

On embracing failure and the cultivation of knowledge

Virendra Mistry

Teaching and Learning Academy, Liverpool John Moores University, Exchange Office, Tithebarn Street, Liverpool L2 2QP, UK

Contact: v.mistry@ljmu.ac.uk

The unexamined life is not worth living.
- Socrates (c. 470 – 399 BC)

In Yuval Harari's *Sapiens* – a book that offers a magisterial sweep of the history of humankind – the beginning of our enslavement by wheat (about 10,000 years ago) is posited as a pivotal moment in our civilisation. In recognising the crop's potential and value, our ancestors turned their backs on the frenzied existence of hunter gathering or the nomadic pastoral existence and, in effect, stayed put. And, in this state of contemplation, things began to change.

The entanglement with wheat led to the formation of enclosures, the cultivation of fields and domestication of animals. Eventually flatbreads produced by the early strains of grain gave way to the emergence of a 'loaf-bread culture' about 2,000 years ago in Europe (Marchant et al., 2008; Rubel, 2011). Those early pioneers were gloriously curious, a trait that has followed human beings since the beginning of time. The techniques for grinding, the conversion of

grain to flour and, later, yeast discovery, baking methods, cooling, proving, dividing, kneading and other mixing techniques, led to the celebrated sliced white we have today. All this required patience but, and I'd like to think, the trials and errors enabled our ancestors get to know a little more about themselves along the way.



If bread chemistry is not your thing and you are wondering what the best thing is since sliced bread, I daresay WD-40 may not

feature prominently on your list. Developed in the 1950s, by Norman Larsen of the Rocket Chemical Company in California, it was first used to help displace water (hence ‘WD’ is an abbreviation of ‘water displacement’) to protect the outer casing of a nuclear missile from rust and corrosion (Bellis, 2019). After considerable persistence, at the *fortieth* attempt of production, success was realised! That is why this mysterious and exciting blend of ‘aliphatic hydrocarbons’, petroleum base oil, CO₂, and other inert ingredients, came to be known as WD-40. It seems, therefore, that failure is an essential part of success. Maybe too, it all goes to show that ‘truth’ is elusive, and that there are unforeseen consequences.

Abū Ali al-Ḥasan Ibn al-Haytham al-Baṣrī (965-1039), a Persian scholar known in Europe by the Latinised name of Alhazen, made significant contributions to the principles of optics, astronomy and mathematics but is also celebrated for articulating a methodology that placed experimentation as a mode of proving a basic hypothesis or premise (Gorini, 2003):

[al-Haytham insists on the importance of *investigating by induction existing phenomenon and in this way distinguishing the properties of individual things. From here we may turn to research and comparison, in a gradual and orderly way, criticising premises and being careful about results.* (Jean Rosmorduc, cited by Gorini, 2003: 55)

This ‘modern scientific method’ preceded the ‘European scientific method’ by some 500 years. In the latter incarnation, with the rise of empiricism, we witness a more

sensory notion of knowledge. Religion and science come into conflict, as we learn to recognise the different questions and senses of purpose, meanings and values. However as articulated in Stephen J. Gould’s (1999) ‘NOMA’ doctrine (Non-overlapping Magisteria’):

Science tries to document the factual character of the natural world, and to develop theories that coordinate and explain these facts. Religion, on the other hand, operates in an equally important, but utterly different, realm of human purposes, meaning, and values – subjects that the factual domain of science might illuminate, but can never resolve. (p. 4)

NOMA has not been without its critics, and it is this idea of accommodationism that is worthy of reflection. Faith revolves around trust, but not necessarily evidence. Further, there are some things – that we may consider as ‘common sense’ – that do not need to be tested. Often, what needs to be challenged are the rules of engagement that some religions or social ideologies place upon us. In Zia Chaudhry’s reflection on religion and faith on the campus, he muses on the nature of the university and – ‘as an ordinary Muslim’ – asks us not to fear asking difficult questions about faith. Doesn’t this strike at the very core of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ in a university? Zia offers a personal perspective of a Muslim experience on campus, which is extremely timely as we now have a more insightful sense of religious (and non-religious) identity in the university (Advance HE, 2018).

