (PDP) associated with the Professional Doctorate. As validated, the Professional Doctorate programme places a high emphasis on reflection. This is a notable distinction from a traditional PhD in that it recognises the context-specific and highly personal nature of the work. This summary of the PDP activities covers the period between December 2006 and September 2010. Although my personal development is a continuation of a longer association with activities surrounding the project, this summary reflects the formal processes of being enrolled on a doctorate where it is important to evidence the overall process.

This summary is an attempt to provide the evidence and highlight key events and concepts. The prescribed structure of the PDP was extremely flexible. I interpreted it and structured it to include the following:

- a reflective diary;
- the monitoring/QA forms as prescribed by Professional Doctorate programme; and,
- the evidence of relevant staff development activities.

The reflective diary represented a significant volume of activity and notional learning time and comprised hand-written notes in a bound journal (roughly equivalent to over 6000 words). Rather than reproducing it here, I will choose three major themes which seem to run throughout and provide a further
reflection. The Professional Doctorate forms include Records of Progress, Annual Monitoring Reports and internal feedback generated from the following modules: Contextualising Professional Change, Advanced Research: literature review, and Advanced Research: Ontological, Epistemological and Methodological Perspectives. The forms and interim assignments are not reproduced here. Staff development is summarised in a table below and includes relevant workshops, conferences and other key events. Papers and presentations that resulted from the process are also reproduced below.

Diary Reflections 1: the Ph of PhD

In the early stages of the Prof Doc, I had had a number of misgivings about the distinctions between a PhD and a Prof Doc. There were colleagues who could elaborate on the nature of PhDs, but fewer on Prof Docs, as it is a relatively new programme here and elsewhere. After speaking with a number of internal and external academics, I was less worried about the differences and satisfied that both doctorates essentially involved targeted research which demonstrated a sustained ability to analyse at an appropriate doctoral level. This then left me with the conundrum of what actually constituted that appropriate level.

There was one particular set of diary entries which represented a bit of a breakthrough, a eureka moment, an epiphany. It occurred in the early stages of preparing the literature review. Many of the early entries reflected my coming to
grips with a new subject field. Given my background in science, engineering and management, much of my understanding of education was based on on-the-job training, with an increasing association with the pedagogic discourse as reflected in various HE conferences I had attended. However, I was lacking in the theoretical underpinning of the field of education and pedagogy. Therefore, the formal step of preparing a literature review proved to be a slow but important process.

There were several diary entries about the term *instrumentality* which as far as I could tell was a relatively recent buzzword in pedagogic circles. Many people had started to use it at conferences and workshops to describe students’ attitudes. And while I had a sense of what it meant and how to use it, I had no idea where it came from. Its recent usage proved to be difficult to trace in that many database searches combining it with key words such as HE, students, engagement and so forth were disappointing. I did however turn up a wealth of information about the term’s use in more philosophical discussions. To read or even read about Hegel proved to be a challenge. I found that I spent a disproportionate amount of time reading difficult tracts about heavy theoretical concepts. And I spent time questioning the relevance of such theory given that the investigation was not only a Prof Doc which is about real-world change, but also focused on Education which would appear to be, on the surface, not related to Hegelian theories of morality and pragmatism. Nevertheless, I found it interesting, so I continued to read descriptions of the philosophical debates (having become frustrated with trying to fathom the original material).
Finally, the epiphany came when I realised that the Ph of PhD stood for philosophy. And while I’m not sure of the history or origins of that degree award, it stands to reason that a PhD student should be able to grapple with the more philosophical aspects of whatever they are studying. Granted, it is questionable whether an engineer or pure scientist would be expected to frame their discussions in terms defined by 18th Century philosophers. Nevertheless, they would be expected to be able to enter into a complex discussion of the more intangible aspects of whatever they are studying.

