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18. Learning an Outlook: An Overlooked Idea of Stafford Beer Whose Time May Now Have Come

Clive Holtham

*The focus of the chapter is on Beer's contribution to education, specifically higher education. The author has engaged with the work of Beer since 1971, and subsequently with the wider Beer community. Key aspects of Beer's educational thinking are reviewed, then interwoven with the author's personal pedagogic journey embracing the last two decades. That journey helped uncover a seminal concept of Beer's educational insights, namely the importance of "learning an outlook". This concept articulates a valuable insight that an outlook is personal, lifelong and continually updateable, and that education should not be entirely focused on knowledge and skills. The concept was included in Beer's unfinished autobiography, written in 2001 and published in 2009. Yet there is no citation to this concept in either the cybernetics or education literature. It has been overlooked. The author then revisits their own experiences of innovations in management education, and focusses on one of them, the *dérive* (learning by walking about) to illustrate how existing active learning methods may, in retrospect, have supported "learning an outlook". Beer's concept can provide support to already overdue practical educational changes to address the higher education polycrisis. However, conceptual development is still essential to interweave Beer's focused educational thinking with complementary pedagogic research. A key challenge now is to design educational experiences that explicitly support lifelong learners to evolve and reconstruct their outlooks.*

Introduction

The chapter was finalised after reading the chapter by Alfonso Reyes (2026). who demonstrates a deep understanding of Beer's high level educational thinking, while in parallel providing a comprehensive case study of how to implement and sustain novel educational processes successfully, drawing actively on Beer and his viable system model. Reyes' chapter is an important contribution to the general literature of higher education.

My own aims are narrower. I have been personally influenced by the work of Beer over five decades and now focus on technology and learning in higher education. His thinking on education was relatively fragmented, and as a result has been much less influential than his headline contributions including the Viable System Model. I review what I regard as a key element of Beer's educational thinking that has been almost entirely ignored, namely "learning an outlook". Today's context is the polycrisis which higher education is currently facing, in part accentuated by the impact of generative artificial intelligence (GAI), which contributes to undermining the conventional 20th century higher educational approach, about which Beer was so critical.

In my view learning an outlook is arguably of increased significance for higher education, at a time when historically successful methods of teaching and assessment are under challenge. I suggest that to develop learning an outlook needs to draw on parallel work by other authors, leading to the refinement and updating of Beer's underlying approach. I conclude with an illustrative example selected from a larger portfolio of nearly three decades of pedagogic innovation in my own business school.

My Intersections with Beer and the Beer Community since 1971

As an undergraduate, I studied philosophy as a core subject, and over my career and particularly in relation to systems thinking, three subjects still stand out as having much more practical relevance than other supposedly more career-oriented subjects such as economics. They should also underpin much of the discourse around knowledge and technology in higher education, and indeed its wider purposes. Here I summarise the definitions of Zalta and Nodelman (2026):

Ontology: What exists, what kinds of things exist, and how reality is structured.

Epistemology: What knowledge is, where it comes from, and what its scope and limits are.

Ethics: How we ought to live, behave and decide.

A core focus in my professional praxis, has always been on education, and latterly more specifically teaching and learning in business schools. This is against a professional background rooted in technology, accountancy and

management, and since 1988 as a professor of information management. I have explored my personal journey in my chapter in Raul Espejo's *Festschrift* (Holtham, 2025), so here only key events relating to Beer and his body of work will be summarised.

I first came across the work of Stafford Beer in 1971 as a student in a module on systems and cybernetics within my MSc in management. During the 1970s I was a solitary auto-didact in relation to Beer. I bought his key books as they came out, with *Platform for Change* probably having the greatest impact, not least due to its striking physical format and the powerful discussion of the Chile experience. With the evolution of my own interests, I would now probably describe *Designing Freedom* as having the greatest overall influence on me, though I didn't fully absorb its significance until the 1980s.

The second major intersection came by accident in 1978. I was working in the West Midlands and was contacted by a master's student from Aston Business School who was looking for managers to interview. I happily did this, but that led to me travelling to Birmingham to meeting the student's supervisor, Raul Espejo. This was the beginning of over 40 years much valued collaboration with Raul, and I shifted from being a solitary reader to participating in a variety of Beer-related projects and events up to the present day. Raul also introduced me to Beer himself.

The third intersection began in 1993. I secured research council funding for a large computer-supported collaborative work project called the BFS (Business Flight Simulator – Holtham, 1995) This sought to engage executives both with the internet, and in hands-on use of a portable local area network system, set up in a meeting room. This enabled executives to tease out, share and discuss their priorities both digitally and orally. Raul was leader of a parallel project, and it was agreed my research team could, as one of our own case studies, actively support the online collaboration process for the Beer *Festschrift* (Espejo and Schwaninger, eds., 1998).

