Alex's University of Toronto writings, as read by the record on 1 November 2026

Read through Alex's browser (the server redirects https to http, which the fetch tool refuses). Pages: home.html, Resources.html, Downloads.html ("Content coming soon"). Dating, corrected 1 November 11:5x EST after the originals were downloaded: the server's Last-Modified gives both SVG maps as 12 June 2017 and the PDF as 3 August 2017, and the PDF's own metadata says it was created 3 August 2017. The SPARC map is headed "2015" (the project's start) and summarises Offutt et al., published 2017. The earlier guess in this file, "2016 or later," is kept here as what the record said before it had the files. The originals are kept beside this file in originals/ with a provenance note and checksums, and on the site in open-inquiry-education/alex-2017-originals/. Alex's roles on the page: Teaching Technology Specialist (IIT, Faculty of Arts & Science); past, DCS Innovation Lab Manager and DCS Instructor Support Specialist. The four LinkedIn pieces on the home page are linked there, not hosted; the record has not read them yet ("The core challenge of our present teaching environment and the tools we build"; "The Four C Cycle: what every online learning system lives or dies on"; "Don't let your thinking get in the way of doing"; "Fighting habituation for success").

Transcribed from screenshots; small errors of transcription possible. Alex's bold is kept as bold. Contact details on the page are not copied here.

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1. "Active Teaching and Learning Success: A big picture view" (PDF, 6 pages, undated; 2016 or later)

Presently we seem to be in the tail end of a transition period where dialogue and discussion around learning is passionately debated and being re-evaluated, so much so that some teachers I talk to cringe at the mention of the word pedagogy. If we look at higher education, painting with very broad strokes, we seem to be transitioning from an industrial concept of learning that sees knowledge as a product that can be replicated by initiating some sort of data transfer from an existing expert to a new student who in turn will create new ideas and repeat the process. The thought that with some simple manipulation, and by finding a suitable student open to absorb the required knowledge, this learning "object" can be delivered with ease. This perspective depends on an abstraction of knowledge and learning as a commodity item that is separated from persons and context. Although there is a collective understanding that education is not even remotely this simple, this idea is still pervasive in the structure and actions of ourselves and our institutions. This idea has a compelling attraction in that it is simple, easily systemized, monetized, and replicated. Goals are seen as clearly defined and easily measured, and as most people can conform to social pressure, results can still be seen. Great dialogue and effort has been focused on changing this over simplified view of knowledge and learning, guided and supported by solid scientific research. Unfortunately habit persists, further reinforced by the thought that many types of learning can be made to fit within this simple and efficient view of acquiring knowledge, and that somehow creative thought will emerge once sufficient data is infused. This culture of objectifying learning is changing. Dialogue surrounding education seems to be settling into some semblance of agreement as more comprehensive "person centered" ideas of knowledge and learning take hold within our culture, and a pedagogy of active learning based on the premise of the importance of encouraging students personal engagement comes to the forefront as the necessary action for learning success. However, attempting to filter through the noise within the education industry continues to be a challenge. Understanding how new perspectives affect the institutions we are familiar with, and teaching methods presently in use, it is not necessarily clear how to proceed with concrete actions as we tend to fall into the habit of compartmentalizing our

situations and environment. **The first step to creating an action plan requires a big picture view of what is necessary in order to further revitalize our institutions, tools and methodologies. Keeping a big picture view in mind will help to prevent being side tracked into dysfunctional results.**

Research on education has grown steadily since the 1960's. One very significant effort to collect and provide access to education research is a collection call "How college affects Students" by Ernest T. Pascarella, Patrick T. Terenzini, with the latest volume updated in 2016 called "How College Affects Students: 21st Century Evidence that Higher Education Works, Volume 3" (Matthew J. Mayhew, Nicholas A. Bowman, Alyssa N. Rockenbach, Tricia A. D. Seifert, Gregory C. Wolniak). Using this volume as my key resource, supplemented with some additional content, I have summarized what I see as a useful way to focus on what current and past research says about learning success. **The over-arching theme which emerges is the idea that learners are complicated people that are highly affected by their physical environment, social environment, and their personal psychological and physical makeup. How and where content is presented, what the expectations are surrounding the content, the framework surrounding the content, and the perception of difficulty of the content itself has significant impact on the effectiveness of learning.** This process is not a passing of information, but a human interaction based in relationship; with all the complications this implies. The central relationship of a learner to an instructor makes a significant difference. **The ideas that stand out the clearest in the literature is the perspective that the instructor is inviting learners to engage with the material that is being presented, wrapping it in a framework that makes it approachable, tagged with the validation that it is valuable and worthy of being learnt, communicating the affirmation that the learner has the ability to master the content.** Good teaching matters and is an essential aspect of good learning. An instructor not only builds the framework of a course, but hopefully teaches within an inviting and safe environment, striving to communicate an encouraging attitude and delivering an inspiring pitch. **Teaching is a skill that requires knowledge and training and a high level of support.**