In retrospect, these early diary entries and eureka moments seem obvious. However, it is my ability to express this phenomenon that has changed considerably. And it seems to tie into two other philosophical constructs that I picked up along the way: cognition and discourse. During the course of the literature review, I became more comfortable with the work of the proponents of cognitive development, e.g. Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner. It strikes me that I was undergoing a development of my own meta-cognitive skills, i.e. improving my ability to deal with concepts and thinking about thinking. Piaget might describe my grappling with instrumentality as being in a state of disequilibrium and having to accommodate the new philosophies. Vygotsky and Bruner would say that the extra reading provided some of the scaffolding to achieve better meta-cognition.
More recently, I have been grappling with Foucault. I had initially dismissed him when considering appropriate research methodologies. I probably had a sense that it would take too long to feel comfortable with his underlying epistemologies before being able to apply some of his methodologies. In the end, I opted for other approaches to qualitative research. I did however continue to read about Foucault with the understanding that it might help me with philosophical concepts, especially those which most challenged my somewhat positivist background. Again, I struggle with attempts to read the source material, but I have enjoyed (slowly) reading through Clare O’Farrell’s analysis of Foucault’s considerable works. Of greatest benefit is having a better understanding of the term discourse which can be used in the conversational sense as well as the philosophical sense. This allows me to see the PhD-ness or doctoral level as an ability to participate in a philosophical discourse, always questioning our reading of history, the inherent power structures and the relations to language.

**Diary Reflections 2: Shifting Paradigms**

A number of the early entries to the diary were on dualities, tensions and newer concepts, e.g. Prof Doc v PhD, social sciences v hard sciences, and both eventually expressed as qualitative v quantitative techniques. Although these reflections did not deal directly with the subject matter of the project, it soon became clear that these debates were at the heart of what it meant to study at the doctoral level. Again, with an educational background which could now be described as fairly positivist, I had difficulty accepting many of the tenets of the
more qualitative approach which the Prof Doc seemed to be suggesting. Embracing a more qualitative pathway was clearly my choice, but it was not without resistance on my part. I had had limited experience with ‘alternative’ approaches to research, such as action research, which fit nicely with my understanding of quality management concepts, and some exposure to non-statistical techniques such as focus groups and interviews, but I remained predominantly positivist in my views. Basing a thesis on a handful of interviews seemed somehow ‘unworthy’.

Some of my distrust of the validity of alternative approaches was affected by less-than scientific methodologies presented at various pedagogic conferences, which resembled more sharing best practice workshops than investigation. More recently, I’ve been struck by a seemingly humorous quote from Bruner who refers to some of the educational research in the 1980s as ‘seemingly rigorous re-descriptions of canonical common-sense’, a quote I’ve had to incorporate into the thesis. These depictions of alternative research techniques were accompanied by a backdrop where the field of pedagogy was not recognised to the same degree among the research funding agencies. And there were rallying cries at some of the conferences to improve the quality of what was presented. All of this conspired to make me further question the validity of these approaches, not to mention the validity and usefulness of some of the findings. Given that a classical investigation should produce something useful, even more so in a Prof Doc where there was meant to be a change
within an organisation, I knew I had to do more to buy into the range of alternative methodologies.