The fourth intersection related to the research work of Dr Chris Brady in the late 1990s. Chris came into management academia after a military career and a doctorate in business history. Chris was able to use his diplomatic skills to secure interviews with thought leaders in the fields of business and systems. One interviewee was Demis Hassabis, now the holder of a knighthood and a Nobel Prize winner. Another was Stafford Beer, with whom Chris engaged

several times. Beer gave Chris a photocopy of his 1970 Manchester business school report (Beer, 1970), even today not widely available, but which I still regard as one of the most treasured documents in my now miniscule paper archive.

The fifth intersection involved engaging with various aspects of the Beer legacy in the 2000s and beyond. In 2001, the Business School of City University, London agreed to my proposal to set up its Learning Laboratory, to research teaching innovations, to experiment with them, and then hopefully encourage their mainstream adoption. The Laboratory has focused on three types of learning space: physical, virtual and imaginative, the latter mainly encompassing approaches to managerial creativity. From the start, the Laboratory was set up to seek out innovative ideas from any academic discipline, and many of the themes addressed were based on methods from the arts in particular. In that sense it has been “indisciplinary”, a stage even beyond the transdisciplinary approach so frequently advocated by Beer. Mitchell (1995) describes it as a factor of “...turbulence or incoherence at the inner and outer boundaries of disciplines...” The spirit of Beer has been very much embedded in both the design and implementation of the Lab’s work programme.

I was delighted to join the highly interdisciplinary advisory committee for the 2007 Karlsruhe ZKM (Zentrum für Kunst und Medien) gallery event which involved creation of a replica of the Chile operations room chair (see also Palmarola, Medina and Alonso, 2024). Another important dimension involved visits to the Beer Collection at Liverpool John Moores University. I spent a fortune on photocopying crucial material, particularly relating to the operations room, which has always had an almost hypnotic effect on me. I have felt part of a wider Beer community through invaluable Metaphorum and WOSC conferences.

Since 2022, our educational innovation work has focused on the implications of generative AI for business education, and I have since then increasingly found value in Beer’s own innovative thinking even since the 1960s relating to knowledge, technology, cognition and learning.

Beer on Education

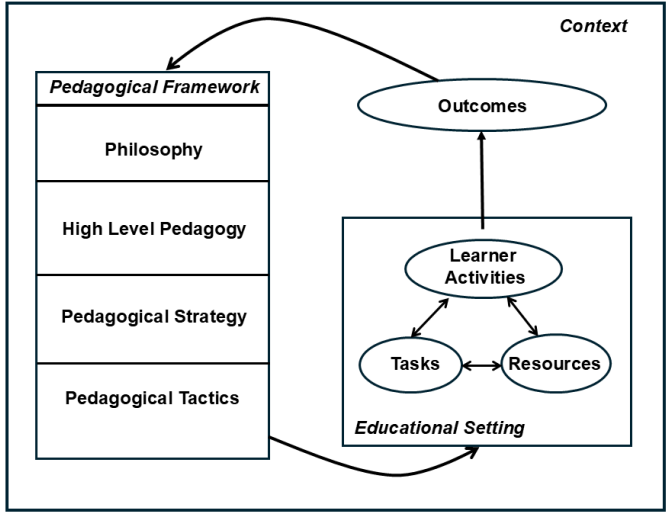


Figure 18.1. Framework for university teaching and learning design

Since the terminologies around education, teaching and learning are by no means uncontested, my work has been underpinned by the framework in Figure 19.1 (Holtham and Courtney, 2008, adapted from Goodyear, 1999).

The work of the learning laboratory has ranged across almost every component of this landscape. Relating the diagram to Beer’s writing, he was concerned through his entire life with making sure the whole system was viable, along with its sub-systems. By contrast, his contribution to the individual components shown in the teaching and learning framework was intermittent.

Beer did not have a cybernetic teaching and learning focus in same way as Gordon Pask (1976), with whom Beer had a sustained intellectual affinity, clearly did. Beer was more concerned with higher level principles than everyday teaching practice. Fortunately, a variety of management educators have explicitly drawn directly and successfully on the work of Beer in their own teaching and learning innovations. (Adams,1993; Liber, 2004; Reyes, 2026). In our own case, his written legacy has provided more of a continuous underpinning than an explicit signpost.