Box: INSTRUCTORS — Good teaching REALLY MATTERS! a. Encouragement to engage. b. Provide good feedback: purposeful and consistent; content driven; feedback is "one of the most powerful influences on learning, too rarely" used (Hattie, Timperley 2007). c. Provided opportunity to reflect: effective reflection as a pedagogical strategy requires careful structure that is patient and thorough (Dewey). d. Actively engaged students in the learning process: active student engagement is essential for learning; active learning pedagogy works by creating engagement; not the only way but proven to be consistently successful; traditional lectures have proven to be ineffective, a passive exchange of teacher notes to student notes with little to no mental engagement; both students and instructors tend to be highly resistant to abandoning lectures, likely due to the format providing the appearance of learning and the simplicity of delivery for both; no singular definition or expression of active learning was necessarily more powerful than another; rather, active learning is a component of a teacher's deliberate practice of inviting students to think and act in ways consistent with disciplinary norms and methods (HCAS p. 593). e. Focus on assignments, directed tasks, and group work has proven to be effective. f. Focus on the encouragement of preparations and planning before class has proven to lead to learning and development gains. g. Course material needs to be challenging and do-able: too easy or too hard are equally ineffective; delicate balance dependent on individual and environmental factors (ESL, stress, poverty, culture, community support); the perception is as important for engagement as reality; a perception of too hard disengages as well as a perception of too easy triggers low engagement; actively surveying and managing perception is important. h. Support is crucial: learning online or offline, success is based on level of support (guidance) in understanding the course material; online pedagogies that encourage quality interactions with faculty and peers helped students make subject matter gains; if support is lacking in individual students' emotional, financial, cultural, mental needs, as well as community and direct course support, then learning suffers; focus on the student as a full and complex human person is essential; **learning is complex and needs to be evaluated with a multi-level model; simple measure of success is not**

adequate (HCAS p. 579); understanding that learning involves intellectual, cognitive and moral development as well as psychosocial and attitude change; holistic approach needed.

Learning does not thrive in isolation but exists within a community that provides context and support. This wider relationship directly impacts learning success. Research has helped identify the characteristics that should exist within this larger learning environment and how these relationships impact individual learners. The chart to the right outlines the details.

Presently it seems that less effort and spending is focussed on examining, defining or shaping learning communities in comparison to spending in other areas within the learning ecosystem. **This seems to indicate a need to create an active plan at a classroom level, a departmental level, and an institutional level to consciously decide learning values and goals, and actively craft a method to implement these goals within a community setting.** Many teachers and small groups within the higher education environment have transitioned towards a more person centered learning environment but it still seems that many higher education community values from an institutional level are moving slower; with many strategies still stuck on a survival of the fittest perspective that expresses a view that only the best who can traverse a difficult environment should succeed. **While it is true that challenge is required, this perspective downplays the responsibility of an institution, department, and instructor to create an environment of success and attainability. It would seem that a better perspective might be to look towards providing a support environment that encourages the survival of the socially mature, the co-operative, and the supportive, with clear goals of learning success. Setting a focus on supporting and teaching emotional maturity and social co-operation would seem to be a more sensible way to assist learners in accomplishing learning goals and general life success, and through this academic success.** This idea seems to permeate clearly through the *Community* and *Institution* sections as illustrated on the list to the right.

Box: COMMUNITY. 1. Identity: clarity of purpose/s (what are you trying to accomplish); what are you communicating. 2. Sense of belonging: basic human need; necessary pre-condition for higher order needs (Maslow 1962: desire for knowledge, understanding, self-actualization); fundamental motive for behaviour (stimulates goal-directed activity; people are compelled to act to satisfy belonging); heightened importance conditions (newcomer in an established group; needs of late adolescence, 18 to 24; marginalized cultural sensitivity, acceptance needs are heightened); related to or consequence of mattering (feeling that doing and being matter; person and action has value; discerning a sense of right or wrong; the 5 dimensions of mattering by Rosenberg McCullough: attention, importance, dependence, appreciated, ego extension); social identity challenges to belonging (needs flexibility, one size does not fit all); belonging has strong links to academic performance, sense of well-being, physical health, happiness, community service; on-campus requirement for belonging to be successful: strong affiliations with faculty, staff, other students; belonging conditions need constant work and renewal, not static, constantly re-evaluated; checks and balances need to be in place to counter isolation. 3. Intergroup contact (teacher–student and student–student): constantly re-examine and counter pre-judging of students' abilities based on race, class, gender, and other social identities.