One of the most influential books for me was Schön’s *Reflective Practitioner*. My diary entries show that it struck a chord with its historical discussions on the limitations of rationalism/positivism in certain contexts, namely the social sciences, art and philosophy. Although not typically considered a book on pedagogy, it was quite clearly about how we as humans learn, or rather where and when we learn. In other words, the professionals depicted in the book had mostly learned their craft through experience, developing a kind of intuition that did not fit neatly into the positivist model of experimentation and deducing truth. His terminology of knowledge-in-action had an air of common sense to it, which mirrored some of my own life experiences. Although I had studied science and engineering, I had professors who often commented on the art of their profession, not only the science. Many of my studies at undergraduate and Masters levels in the 70s and 80s had involved the growing field of computer programming where computers could handle increasingly complicated algorithms to model naturally occurring phenomena. Yet, I had been consistently surprised at the willing suspension of disbelief of scientists who refused to acknowledge the unreliability of computer results when compared to the intuition of practitioners. Therefore, Schön provided a convenient bridge between the rational scientific world and the messy world of predicting human and organisational behaviour.
While researching methodologies, I was exposed to a number of texts and articles on phenomenology and qualitative methods. At the time, it struck me that much of the writing seemed to be preoccupied with justifying the validity of the approaches, and responding to the critics of the methodologies. The discussions portrayed a paradigm war which seems to have been played out in the academic journals and conferences of the 80s and 90s. At times, I found the defensive attitudes to work against the proponents. It wasn’t until later that I was able to resolve these tensions. Several of the more recent research methods texts acknowledged that many practitioners use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, and that it was the researcher’s job to choose the best tool for the task. In other words, researchers could and should be more pragmatic than dogmatic in their chosen approaches. I was able to reflect much of this in the write-up of the methodology section in the thesis.

I also came to a better understanding of the paradigm wars after my exposure to Foucault. It’s possible to see the different camps in terms of their historical discourses. And Foucault, who seemed to be reacting against the prevailing rationalist philosophies (and pretty much any other philosophy), shows how the discourses often embody underlying power structures. It’s easy to see how the power and authority of the different camps can be threatened by the less scientific methodologies which often resulted in more relativist than absolutist positions. It was therefore important to understand some of the history of the evolving epistemologies and paradigms.
These evolving paradigms very much mirrored my own shifting stances toward epistemology. Whereas before the doctorate I had my doubts about the sanctity of the scientific method, I am now more at ease in justifying its limitations and placing knowledge into a continuum of epistemologies. Having said that, while I've become less absolutist, I still avoid aligning with a purely relativist viewpoint. This is probably because this project is grounded in the real world where concrete action must occur, not just philosophical musing on the nature of knowledge and being.

The whole notion of shifting paradigms has appeal because it also seems to be the key to changing practices. Higher education is slowly coming to accept some of the pedagogical and quality assurance tenets that have been the vogue for the last decade, namely student-centred learning, independent learning, skills development, etc. While most academics are familiar with the buzzwords, it is questionable whether the paradigms have been embraced. Therefore, it would seem that we practitioners need to undergo a form of academic reflection in order to change, whether through a structured form of research or simply knowledge-in-action.

**Diary Reflections 3: Benchmarking**

A number of the diary entries seemed to be concerned with benchmarking and making comparisons: comparing ideas, practices, theories, etc. both with the wider academic community and on a personal level. One of the objectives of
the project had been explicitly to benchmark current practices in developing skills within and outside the home institution. Yet the observations in the diary showed a wider scope of comparisons and were admittedly more anecdotal than informed by rigorous research.

Many of the comparisons resulted from attending conferences and workshops. As above, many of the conferences were more about dissemination of good practice, rather than presenting research results. As such, there is a certain amount of ‘industrial espionage’ with participants looking for ideas to try out at their respective institutions. In early conferences, I had taken notes on what I wanted to try out. There was also a sense of benchmarking our practices along the evolutionary scale of universities responding to recent initiatives such as PDP, widening participation and, more relevant, explicitly trying to develop academic skills. Benchmarking not only gave us information on whether our techniques were appropriate, but also gave us confidence that what we developed locally was as good if not better than elsewhere. The idea of context-specific solutions became a theme that emerged throughout the research.

Later, when I was giving papers at the conferences, much of the benchmarking occurred during the Q&A sessions after the paper. The questions often displayed more curiosity on how things were done, rather than questioning the conclusion. Again, this showed that other institutions were grappling with the same challenges, and many had yet to put into place their own solutions. The
starkest contrasts in benchmarking came when I gave a paper at the European First Year Experience conference in Groningen, Netherlands. There were a number of good opportunities to debate certain points in the small workshops. And without wishing to appear jingoistic, the Brits did seem to come out well in many of the debates. To be honest, we did also appear to be more jaded on many of the issues, another sign of our position on the evolutionary scale.