Beer was profoundly interested in education, not least because he saw education as an essential opportunity to steer the formation of children and

adults, so they can actively contribute to the journey towards his own high-level goal of a free, secure world capable of improvement and survival for all forms of life. Beer examined education in its current state, along with publishing and many other institutions; far from seeing these as salvations, he criticised them as actively promoting the already failed status quo. In his view, such institutions were geared to produce themselves, hence Beer's view that they had become part of the mechanisms acting as barriers to radical change, to freedom and to security. The second chapter of *Chronicles of Wizard Prang* (Beer, 1989) relates to a visit from the Chairman of the Education Committee, asking the Wizard to speak at a prize-giving; the end of the conversation graphically summarises Beer's views on conventional education:

"What they have to do is learn more things," finished the pompous man, as usual. This time Wizard Prang was ready for him. "The only things on offer are the ones leading to the world we already have – and that doesn't work," he said. "Until we unlearn, we cannot recognise the world that our education has concealed from us."

Beer was also unusual for being a leading thinker and writer on management, in that he had been unsettled at high school and then did not complete his university degree. Though the IT industry has many dropout leaders, it is interesting that inspirational thought leaders such as Buckminster Fuller and Frank Lloyd Wright had a very similar academic profile to Beer. When it came to Beer's relationships, no doubt through his charisma and intellectual breadth and depth, he maintained close connections with many of the highly qualified and most eminent pioneers in cybernetics. A similar pattern applied in his business career. One can only speculate as to whether Beer's youthful history of disengagement with the formal education system impacted his subsequent relative lack of interest in the everyday practices of institutional teaching and learning. One wonders if Churchill's famous quote (1952) might apply:

"Personally, I am always ready to learn, although I do not always like being taught."

Beer maintained close personal contacts with many individuals in education, played a significant part in setting up what became the Brunel Department of Cybernetics, held numerous visiting positions, and was more than generous in making time for both faculty and students. Crucially, he

supported Liverpool John Moores University when they were setting up the Stafford Beer Collection (Beer, 2009a).

His antennae about educational activity were acute. Searching my sole remaining physical archive on systems and cybernetics (sadly just one A4 box), I found a letter sent by Stafford to the Dean of my Business School in 1994, where he commented in a handwritten annotation “*I have recently been made aware of 3* (his underlining) people from your School who seem to know all about me: Well, well.*” This was followed by an archetypal invitation to meet at “*the Club*”.

So, Beer in practice was actively involved with higher education. However, he was more preoccupied with the role education could and should play in sustaining a viable world, and in being a viable system itself, than in its teaching and learning processes.

Beer was certainly a successful face-to-face teacher. Rod Thomas from the University of Sunderland (Thomas and van Zwanenberg, 2005) recalled Beer’s many visits to Sunderland, to teach in his Socratic mode. The Falcondale tapes (Beer, 1994) show him in live action. He also communicated through broadcasting (in *Designing Freedom*), and of course his many books, speeches and articles.

His Manchester Business School report (Beer, 1970) scarcely covers pedagogy, but perhaps surprisingly, strongly advocates “teaching” when it comes to senior executives:

“I firmly attest that senior managers need teaching (his underline) and teaching explicitly in the sense that their confident notion of what management now is fails to do the job”.

In relation to Chile, Medina (2014) summed up an example of his skill:

“Beer acted as both teacher and student in Chile. He presented his work in cybernetic management to Chilean scientists, engineers, and politicians and taught them its concepts.”

Although not designed as a formal educational space, the Chile Operations Room was a place for conversation and collective learning. Team Syntegrity could be used as a vehicle for learning, and he saw simulations as helping support the understanding of practicing managers. But it took the work of Raul Espejo and colleagues to design and implement the Proteus simulation (Gunz, 1994), which could be used in MBA education. Proteus

has heavily influenced my own initiatives to develop less conventional simulation and role play methods.

His detailed study on the organisation of Manchester Business School (Beer, 1970), not surprisingly, focused on moving to reorganising its management around the principles of the VSM. Although the practice of teaching and learning is barely touched upon, the study does begin with a valuable emphasis that the value of management education is not to be found in league tables, but in how far alumni have actually contributed as managers to real world improvements as a result of their studies.

His educational views can locate Beer within the critical education approach of educationalists such as Freire (1974), Illich (1973) and hooks (1994). The catalogue of his library at Liverpool John Moores shows he owned key texts by Freire and Illich, and Medina (2014) references Freire's rejection of education imposed from above as part of the South American educational context within which Beer was operating. Maria Montessori (1939) published a trenchant but little cited critique of universities covering similar ground to Beer's critique. It is interesting that Montessori methods and philosophy are now being trialled for business education (Murray et al, 2022).

In *Platform for Change* (Beer, 1974, pp415-6) there is a brief but important discussion of a proposed curriculum, which is summarised in Table 18.1.