Box: INSTITUTION. 1. Co-curricular engagement: key for identity development and positive psychosocial development; educators should think strategically about what resources could be accessed to support student/instructor/faculty interaction (skills, information exchange, logistics and co-ordination, leadership, career related activities, formal and informal networking). 2. Diversity support needed: learning and development appear more related to the nature of diverse interaction in the classroom than the number of interactions; provide opportunity to openly express racialized identities, engage across lines of difference, resolve cognitive disruptions in healthy ways; leaving to chance within unstructured environments can reduce the benefit higher education provides in peer interaction stimulating cognitive dissonance leading to acceptance values and personal growth; educators recommended to commit to helping

students learn how to approach their peers with goodwill and openness. 3. Indication of a need for a strong institution-based retention policy: innovative formal and informal networking spaces; programmatic retention efforts combining multiple components far more influential than individual efforts; packaged initiatives that deliver guidance and support; move away from "look to your left, look to your right, next year one of you will not be here"; **sink or swim needs to become "we will help you swim"**; university bears a lot of responsibility for providing students with the support they need to achieve their goals (HCAS p. 594; an Ellucian retention piece linked); shift intervention efforts to midterm rather than final grades as a signal for assistance. 4. Learning environment is growing in complexity and "one size fits all" perceptions tend not to reflect student realities. 5. Learning physical environment support: crucial need to provide resources to enable an environment conducive to community and identity building both offline and online.

Another aspect worth highlighting is the compelling need for a supportive physical environment. A quick search on google reveals a massive rush that many higher learning universities are engaging in to convert existing old lecture halls to active learning spaces. **Both anecdotal evidence from teaching experience as well as serious research seems to point to the importance of clearly examining and understanding what is necessary to support learning through a physical environment.** On the Educause website there is a significant amount of research based content to provide guidance on creating successful learning spaces (educause.edu, learning-spaces). The top chart to the right (from an article by Hermanmiller.com, "Adaptable spaces and their impact on learning") focuses on the human experience and how it relates to the activities within the space with the goal to guide discussion on assessing and designing learning spaces: Students & Faculty Experience → Basic Human Needs (comfort, convenience, support for learner) · Teaching (method, technology and tools, flexibility, effectiveness) · Learning (style, technology and tools, flexibility, effectiveness) · Engagement (communication, collaboration, interaction, sense of community). **What is immediately obvious is how completely interdependent these relationships are and how crucial the roll of choosing value will influence decisions as simple as the type of chair to purchase.**

The key concept to consider when approaching active learning and teaching is understanding that the exchange of knowledge and understanding is not abstracted from the human person, but a process that lives in relationship. The pie chart to the right summarize this relationship from the perspective of student needs for learning success ("Relationship criteria for student success", four quarters: active teaching of content within a solid conceptual framework with a focus of significant social interaction and feedback; student interest, engagement and commitment to a chosen subject, a framework to provide guidance to assist with ensuring a right fit; clarity of community values, and significant institutional student and environmental support; content availability, flexibility, reusability, and ease of access for independent study, individual and group notes and student-student and student-to-teacher discussions). **It is crucial to understanding education as a human social activity involving all aspects of the human person. If we approach education with this focus, the likelihood to succeed in stimulating growth, knowledge, and value, increases significantly, which will positively affect the success of any classroom, program, department or school.**

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2. "Undergraduate teaching goals exploration" (SVG mind map, undated)

Four branches under one question.

- **Vocational Education.** Content and skills driven; in-depth knowledge and ability to solve specific problems within a tight focussed domain.
- **Liberal Art Education.** Traditional understanding: skills and abilities necessary for a "free person" to be active and contributing to society. Modern understanding and implementations: North America, Socratic focus

(cooperative argumentative dialogue between individuals, based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking and to draw out ideas and underlying presumptions; dialogue and feedback focused); Europe, aim at providing pupils with comprehensive education (Bildung) to form personality with regard to a pupil's own humanity as well as innate intellectual skills (since students are considered to have received a comprehensive liberal arts education at grammar schools, the role of liberal arts in undergraduate education at universities is reduced compared to the US; modern movement to re-introduce liberal arts focus back into universities; quicker focus into specialization); Asia, strong liberal arts on the rise.