The benchmarking not only occurred at the institutional level, but also the personal level. The whole process of undertaking an intensive literature review is about comparing levels of knowledge and expertise with that of the wider academic community. Many of the earlier diary entries tended to say things like ‘can’t get my head around’ subjects such as epistemology, ontology or even the nature of a Prof Doc. The process of benchmarking inevitably involves using the information to guide further study and set better defined goals. Benchmarking continued throughout the years especially when interacting with the newer cohorts following the Prof Doc. Informal mentoring makes it obvious what has been picked up along the way, whether dealing with concepts or trying to use EndNote or NVivo.

Finally, it seems that benchmarking can be just another word for reflection, which seems to be the point of a PDP. The term benchmarking is probably more appealing to me than reflection, in that it seems more grounded in science and management. The term reflection often suffers from connotations of being ‘touchy-feely’, with benchmarking being associated with more cold, clinical and
objective practices. Either way, the concepts of reviewing, reflecting and comparing seem to be the value of keeping a diary and more importantly periodically reviewing the contents. Not only is it a useful trawl for finding contents for the thesis, it can build confidence during those times when motivation is low and burnout is high.

The following table summarises the major activities and training that contributed to personal development and the production of this thesis.
## PDP Overview

The following is a summary of key issues and events that formed part of the personal development related to the doctorate. It contains observations and excerpts from the voluminous and hand-written reflective diary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Frame</th>
<th>Issue/Event</th>
<th>Reflection</th>
<th>Resultant Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12/06 – 02/07</td>
<td>Research for Contextualising Change essay.</td>
<td>Standard lit review on change mgt. Unsure of business studies, organisational behaviour, standard texts seeming to concentrate on practical if not vocational aspects, whereas a doctorate would require more of a conceptual if not philosophical underpinning. Nevertheless, main task of assignment to conduct an analysis of real-world scenario. Therefore business study texts provide justifiably pragmatic framework for analysis. Higher order analysis to be ‘hung’ on practical framework. Better literature relating to pedagogy and university approaches. Usual struggles with defining and refining aims and objectives.</td>
<td>Deadlines for presenting Contextualising Change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/01/07</td>
<td>UWIC Creativity Conference</td>
<td>Clearly, emphasis on creativity is becoming the next big thing. Not just HE, but in industry. Relevance to pedagogy: discussions of how students must go through a period of confusion, ‘outside their zone of comfort’ before they start to learn. Therefore, there seems to be practical implications for curriculum design: design for it, and steel ourselves for the inevitable backlash or defiance from uncomfortable students.</td>
<td>Research pedagogic ideas of zone of comfort for Lit Review.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09/02/07</td>
<td>BMAF Subject Centre Workshop on Study Skills, Belfast</td>
<td>Extremely relevant. Good networking. Ideas for changes to module for next year, mainly around structure and delivery patterns. Discussions of current student stereotypes ‘Generation Y’.</td>
<td>Research more on current student profiles, expectations, instrumentality for Lit Review.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Frame</td>
<td>Issue/Event</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>Resultant Action</td>
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<tr>
<td>------------</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04/07 – 05/07</td>
<td>Lit Review prep. Lack of knowledge on basic educational theory. Uncertainties on British secondary education system.</td>
<td>Coming up to speed on British and national educational theory proving challenging, as significantly different than previous specialties. Often sidetracked by policy dogma, procedural requirements for secondary schools. While important to understand incoming students, it seems to be distracting me from task at hand. Doctorate not meant to be yet another critique of how the government got their policies wrong, but instead an analysis of how we can bring about a meaningful change at the level of one university. Discussions with supervisors and others in School of Ed helps focus on many of the issues, and perhaps more importantly, the buzz words and vocabulary of pedagogy.</td>
<td>Lit Review some time in early 08.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07/07</td>