‘BAME (black, Asian or minority ethnic) underrepresentation’ is the focus of Andrea Livesey’s ‘viewpoint’ paper. There are some

sobering insights from a few sector reports on racism and being BAME in UK higher education. Andrea examines this through her lens as a lecturer in history, drawing on deep and rich insights as an expert on the Atlantic slave trade (it is worth mentioning that LJMU became the third UK university – after Bristol and Glasgow – to join the Universities Studying Slavery consortium). This is a vivid account that challenges us to understand where the boundaries that thwart knowledge are, how they got there and how all this fits into the great scheme of things. ‘Decolonising the curriculum’ has had been discussed as a small part (or even start) of a wider solution to addressing the BAME attainment gap. Thus, if we are to make good on our plans and vision, might students and scholars of the future be more acquainted with the value of al-Haytham’s contribution to knowledge as those made by Copernicus, Galileo or Bacon?

The connections students make with staff are essential in supporting their success and in easing students’ transition throughout their time at university. Laura Dixon, Tom Fletcher and Val O’Gorman, as personal tutors, were curious to know what their events management and tourism students thought about the support they needed, and how best this might be accommodated. This viewpoint paper draws attention to the differing senses of support students develop during their time at university. Thus, whilst a structured idea of personal tutoring (e.g. accommodating it into the timetable/curriculum) might be of greater value to first year students, a more ‘relaxed’, Oxbridge-type model appears to be more amenable after the first year of study.

If the connections with staff are vital, so too are the connections students make with each other and with the outside world. Helping to facilitate these connections forms a key pillar in John Moores Students’ Union’s (JMSU)(2017) vision, mission and values. In 2018/19, JMSU’s Vice President Activities, Fiona Brereton, led a project to determine the barriers students faced when engaging, or trying to engage, with a JMSU-supported sports club or society. Clubs and societies have been cited as key tools to support student engagement and retention (Thomas, 2012), as they create natural spaces for learners to develop their friendship network. The research paper in this issue examines this more closely, by focusing on notions of social capital, including ideas of ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’. There is also a reflection of the ‘darker side’ of bonding social capital – sometimes evident in sports clubs – where rituals such as hazing can inculcate values that are at odds with the students’ union. This paper and Zia’s viewpoint piece highlight the potential of LJMU’s Respect, Always! Charter as a basis for belonging and enculturation, through good relations with one another.

The ‘sector round-up’ piece (February to August 2019) does not feature the important reports referenced in Andrea Livesey’s viewpoint paper (as these were released after September 2019). It does, however, feature over 60 key policy reports and studies, including the Augar Review and *Student Academic Experience Survey 2019*.

Three book reviews are included in this issue, by Charlie Smith (on assessment), Claire Flynn (on mental health) and Jim Turner (on learning online). Finally, I wish to offer my sincerest thanks to all who have contributed to the journal, our authors and

reviewers – and, in particular, to the resolute Cath Dishman (LJMU Library Services), as *Innovations* would not exist without her direction (and patience), and Ian Gould-Jones (Teaching & Learning Academy), who provided significant support and encouragement.

I hope you enjoy this issue and, if you do wish to submit a paper, or offer a review, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Virendra Mistry

Editor, *Innovations in Practice*

December 2019

#LJMUIiP

Image: “*segar*” is licensed under [CC0 1.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

References

- Advance HE (2018) *Religion and Belief: Supporting Inclusion of Staff and Students in Higher Education and Colleges*, York: Advance HE
- Bellis, M. (2019) ‘The interesting history of WD-40’, ThoughtCo., 17 November [blog], retrieved from: <https://www.thoughtco.com/wd-40-1992659> (accessed December 2019)
- Gorini, R. (2003) ‘Al-Haytham the man of experience. First steps in the science of vision’, *Journal of the International Society for the History of Islamic Medicine*, 2 (4): 53-55
- Gould, S.J. (1999) *Rock of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Time*, Ballantine Books
- Harari, Y. (2014) *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, London: Harvill Secker
- JMSU (2017) ‘Our vision, mission and values’ retrieved from: <https://www.jmsu.co.uk/ourvision> (accessed November 2019)
- Marchant, J.S., Reuben, B.G. and Alcock, J.P. (2008) *Bread: A Slice of History*, Stroud: The History Society
- Rubel, W. (2011) *Bread: A Global History*, London: Reaktion Books
- Thomas, L. (2012) *Building Student Engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a Time of Change: Final Report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success Programme*, London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation, retrieved from: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/What_works_final_report_0.pdf (accessed November 2019)