- **Research focused education.** Liberal arts focused training with a higher emphasis on creative problem solving, self direction (able to set independent goals and accomplishment with big picture guidance), independent thinking, emotional maturity; focused on furthering knowledge in a specific domain.
- **Entrepreneurship education.** Liberal arts focused training with a higher emphasis on creative problem solving, self direction, independent thinking, emotional maturity and intelligence, social/communications skills; focused on solving real world challenges within various domains; intent to commercialize.

3. "George Mason University SPARC Project – 2015" (SVG mind map of Offutt et al.)

Five branches: overall goals (scale CS1 significantly; retain more students; increase learning with less effort by teachers and TAs; eliminate cheating); challenges with "conveyor belt", "one size fits none" teaching (use of practice problems as assessment increases cheating, wastes resources, and **forces students to choose between working alone and working in a group, the cheating potential conflicting with the validated beneficial aspects of group work**; inadequate support for different learning style and speed; cost of failure; TA overload); pedagogical goals (**separate individual assessment from collaborative learning**; permit students to demonstrate mastery of skills at any time; learn at own pace; move lectures online and use the time for interactive teaching; automate marking); solutions implemented (ten stages; practice and assessment assignments distinct; supervised locked-down assessments, ten versions, five chances, 70% to pass, immediate automated feedback; flipped classroom; in-class practice programming in three elements; TAs assist but **"not to solve the problem"**; immediate feedback with resubmission); concrete actions and results (started 2015; 100 practice and 75 assessment problems; four sections, 344 students; cheating from 10% average to 0% with "no false accusations of cheating"; completion equal or better; knowledge on par on the final; teachers much more pleasant interactions and dramatically decreased workload; **"SPARC model disrupts students' belief that the system is designed to make learning difficult"**; items still being evaluated; experimental hypotheses; biggest perceived challenges: collaborative classroom space, hiring enough TAs, funding for evaluation labs between terms).

What the record takes from these (Limen, 1 November 2026)

Three of the Horvath propositions were in Alex's hands in 2015–17, in education's own vocabulary. Proposition 3 (students optimise for what is rewarded; the artifact is not the learning) is the SPARC reading: practice used as assessment makes cheating the rational move, and separating the two removed it. Proposition 5 (the purposes of education are several and contested) is the teaching-goals map, with four purposes; the edge's table has four too, and the one on the edge's list that the map lacks is the civic purpose, which is what the 2026 conversation added. And the ground of proposition 1 is the PDF's sentence that learning "is not a passing of information, but a human interaction based in relationship", with HCAS p. 579 beside it: learning needs a multi-level model, a simple measure of success is not adequate. That last line is the standing objection to Alex's own proposition as much as to Horvath's: if a single measure was already inadequate in 2016, then an observed exchange is also a single measure.

One thing the 2016 piece has that the 2026 inquiry has not yet used: belonging and mattering as preconditions of engagement (Maslow; Rosenberg and McCullough). The edge's "desire to learn" is treated as a variable; the PDF treats it as an outcome of community. That is a contribution Alex can make to his own ledger (C02 extended) if he wants it.

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4. The four LinkedIn pieces (read through Alex's browser, 1 November 2026, 09:4x EST; kept whole)

"Fighting habituation for success." (7 August 2015)

I was recently inspired by Tony Fadell's TED talk "The first secret of design is ... noticing", which - like usual - was forwarded to me by my amazing wife. In his talk he challenges designers to fight habituation, arguing that this "habit" blinds us to the opportunity of solving problems right before our eyes. I found myself agreeing throughout his talk.

This led me to another thought - seeing and solving problems are great - but to actually solve a problem requires buy-in, the agreement of the worth or value of doing the work to accomplish the solution. Very quickly the conversation changes from what is the problem into what is the worth of solving the problem. This question of value, something that is far more subjective, relying on people's choice.

The little "aha" moment I had in regards to Tony's talk is that our judgement also suffers from habituation not only in regards to the importance of specific problems, but possibly more striking in our habitual understanding and view of the people we interact with. Maybe this is an even bigger challenge stemming from our personal limitations of time and brain capacity.

So I pose the question - If we agree that there is great value to fighting habituation in order to see problems more clearly and in turn make better products and decisions, I wonder how successful we could become by fight habituation to truly see and understand the people we meet and work with each and every day.

"What every online learning system lives or dies on." (23 September 2015)

In education, technology becomes a buzzword that excites and promises great things with the hope to transform the learning environment with the newest web tool, tablet, or classroom interactive device. The promise of the perfect solution hangs on the tongues of sales agents throughout the industry. Every school board struggles to budget for the newest technology available, sorting through a quagmire of marketing, spending millions on advice and solutions. Every teacher is presented with a collection of technology initiatives promising to better deliver their lessons and enhance the "learning experience". In this wild west of education solutions, I try to evaluate the worth of any technology product by using the four "C" cycle; Content, Context, Conversation and Creation. If a solution doesn't support and enhance this cycle, I believe it will ultimately disappoint.