<td>Lack of understanding of concepts behind Instrumentalism</td>
<td>Specific research on philosophy and pedagogy, Hegel, Kant and Dewey. Difficult concepts, doubts over relevance of pure philosophy, until minor epiphany of the Ph in PhD underscoring importance of purely theoretical concepts at the doctorate level.</td>
<td>Continuing Lit Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30/10/07</td>
<td>CRA/HEA PDP Seminar, London</td>
<td>Valuable for comparing some approaches to PDP in HE.</td>
<td>Download and read through all LDHEN discussion boards. Consider inclusion into paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/07</td>
<td>Idea to research the community of Learning Developers as a component of Lit Review. Need for external reference points.</td>
<td>Idea to do a simple qualitative analysis of LDHEN discussion board. No sophisticated coding, but looking for a semi-quantitative indication of major themes arising. Struggled with how this fit into the Lit Review or the Methodology, as isn't meant to be the actual methodology of project. Sort of an analysis of secondary data, as is the Lit Review.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Frame</td>
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<td>Reflection</td>
<td>Resultant Action</td>
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<tr>
<td>28/11/07</td>
<td>Prof Doc workshops</td>
<td>John Gunson’s work on interviewing very relevant, considering my lack of experience with qualitative approaches. Ideas that the Methodology section of write-up is more about the choices you consider and the appropriateness of chosen tools. Eleri’s mention of ‘projective techniques’, using visual clues to prompt interviewees very appealing.</td>
<td>Research projective techniques and other tools for qualitative interviewing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/12/07</td>
<td>Prof Doc workshops</td>
<td>Isabelle Duncan, more on qualitative methods, spatial analysis somewhat appealing, insofar as another projective technique. Not totally convinced of scientific validity of some of techniques, but probably guilty of projecting a Positivist mindset onto newer methodologies. Some concerns over using any methodologies when interviewing fellow academics, as they might try to ‘second guess’ where the interview is going.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01/08 – 02/08</td>
<td>Prep for Lit Review presentation</td>
<td>Major lit sources reviewed, outline prepared, presentation given.</td>
<td>Flesh out presentation, format Lit Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03/08</td>
<td>Action Research and qualitative research submitted as abstract to PRHE Conference</td>
<td>Paper accepted and to be presented June 08. Unfortunately, not a peer reviewed process. Nevertheless, good opportunity for networking.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06/08</td>
<td>Major Stall in Lit Review. Confident of approach and contents. Not confident of time available to write.</td>
<td>Juggling parallel work on Lit Review and Methodology. Somewhat confusing to move onto latter without having finished/written former. Somewhat justifiable when considering the nature of qualitative research and the artificiality of projecting a standard ‘scientific’ approach and format onto this type of project. Mind focussed somewhat by Conference Paper write-up deadlines. Doctorate Lit Review to follow, incorporating paper.</td>
<td>Present conference paper, submit write-up for publication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Frame</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>16/06/08</td>
<td>Pedagogic Research in Higher Education Conference, Liverpool</td>
<td>Presented paper based on action research, lit review, analysis of LDHEN discussion groups. Good networking. Reinforcement that most all unis grappling with similar problems of engagement and skill development. Some confidence that we might be slightly ahead of many unis, which seem to be stymied by staff resistance to the basic tenets of learning to learn.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06/08</td>
<td>Methodology Slippage</td>
<td>Extremely unproductive lull. Questioning motivation, acknowledging predictable pattern of any project and cycles of enthusiasm.</td>
<td>Book a week away from office.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/08</td>
<td>Resumption of studies</td>
<td>Identifying holes in understanding of Piaget and similar theoretical perspectives on pedagogy. Parallel studies on methodology. Refinement of aims and objectives, emphasis now more on student experience, rather than curriculum, reflecting on academics’ tendency toward egocentricity. Experience angle to more fully acknowledge contribution of others within and outside of the university as an organisation.</td>
<td>Refining methodologies, submitting Lit Review by early 09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02/09</td>
<td>Pilot Methodology</td>
<td>Mechanical and theoretical exploration of how to do an interview. Need to confront interviewer’s role within an admitted subjective epistemology.</td>
