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Why is learning the life skills of problem solving, decision making, risk management and people handling left to experience at University?

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The recently departed Daniel Kahneman made the observation that our brains can think fast or slow. Fast when we have a pattern match and slow when they need to process data and get it right. Sometimes we match the wrong pattern and get a answer we later regret. It is assumed in UK universities that the key skills of problem solving:- situation appraisal, problem analysis, decision making, assessment of risk and people handling will be learned through experience. For example, a group project intends gives students the opportunity to experience working in a team, possibly for the 1st time. However, they are typically not given guidance as to best practice for handing interpersonal situations, people management and the management of their own emotions and those of others.

In 1970, when Apollo 13 was hurtling towards the moon and experiencing multiple failures, the part not documented in the film is that the flight engineers had a thinking process to follow based on the study by anthropologists of how individuals successful in business analyze problems. The observations extend across cultures, industries and subject specialties. Learning and internalising a set of such processes can help us avoid bad decisions, wrong diagnosis and failure to spot disaster.

Core skills such as debugging code in a Computer Science degree is left to learn by trial and error. Students must work out their own heuristics for what works and does not. What works for small coding assignments may not translate to industry scale problems when the students enter the world of work.

In employment, companies and orgaisation pay for communication skills, negotiation skills, problem solving and risk management. Should more of these skills be taught as part of the foundation of a well formed degree level education? This talk sets of why and how the teaching of problem solving and people handling should be made an explicit part of a degree course and how to make it scale.