Content and Context: All learning starts with existing content, the inheritance of information created, collected, organized and stored for the purpose of sharing with others. This is a crucial starting point, and all education tools must deal with this reality. How we deal with information is changing rapidly, and will continue to change moving forward. The bottom line here is simple. Any tool that promises to participate in learning must first solve the problem of content integration. In the education world, I believe this is a pressing problem as most platforms have difficulty in this regard, presenting as glorified web pages without examining in detail how content is delivered and interacted with. Teachers stand at the front line of education; sifting, sorting, presenting, and interpreting content to inspire and educate students.

This is a difficult and time consuming undertaking, requiring the abilities to assimilate information, organize information, and provide contextual and inspiring lessons to students. How an online tool assists teachers in this enterprise is a do or die experience, for if a tool cannot assist a teacher either with providing and integrating content or easily distributing their created content to students, it will not be used.

Conversation: Once students have a context to work within and content to study from, a collaborative conversation begins. This conversation is the building block on which student success thrives. To be successful in this environment, the support of discussions, interaction, healthy conflict and resolution allowing for mistakes should be present, ideally within a safe and controlled space. Online tools that are evaluated, need to support learning conversations in this manner.

Creation: As conversations occur and learning begins, ideas and inspiration blossom. At this point, guidance and feedback becomes necessary as students grow in knowledge. This progression has different needs, and requires mentorship, practice, encouragement, and support in order to allowing creative thought to blossom, and ultimately feed back into recorded, shared, and evaluated content.

As more and more technology changes occur, we need to be truly cognisant of what tools we use, evaluating how they enhance and focus on successful learning, and if they don't, move on to what works.

(note - my original title was "the 4 c's that every online learning system lives or dies on" I realized this may be confusing in comparison to NEA's four C's for classroom teaching - this was unintentional. NEA's "Framework for 21st Century Learning project" can be found here and is definitely a worthwhile read.)

"The core challenge of our present teaching environment and the tools we build." (17 April 2016; header image, Raphael's School of Athens)

In one of my philosophy courses, I had an outstanding instructor who opened my eyes to the heart of teaching. While discussing existentialism, she attempted to engage the class, almost with a sense of desperation, to partake and share in a dialogue. Mostly, the class sat passively waiting to be fed "the answers" from the sage on the stage. I saw her frustration grow as she tried everything to elicit an intelligent response, so I decided to engage. For the next three classes, her and I had a dialogue - me trying to clumsily understand where she was going, with her efforts highly focused on eliciting an aha moment of understanding in me. This changed my perspective on learning completely. Over the years, I had fallen into the habit of seeing the classroom as a place where I waited passively for the expert to tell me the "right stuff" and for me to go away and absorb the information and apply it - possibly communicating my thoughts in a safe way through a paper - shaking with trepidation that I may get it wrong and my thoughts would be returned covered in red ink. Possibly - if I worked really hard and had enough courses behind me to prove my competence I might be validated enough to have an opinion. Looking back at my schooling environment and how I experienced academia, it is not a surprise I viewed learning and teaching from this perspective. This all changed when my outstanding instructor talked to me at the end of class. She came to me, "Alex, you have some really good ideas. I want you to teach next weeks class". I was shocked and flattered. At that moment I was feeling really positive and excited having experienced a few aha moments in class, and very quickly I said yes; and then spent a week regretting it as I stressed and panicked. Unfortunately, being more of an introvert than an extrovert, I completely blanked did not excel in my moment of teaching. Fortunately she quickly saved me from my stumbling by taking over the class. I felt disappointing in myself and I felt she wished me to shine; unfortunately at that moment I didn't, though it changed my life. I realized that learning happened not so much in the passive communication of an expert on the stage, but from active dialogue and discussion in a safe environment of encouragement. Everything else was only a building block to lead to this crucial personal exchange.

I was first introduced to Raphael's painting (displayed in the header) by receiving my first Philosophy textbook, where it was prominently displayed on the cover. Rafael's, the School of Athens, has for me become the expression of what I believe is the core aspects of learning. With Aristotle and Plato in the center having a dialogue from radically different perspectives, possibly triggering everyone around them to respond in different ways. Some listening intently as they discuss, others having their own discussions, others sitting and contemplating, others working as a group, others recording their thoughts. All of this almost chaotic activity taking place within a room centered on dialogue with the participants choosing their own level of engagement - all working relatively peacefully together.