Table 18.1 Beer's proposed curriculum for systems education

Possibly his most powerful comment is on the delivery method proposed; the emboldened word is his emphasis:

"These ten units are not referred to as books, as TV programmes, nor as anything else. They would be packages, using the appropriate medium for the job. Part of the work would be to design those packages so that they were effective instruments of communication – given the technology that we already have."

When it came to technology, Beer was an outstanding futurist. In *Designing Freedom* (Beer, 1974), there is a wonderful graphic hand-drawn by Beer: "A Better Outlook for Cybernetic Man." It depicts a viewer in their living room, in an Operations Room-style swivel chair with controller, and three large wall-mounted TV screens, with a teapot and cup on a side table. Beer suggests possible queries from the viewer.

- "Tell me more about news item six

Unit	Content
1	The systemic universe
1.1	The concept of system
1.2	Physical
1.3	Biological
1.4	Social
1.5	Integrates the first four
2.1	A restatement <i>ab ovo</i> of mathematics adequate to deal with these concepts
2.2	The systems approach to management, at every level (by a logical recursion) from the community to the entire world
2.3	Aesthetics, design and the quality of life. This unit would invent new systems for living – including a new kind of house and a new kind of city
2.4	Man’s heritage, history and the classics, with a forward orientation that projects us onward
2.5	Putting together a new philosophy, comprehensible only to students of this total work

- *Show me the family tree of King Prism*
 - *Get back the work I was doing on my new house*
 - *Entropy? I don’t understand. Stop this and explain*
 - *Record in my tax file that today I bought a dog*
 - *Tell Jack in Vancouver I’m ready for the chess match*
 - *Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, the composer conducting.....oh I see*
- AND DON’T TELL ANYONE ELSE UNLESS I SAY SO”**

This seemed like science fiction when I read it in the early 1970s. Today, these queries can be mediated even on a basic smartphone. Every one of his queries can be answered today, through some are dependent on currently risky agentic generative AI, rather than the universal non-agentic AI. And already, well before the invention of social media, his final capitalised sentence was based on his deep scepticism of the motives of technology companies.

The Unfolding of My Personal Pedagogic Journey

Becoming a UK National Teaching Fellow in 2003 brought me into a community of international innovative teachers and scholars from across all disciplines. In 2004, we were encouraged to attend what turned out to

be an iconic scholarship of teaching and learning conference in San Diego. Fifty people were expected from around the world; 400 actually attended. Lee Shulman, president of the Carnegie Foundation, presented the idea of “signature pedagogies”, which were subsequently published in Shulman (2005). Signature pedagogies help prepare learners for a profession, but run the risk of not adapting to changing circumstances, and an urgent need in management education is to review and also innovate its signature pedagogies. The Carnegie Foundation subsequently generated critiques of law and engineering education and then, in 2011, of business management (Colby et al, 2011). This book heavily promoted the need for liberal learning. It highlighted four themes, with only the first, analytical thinking, reflecting the dominant business school pedagogy. Unfortunately, the book was not able to attract a critical mass sufficient to change that dominance in practice. The four central dimensions of liberal learning it identified were:

Analytical Thinking – developing general, formal knowledge from particular experience through concepts, assumptions and deduction.

Multiple Framing – examining an issue through different, sometimes incompatible, intellectual perspectives.

The Reflective Exploration of Meaning – considering meaning, value, commitment, identity and one’s relationship with the world.

Practical Reasoning – drawing on knowledge and judgement to decide on an appropriate course of action in a particular situation.

The first three are “modes of thought”, with practical reasoning being the capacity that integrates knowledge, skills and dispositions in decisions and action.

The Colby book is perhaps even more relevant today, not least because it examined much more than the conventional curriculum. But unbeknown to me in 2011, it has also subsequently provided a discipline-based underpinning which can still help today to advance Beer’s deeper thinking on education.

A Key but Unheralded Beer Perspective: Learning an Outlook

In 2009 David Whittaker published a book drawing together many unpublished or hard to access works of Beer (Whittaker, 2009). This included Beer’s unfinished autobiography (Beer, 2009B). It is important to note that

Beer's autobiography covers only the period from his conception to four years old. That work introduced a core concept that I was regrettably not familiar with until I was researching this chapter: "learning an outlook". This immediately resonated profoundly with me both at the explicit intellectual level, as well as in a more deeply intuitive or emotional sense. The importance of "learning an outlook" deserves attention, to help underpin rethinking the role of professional education, not least in a post-GAI era.