<td>Incorporate notes into write-up of Methodology section.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Frame</td>
<td>Issue/Event</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>Resultant Action</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>26/02/09</td>
<td>Prof Doc Qualitative methodology seminar</td>
<td>Very useful discussions on the ‘fetishisation’ of qualitative methods. Becoming somewhat disillusioned by the disproportionate amount of research method literature that is devoted to justifying the validity of qualitative methods, rather than getting on and talking about how to make it work. Two presenters at workshop confirmed the preoccupation of paradigm wars, also the tendency of many researchers to use software to mechanise the data analysis, turning the process almost back into a quantitative approach. Again, emphasis in Methodology chapter should be on the journey, rather than yet another exposition on the differences between quantitative and qualitative.</td>
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<td>16/05/09</td>
<td>European First Year Experience Conference, Groeningen</td>
<td>Co-presented paper on induction of new students. Reflected on interesting division between UK and continental camps, UK being somewhat more jaded. Was able to push several issues by bringing up ‘elephant in the room’, mainly resistance from academic staff to acknowledge value of skills agenda and learning to learn. Route of differences may well be the degree of academic freedom and conformity of staff. Continental colleagues seemed to be able to push through changes and receive support from academic staff.</td>
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<td>05/09</td>
<td>Submission of Lit Review</td>
<td>Verbal feedback, concerns over flow of the story. Struggling with separation of Lit Review from preliminary methodology of gathering all sources of secondary data, literature or grey.</td>
<td>Re-shuffle Lit Review</td>
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<td>06/09 - 08/09</td>
<td>Primary Data Collection Methodology Interviews</td>
<td>Interested in the idea of maintaining focus in a relatively unstructured interview. Trying to determine just how important language is in this context. Fascinated with linguistic side, although struggling to remember that the project is not setting out to analyse how we use language or how we communicate, but what is being said. Important distinction. Process of transcription proving to be useful, as idiot work allows time for ideas to emerge. If anything, it’s forcing you to sit still long enough to listen. Long debates with colleagues over the value of transcription and the value of learning NVivo. Messy business of coding. Having confidence to throw things away and start from scratch.</td>
<td>Write up notes, outline Discussion Chapter Re-submit Lit Review, submit Methodology chapter early 2010.</td>
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<td>11/09</td>
<td>Interventions Managing Change</td>
<td>Still confusions over where Methodology ended and Analysis began. Nevertheless, first intervention yielding surprising results: most productive aspect occurring at end of meeting with participants chatting informally. Must tie into ideas of creative spaces, similar to conference several years ago.</td>
<td>Research creative spaces, if such a concept is relevant.</td>
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<td>17/11/09</td>
<td>Learning Landscape seminar, UWIC</td>
<td>Rubbish seminar in terms of organisation and marginally relevant philosophical introspection. Nevertheless, provided very good info on the history of universities and their changing roles through the years: collectives, to guilds, to post war ‘businesses’. Relevant to any discussions on the nature of today’s unis as organisations and operating under principals of management theory.</td>
<td>Research uni history (Delanty, G (2001))</td>
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<td>12/09 – 03/10</td>
<td>Lit Review Re-writes and Methodology submissions</td>
<td>Numerous internal debates over the nature of methodology and how best to guide reader through the process. Early musings on conclusion chapters and attempts at framing new paradigm. Concerns over stating the bleeding obvious. Ideas for spin-off paper.</td>
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<td>23/04/10</td>
<td>UW Student Engagement</td>
<td>Presented session on Traditional Student Induction, sat on “Is it the</td>
<td>Panel Debate. The value of attending was, again, reinforcing that what we are doing at UWIC is on par if not ahead of other universities, in terms of</td>
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<td>Conference</td>
<td>learning or the experience that makes a graduate?” Panel Debate. The</td>
<td>innovation and attempts at implementing current pedagogical theories.</td>
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