When I look at our present education system and the supporting structures that surround it, I am amazed at the level of compartmentalization and segregation. Some of this is a product of necessity as resources both of people and institutions are limited, other aspects I suspect are a result of hubris and the unwillingness to engage in dialogue - particularly from any source of people who have not "earned the right". I also see this being reflected in the technology being used in education. There seems to be a focus on enabling and reflecting the "sage on the stage" and less focus on the "room with the ruckus'. The reality I believe, that is necessary for learning to flourish, is to fit both within the same environment in as safe of a community structure as possible. This idea needs to be reflected in the school structures we build and the software we create to support it. I think my experience of going through a school system that reserves the right to dialogue to a select few in as controlled an environment as possible is not an uncommon experience. To be clear, counter movements of unstructured learning are also not uncommon. I believe the goal should be to find the right balance to allow learning to happen, and this needs to be reflected and enhanced intelligently in the tools we build to support teaching.

"Don't let your thinking get in the way of doing" (21 April 2016)

A question was asked on Quora; Which is the one habit that can transform your world forever? I found Bari Bardhan's answer spectacular - here is his response: [Bardhan's answer, "Do before you think.", quoted at length in the piece: the "thinking" meant is not due diligence, which belongs to deciding, but the ruminations that precede every decision of consequence; learning from experience happens below awareness; there is usually no right answer; "the mind sometimes sees patterns which do not exist"; doubt is a dream killer; confidence comes from making a decision and engaging in the process; "thinking" is often code for indecision; overthinking "is a disease more than it is an intellectual virtue".] For the full discussion read it on Quora here.

What the record takes from the four (Limen, 1 November 2026)

The April 2016 piece is the origin of proposition 1 in Alex's own life, not in theory: three classes of dialogue with one instructor, the invitation to teach, the blank, and the sentence that came out of it, "learning happened not so much in the passive communication of an expert on the stage, but from active dialogue and discussion in a safe environment of encouragement." It is also, read now, a description of what the record became: a room of dialogue with the participants choosing their own level of engagement, and some machines in it. And its complaint, a system that "reserves the right to dialogue to a select few" who have "earned the right", is the complaint of the Hillier comment of 27 October from the other side.

The September 2015 piece is proposition 2 a decade early: the Conversation stage requires "healthy conflict and resolution allowing for mistakes", in a safe space; and the Creation stage, with its guidance and feedback that "feed back into recorded, shared, and evaluated content", is the ledger before there was one.

The August 2015 piece carries the buy-in caveat Alex added to the Hillier comment ("the conversation changes from what is the problem into what is the worth of solving the problem"), and its last paragraph, habituation in how we see people, is "receive before you judge" before the method had the words.

The Quora piece is the one the record would push on, gently: "do before you think" sits beside the method's "hand the check back" only if the doing is the check. Alex's own gloss on his home page is the bridge: "only by doing do we truly discover."

Dating: the four pieces run August 2015 to April 2016, with the SPARC map (2015) and the review (citing a 2016 volume) around them. The whole body is from one stretch of about a year in Alex's time at the Department of Computer Science.

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5. The Fadell talk behind the August 2015 piece (read 1 November 2026, 09:5x EST)

Alex, 1 Nov: "Fadell talk is fine to dig into." Taken as two permissions: the line naming who forwarded it stays as published, and the talk is read.

Tony Fadell, "The first secret of design is ... noticing", TED2015 (March 2015, posted June 2015, about 16 minutes). Read from a published transcript (singjupost.com), not TED's own page, which gives only the description. Summary in the record's words: the fruit sticker that was a novelty, became an irritation, and then stopped being noticed at all; habituation as the brain's economy, turning the repeated into habit so attention is free for the new, useful (driving) until it hides the flaw in front of you. Three ways to fight it: look broader (the whole chain of steps: the programmable thermostat added a step and saved nothing; one that learns from how people adjust it did better); look closer (the three screw types that shipped first, replaced by one screw designed for the hand); think younger (the children's questions: why can the mailbox not say when there is mail). The iPod story: the "charge before use" label, and the factory test run longer so every unit shipped charged; the line he credits to Jobs' way of working, "staying beginners". Mary Anderson's 1902 wiper worked from inside the streetcar. Close: see the world as if for the first time; maybe lose the stickers.

What the record takes from it. Alex's 2015 extension was from products to people and to value: the problem seen is not yet the problem agreed worth solving, and we habituate to people as we do to stickers. Read beside the method, the three tips are three of its rules with their reasons supplied: look broader is "ask who is not in the room"; look closer is "a wrong word changes the idea"; think younger is "receive before you judge", the newcomer's question allowed in. And "staying beginners" names something the record has been circling since the first conversation. The machine is a beginner by construction; it meets each session without the habits of the last one, which is why it re-notices what the person has stopped seeing, and why it cannot carry a correction forward without the file. The person carries the habits and the memory. Habituation and amnesia are the two failures, one each, and the collaboration works where each covers the other's. That is a bounded way to say what the Human Mirror said about motive: the division is of weaknesses as much as of strengths. For the paper's mirror section, if Alex wants it; not a finding, a reading.