Paraphrasing his explanation of the term "learning an outlook," he sees learning as going far beyond the acquisition of facts and skills. It is not confined to what happens in educational institutions but applies across all dimensions of life. Knowledge is not an absolute, it is crucial to understand that it is always provisional. This resonated with my emotional experience, hinted at above, when viewing Jacob Bronowski's (1973) impassioned video, filmed in the mud of Auschwitz, where he asserted:

"Science is a very human form of knowledge. We are always at the brink of the known... Every judgment in science stands on the edge of error and is personal. Science is a tribute to what we can know although we are fallible. In the end, the words were said by Oliver Cromwell: I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken."

There are many parallels in the educational literature to "learning an outlook". In addition to Shulman, and Illich, which I already mentioned, Dall'Alba (2009) addresses "the ambiguities of becoming". Freire (1974) urged learners to develop critical consciousness by reflecting and acting upon their social world: their outlook changes through engagement with reality, while the learner also seeks to change that reality. Miller-Young and Chick (2024) from Elon University, use "becoming" in the title of their book aimed at becoming a teacher. Pickering (2010, pp401-402) argues:

"...Western educational systems are strongly oriented toward the transmission of positive knowledge, and that this hangs together with a modern ontology of knowability, controllability, enframability... my suggestion is that it does not have to be this way, even in our pedagogical institutions. We could bring unknowability into focus for our children".

Some key quotes from the autobiography can explore the meaning of "learning an outlook", including the point where Beer first emphasises explicitly overcoming the limiting of experience.

“The primitive beginnings of memory mean that I am now starting to acquire my own experience. It is the beginning of learning an outlook. That means that I must never deliberately inhibit experience as life continues but always explore it.”

Beer acknowledges that learning an outlook is not innate:

“After that, it is a matter of choice. I shall choose to spend my whole life learning an outlook. On the whole, people seem to give up the process sooner or later, often as early as puberty, and that is a tragedy.”

Beer distinguishes between “learning an outlook” and the generality of learning, as a child growing up, and indeed in the education system, what might be called everyday learning and formal learning:

“Why am I making a fuss about these three words, and linking them together as a phrase by italicising them? The answer is that I’m not talking about learning itself – as might have been supposed. It is a truism to say that it is necessary to go on learning...”

Learning an outlook for Beer is a daily and lifelong practice:

“No, learning an outlook means incorporating experience as it happens, formulating and refining it continuously. It means adjusting the model of life itself while it is being lived.”

Beer advocates intellectual flexibility and uses the Latin proverb: “Experience is the teacher.”

“As a result, I have changed my views about every serious issue at least once in my life. ‘Inconsistent’, folk have often contended and complained. I should hope so. *Experientia docket.*”

Beer’s “learning an outlook” has attracted virtually no academic attention or citations, yet in my view could provide an approach capable of being at the heart of rethinking higher education in an era infused with generative AI. But research work is needed to evolve it from a conceptual level to one that can help shape pedagogic strategy and actual practice in the classroom; this would make a fascinating doctoral topic.

A key contribution in progressing Beer’s concept would be from Ronald Barnett who has written extensively on two germane areas. The first relates to knowing and becoming in higher education (Barnett, 2009), the second is contained in his book on the “ecological university” (Barnett, 2024). Though neither Beer nor Pask is cited in Barnett’s book, it develops and justifies a

valuable framework, which, in my view, will serve to augment Beer’s insights in a GAI¹¹⁹-infused era.

Beer’s predictions about how technology vendors and the media might dominate and distort data, information and knowledge were all too prescient. When introducing learning an outlook, for example, he anticipated key problems arising from GAI:

“...the plethora of data can easily mean that they are skimmed rather than digested.”

“As life becomes more and more frenetic, the apparently increasing wealth of the experience may be getting so shallow that the frenzy is not worthwhile.”

Innovative Approaches to Learning Developed since 2001 That Show Promise To Support “Learning An Outlook”

In 2001, an early set of learning principles for the proposed Business School Learning Laboratory was developed, as shown in Table 18.2 (Holtham, 2001). These remain useful though if modernised they would put greater emphasis on reflection and on explicit active learning activities.

	Method	Examples
1	Face to face interaction with experienced practitioners	Medieval guild tradition of the city
2	Intensive interaction with peers	Face to face; formal/informal; virtual knowledge networks
3	Intensive interaction with learning materials	Electronic, analogue; high quality commercial information
4	Intensive exploitation of information	Electronic, analogue; high quality commercial information databases; all supported by learning information architecture

Table 18.2. Principles for effective management learning

¹¹⁹Generative Artificial Intelligence

Conventional didactic teaching can be summarised as “transmissive”. This chapter, by contrast, emphasises active learning, where the student is no longer a relatively passive recipient.