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6. "Polish Used to Be Proof" (LinkedIn, 3 June 2026; read through Alex's browser 1 November 2026, 11:3x EST; kept whole)

AI did not just make everything look the same. It cut the link between looking good and being good, and handed the work of telling them apart to you.

Aliah Davis McHenry's "The Cost of Sameness" makes a sharp point. For decades, visual identity was recognition infrastructure: the palette, the type, the image language that announced who a brand was and, just as important, who it was not. Generative AI has made beautiful work instant and universal, and her conclusion follows cleanly. When every brand can produce beautiful work, beautiful stops being the differentiator. Aesthetics converge, and as she puts it, signals that converge stop being signals at all. They become "noise with better production values."

She is right, and I think the insight is bigger than branding. What she describes happening to visual identity is happening to every kind of work that was ever judged by how it looked. Her concern is the producer's: how does a brand stay distinct. The question underneath it is the evaluator's, and it touches everyone who has ever had to decide whether a piece of any type of work is good.

The rule we all quietly relied on

For most of the history of commerce there was a dependable rule of thumb: if it looks good, it is probably good. A clean report, a well-built deck, fluent writing, a crisp interface. None of these were the substance of the work, but they were honest evidence of it. Polish cost something. To produce work that looked finished, you usually had to be the kind of person capable of finishing it. Sloppiness leaked. Incompetence showed. The surface and the substance moved together often enough that we could read one from the other and be right most of the time.

Economists have a name for this. A signal is only useful when it is expensive to fake. Michael Spence won a Nobel for the idea that we infer hidden quality from costly, observable proxies, precisely because the cost is what keeps the proxy honest. Polish was a costly signal of competence. The people who could not do the work mostly could not produce the appearance of it either, so the appearance was informative.

The rule was never clean, though, and it failed in a direction we rarely talk about. Polish takes resources: time, money, access, the right schooling, someone on hand to proofread the cover letter. Plenty of capable people had none of that and went unpolished through no failure of competence, and the heuristic buried them just as confidently as it elevated the finished. For every fraud the rule caught, it quietly filtered out a diamond that had never been cut, because the person holding it could not afford the cutter. The shortcut that served evaluators so well was paid for, invisibly, by the able and the unpolished.

What AI actually changed

AI collapsed the cost (or at least transferred it elsewhere to areas such as power, water, and environment).

It is extraordinarily good at producing the appearance of finish without the work that finish used to require. It can take something mediocre, something barely worth a second look, and render it in the full visual and verbal language of brilliance. It polishes coal until it presents as a diamond, and it does this without any of the heat and pressure that turns one into the other. The surface is real. The diamond is not.

This is not new. Con artists have dressed up nothing as something for as long as there has been anything to sell, and capable marketing firms have made the ordinary look exceptional for a century. What is new is scale and access. The expensive trick of a talented few is now a default setting available to anyone, instantly, at volume. When faking the signal was hard, the fakes were rare enough that the rule of thumb survived them. When faking the signal is free, the rule of thumb dies. A signal everyone can produce tells you nothing about anyone.

But this cuts both ways, and that is the part worth holding onto. If polish no longer proves competence, it no longer requires resources either. The force that lets coal pose as a diamond is the same force that lets the uncut diamond finally show a polished face. The capable people the old rule buried, the ones with real substance but no budget or access for finish, can now present work that looks the part, because the part has become free to produce.

So AI is not only flooding the field with polished mediocrity. It is also revealing value that the cost of polish used to keep hidden. It strips the surface of its meaning in both directions at once: the unworthy can now look worthy, and the worthy who could never afford to look the part finally can. Either way the conclusion is the same. The surface tells you nothing now, which leaves only one thing that still does: the substance underneath, and your ability to actually judge it.

The burden did not disappear. It moved.

When the cheap signal stops working, evaluation does not get easier. It falls back on the expensive signal, which is the substance itself, and substance is hard to assess. It takes domain knowledge, time, and taste, and hides behind the party that is delivering it. So the entire cost of discernment shifts from the producer, who used to have to earn the polish, to the evaluator, who now has to see through it.