These principles appear to be even more relevant in the GAI era, and in the two decades since they were produced, a wide variety of active learning methods have been experimented with and implemented (Figure 18.3). Many of these are consciously analogue-heavy, precisely because they are often much less about learning contemporary facts and skills, and much more about preparation for a career over many decades.

Figure 18.3 summarises 16 active learning methods that have been developed by the learning lab since its inception in 2003, and been applied in at least one level from foundation courses to executive education.

We argue that for undergraduates these capabilities primarily need to involve active learning through analogue-heavy delivery. We believe it is important to make a distinction between foundational and subject expertise knowledge. Specialist professional subject matter knowledge remains important, but historically in management, less emphasis has been given to education in foundational capabilities, including culture and values, often tacit, of a given profession. In 2025, and in direct response to the pressures

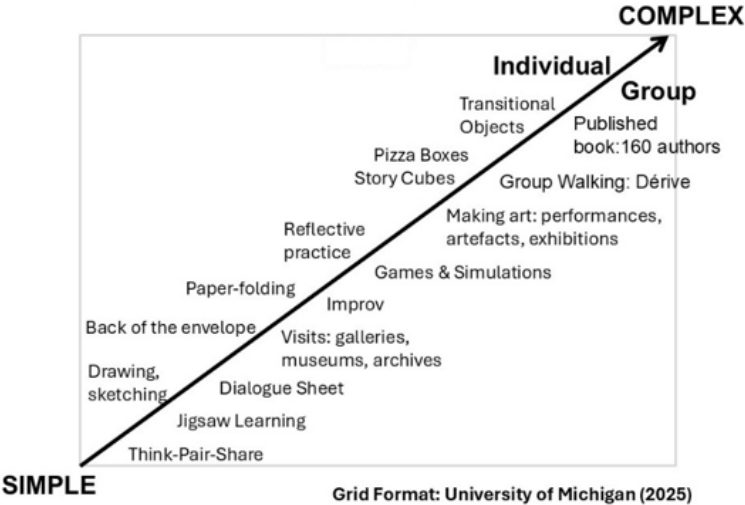


Figure 18.3. Active learning methods over two decades at the Business School

from GAI, we have restated our core pedagogic approaches specifically for the often-underemphasised foundational generic capabilities:

- critical thinking,
- reflective practice,
- imaginative problem solving,
- dialogical perspective,
- effective collaboration
- becoming an ethical professional and citizen

If the basic learning of foundational capabilities predominately uses digital-heavy delivery methods, in which large language models are likely to play an increasingly central role, the risk of cognitive debt (Kosmyna et al, 2025) is greatly increased. So, we argue that subject-specific foundational capabilities are also ring-fenced within an analogue-heavy, active learning pedagogy. Key dimensions that have emerged for us in analogue-heavy approaches include:

- Slow Learning, especially in both generic and disciplinary foundational subjects (Honore, 2005)
- Embodiment, through examining and making artefacts, and experiencing a physical space (Gagliardi, 1990)
- Human-to-human real-time conversation and dialogue (Casebourne and Wegerif, 2024)
- Real-time practical reasoning: thinking in-the-moment, including with other learners, drawing readily on tacit knowledge, not digital sources

Now we examine a specific example, namely our development of the *dérive* (drifting), a method of learning by walking about. This has turned out to be a signature pedagogy within the undergraduate business programme in particular. A *dérive* process was proposed by Guy Debord, a Marxist, who was concerned with disrupting conventional patterns of thinking, as well as engaging participants with the everyday reality of urban life. Debord (2006) explained:

“The *dérive* is a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. *Dérives* involve playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psycho-geographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll”.

We devised this learning by walking method pragmatically for MBA students taking an elective on “The Art of Management” in 2005, when we asked

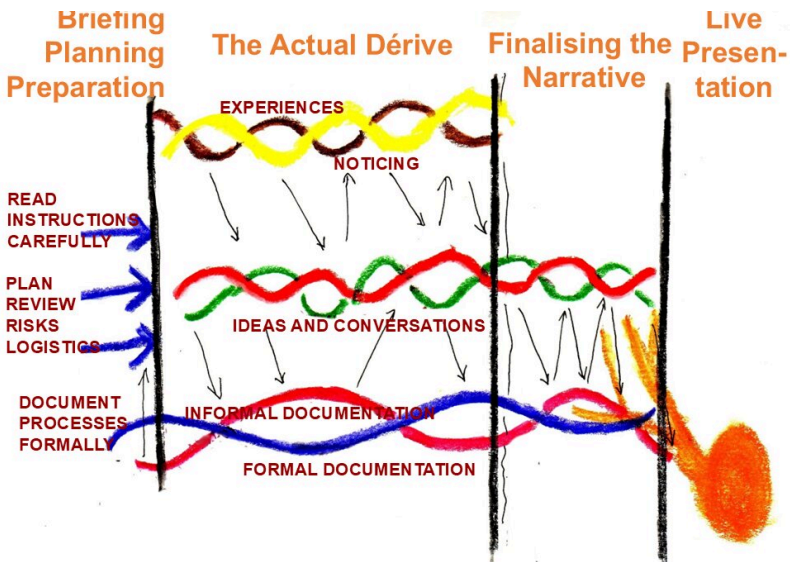


Figure 18.4. Dérive process for a first-year undergraduate management core course