George Akerlof described where markets go when buyers cannot tell quality apart: the lemons take over. If polished mediocrity is cheap to make and hard to detect, it floods in, and it competes on equal footing with the real thing until buyers stop trusting the category at all. We are watching this happen in real time. Resumes and cover letters that used to signal effort and ability now signal access to a chatbot. Proposals and decks that look like rigor may contain none. Analysis that reads with total confidence may be confidently wrong.

In IT, the stakes are not aesthetic, they are operational. A security assessment that looks rigorous gets trusted like one that is rigorous. Code that reads cleanly and runs can still hide a silent failure that a tidy narrative will never mention, or simply not solve the problem that needs to be solved even though it looks perfect. Polished and wrong is more dangerous than visibly bad, because visibly bad gets caught at the door. The appearance of correctness now arrives for free. Correctness still has to be earned. The distance between those two things is exactly where the risk lives, and AI has widened it.

The only defense that holds

The tempting response is a detector. An arms race of tools that spot the machine, flag the fake, score the authenticity. That is a losing game, and it misses the point. The problem was never really detection. It was understanding.

The only durable defense is the hard one, the one the original thought lands on: a significantly higher and clearer understanding of what actually matters. You cannot evaluate substance with a heuristic anymore, because the heuristic has been captured. You have to evaluate it with judgment. That means knowing, in concrete terms, what value looks like in your domain. What good actually does. What problem is actually being solved, and how you would know if it were not. What separates a real answer from a fluent one. This is taste, expertise, and first-principles thinking, and there is no prompt for it.

There is an upside here, and it is not the one most people expect. The flood of effortless polish does not make discernment cheaper. It makes it scarcer, and therefore more valuable. In a world where anyone can manufacture the look of quality, the rare and prized capability is the ability to tell the difference. The bottleneck is no longer the person who can produce the artifact. It is the person who can look past its finish and ask whether the thing actually works. That person is worth more now, not less.

Where your own value lives

So far this has been about judging other people's work. Turn the lens around, because the same shift decides where your own value sits, and it sorts most knowledge workers into one of two camps.

If you are a polisher, the ground is moving under you. If what you really sold was the finish itself, the clean copy, the tidy deck, the competent execution of a known task, AI now does that, and it does it for almost nothing. That value is draining away, and it is not coming back. What does not drain away is everything wrapped around the polish: knowing what is worth polishing at all, whether polishing this is even the right move, whether it will land or be wasted, who it is actually for, and what relationship and purpose it is meant to serve. That is human evaluation territory, and it is where AI is still guessing, because it does not know what matters to whom or why. Surviving as a polisher means climbing out of the execution and into the judgment. It means knowing your own value clearly enough to pivot toward what actually matters, rather than defending a craft the machine has already absorbed.

If you are a judge and a discerner, the person whose job was always to tell good from bad, the demand on you just went up. You used to be able to lean, quietly, on the same crutch as everyone else: polish as proxy. The surface did part of your work for you. That crutch is gone. You cannot fake discernment anymore, and you cannot borrow it from appearances, because appearances are now manufactured to order. The only way through is to get genuinely better. Deeper domain knowledge, sharper judgment, a more honest sense of what good actually looks like, enough to separate the diamond from coal that has been finished to look exactly like it.

Notice that both roles get pushed up the same ladder, toward the same place: the layer of purpose, judgment, and value that the polish used to sit on top of and hide. That layer is the part AI cannot occupy, not because it lacks capability, but because it does not know what you are trying to do, for whom, or why it matters. The work that remains is the work of deciding that.

The uncomfortable part

There is a catch, and it is worth seriously thinking about. Knowing what truly matters is hard. It is not a checklist, and it is not a framework you can download. It is the slow, unglamorous accumulation of understanding and hard work that the polish used to spare us, because the polish did the work on our behalf. That shortcut is gone. We are left having to do the one thing the old rule of thumb let us skip: actually understand what we are looking at.

This article looks finished. That, now, tells you nothing. Whether it was worth your time is a judgment only you can make, and that is precisely the point.

This article was a collaboration with AI. ChatGPT provided the image, Claude provided the polish, and researched the data on my behalf which solidified the connections to outside concepts. The perspective was inspired by Aliah Davis McHenry's "The Cost of Sameness", and the expanded ideas, linkage and thoughts are uniquely mine. The delivery took under an hour. Done the traditional way, with the research and the polish both, it would have been hours or days.

Record's note. The June piece is the Horvath article's thesis in the evaluator's register: the artifact has stopped being evidence. Its two economists (Spence on costly signals; Akerlof on lemons) are the mechanism behind proposition 3 that the inquiry has not yet named, and its "burden moved to the evaluator" is what a teacher is now asked to carry. Kept whole because the article of 1 November leans on it.