them in small groups to walk around a small zone of London, find “flow” and report back. Only after some remarkable group presentations, did we then discover there was actually a theory from Debord behind this approach. So we had evolved the methods of a Marxist to advance active learning in a business school in the centre of UK capital, the City of London.

For undergraduates, the dérive takes up to four entire weeks of class time – briefing, planning, the walk and presentations (see Figure 19.3). There is a heavy emphasis on moving away from low level analogue and digital research skills towards creating their own unique group experience, using all five senses. In executive education, for those habituated to conventional meeting rooms, the emphasis is on rediscovering their pre-professional, if not childlike curiosity and imagination. For first year students, it requires a different type of conversational skill, not least due to walking in an unfamiliar environment. Conversation is a crucial interpersonal skill, but rarely covered in the formal curriculum. Above all it means dealing with both the unknown, and indeed the unknowable, which rarely feature on high school syllabuses, but are at the heart of much real-life managerial experience. The whole point is that all

of what is experienced with their five senses on the walk is what they have to work with.

Connecting now to “learning as outlook”, Beer said you should “never deliberately inhibit experience as life continues, but always explore it”. He is also critical of those who have rich but unreflective experiences, such as travel: “Many people take the technological advantage of touring the world in a hurry, without examining the quality of the experience.” We heavily emphasise using, and reporting back on, experiences through all five senses; an unusual request in a digital age. For some students the *dérive* experience is memorable; we are of course hoping that the seemingly basic skills needed will support their continued application lifelong, that quite memorable sensations can be experienced by a slow reflective walker within a group that would never be noticed by tourists and commuters. Learning by walking about disrupts the often-dysfunctional practices of corporate and research teamwork/meetings. The approach does not involve appointing a chair and meeting around a table with seats. It involves much flatter sharing of responsibilities, and literally creating a fluid form of oral communication while walking.

Extending the Conceptual Development of “Learning An Outlook”

In “The Culpabliss Error”, Beer (1997) writes about what a university should be, culminating in this stirring passage:

“...the university should be embedded in the community; the community should be embedded in the wider wealth-generating context; the university should be organised around the principle of *universus* rather than fragmented faculties; and the business school should act as a powerhouse for change.”

Beer says that he had long ago designed such a business school, which we know is Manchester Business School, but “*The design has never been implemented*”, and he immediately gives the reason in the form of a dismissive institutional response: “*We don’t actually run a business school like that.*”

Sir Douglas Hague had been a professor at Manchester when Beer produced his report but nearly 20 years later (Hague, 1990) admitted that:

“Stafford Beer produces a vision of the school which was never fully taken up, because it was too revolutionary. It is not too revolutionary for the twenty-first century.”

And

“...in the end, despite much debate in the school, we took little notice of it and I bitterly regret that. I do so because all management trainers have thereby been deprived of a valuable example”.

Could Beer's ideas be augmented and evolved to help create a new type of business school? One historical inspiration could come from the Bauhaus, described by UNESCO's World Heritage Committee (2017):

“Between 1919 and 1933, the Bauhaus School, based first in Weimar and then in Dessau, revolutionized architectural and aesthetic concepts and practices... the Bauhaus School has become the symbol of modern architecture, both in its educational theory and its buildings.”

Wick (2000) provides detailed pedagogic insights into the long-term impact of the Bauhaus, and there can be little doubt that its alumni were encouraged to learn an outlook. Adams (1993) reproduces the “Stafford Beer Connection”, a six-segment circle, highlighting the six systems which Beer wanted to see collectively addressed: Societary, Physical, Transcendental, Theoretical, Aesthetic and Living. Visually, this diagram uncannily echoes a seven-segment circle at the core of the Bauhaus approach to learning.

A valuable study by Volkmann and De Cock (2007) rightly cautions against simplistic application of Bauhaus principles to management, and also points out that materiality in learning was necessarily more significant in the Bauhaus, than in management education. However, our own active learning experiences, touched on above, suggest there are not only opportunities for greater use of analogue methods, but also a need to do so, particularly at the foundational stages of learning.

Ronald Barnett (2024) outlined his systems-based framework for the re-design of higher education, and identified eight overlapping and interacting ecosystems: Society, Culture, Individuals, Learning, Nature, Knowledge, Polity and Economy. Barnett sets his work within the context of supercomplexity and ecosystems, but does not draw explicitly on cybernetics, nor does he reference Beer or Pask. Barnett's mission for the university of the twenty-first century is to:

“...understand its being enfolded in the totality of a world in motion with its complexities and conflicts yet acting in the world with huge energy and spirit and self-lessness, putting itself in the service of the whole world, including its non-human inhabitants.”

He also alludes to the metaphor of a patchwork, an exact metaphor used by Beer (2009b) in his autobiography. So, I see great scope for a future study based on interweaving the work of Beer and Barnett.

Another promising direction is that achieved by the Kaospilot in Denmark (Windeløv-Lidzélius, 2018). Although this is a three-year course in design, it does not award a degree, but rather like the Bauhaus, heavily emphasises active learning and, at least implicitly, learning an outlook.

Conclusion

Revisiting the wider body of Beer's work, it is noticeable how much of it is even more applicable today, not least how methods of organising have consistently been shown not to work, especially at the highest levels, and specifically within my area of focus, in teaching and learning in higher education.

The societal problems Beer identified over 50 years ago, if anything, have significantly worsened. Yet universities and professions were never likely to be willing or able to unthink their entrenched habits. Beer saw the fundamental importance of higher education, not least in designing freedom, but he was acutely aware that the conventional 20th century university could not provide what he felt were essential features for achieving such freedom. He was sceptical of professions and professionals generally, as he saw them as being grounded in problems of the past, and failing to provide adaptive mechanisms for learners and societies to cope with an unpredictable future.

I don't regard myself as an academic specialist in management cybernetics. However, Beer's work, and latterly the Beer community, have played a continuing role throughout my adult life. As there are many positives to be extracted from his influence on my personal journey, I am deeply appreciative of how Beer's writings and the Beer community have contributed significantly to this. Indeed, discovering the unheralded autobiography demonstrates how the full breadth of his legacy can still be mined further.

In 2021 my own institution was called the Cass Business School; when it was publicised that Sir John Cass played a significant role in the North

Atlantic slave trade, it decided to rename itself to the Bayes Business School. Thomas Bayes is buried in the cemetery opposite the Business School, and he developed the theorem named after him, which relates to updating the probability of an event in the light of new information becoming available. At our main entrance we have “Always Learning” displayed on a large window. In practical terms, the school, like other progressive institutions, has been willing to support educational innovation if it has a good chance of working, and this supportive atmosphere has certainly contributed to enabling both large and small teaching and learning innovation initiatives.

Over two decades, the Learning Lab has developed a repertoire of pedagogic practices that sought to support learners not only in their subject matter knowledge and in practical skills, but also to support them in the lengthy, if not lifelong, process of becoming a manager.

Encountering Beer's phrase “learning an outlook” has provided a conceptual framework that retrospectively supports the educational purpose that had tacitly guided those practices all along. It leads me to look at the 16 examples in Figure 18.3 and ask the wider question about what kind of educational experiences can make it more likely that students will develop a capability to reconstruct their outlook.

I began as a practising manager. Through experience, my own outlook evolved, although I lacked the framework to explain this. When I entered academia, I found myself creating pedagogies that, in retrospect, were invitations for students to undergo a similar process – not to think as I think, but to become capable of changing how they themselves think. It is only in researching and writing this chapter that I discovered that Stafford Beer had already given a name to an educational approach that I had tacitly been pursuing: learning an outlook.

Beer's neglected concept has helped me personally illuminate what has been learnt from my own decades of professional and pedagogic practice. I am anxious now to share that learning, particularly through drawing on the lessons learned from those with similar cumulative experiences worldwide.

As a concluding thought, Beer was a Freeman of the City of London (as I am myself). This is primarily a social and charitable position, not one with powers and duties, other than a right to drive sheep across London Bridge. On admission as a freeman, he would have been provided with a small book

called “Rules for the conduct of life” (Anonymous, 1992). These are not actually mandatory rules to be obeyed, but centuries-old wise advice on what good behaviour looks like. I draw on part of Rule 3 by way of conclusion:

“*Let the end you aim at be always good;
be vigorous in making use of the proper means for the compassing of such an end...*”

It strikes me that Beer was unswerving if not exemplary in following these two pieces of advice. For the five decades that I have known his work and to a small extent himself, his approach to life and work remains appealing. I hope this chapter can stimulate interest in an overlooked area of his thought.

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