

# Practice and Performance: Learning New Life **Grooves!**

Saturday 20th August 2016

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## The Plan

- **Overall theme** Exploring parallel between achieving change in therapy and learning complex practical (“real time”) skills - such as music, second language learning, or sport.
- **Along the way** Some practical exercises, some therapy techniques, some “Blue Peter” make it yourself fun, a bit of psychology and a smidgen of philosophy.
- **All linked** (loosely) to **TA concepts**

## Morning Agenda

- **Morning**
  - Some Talking & Slides (brief) - and “straw poll”
  - Exercise - in pairs (or threes)
  - Reflection - whole group
  - Some Talking & Slides (half an hour or so)
  - Exercise - in groups (2 or 3 groups)
  - Reflection - whole group
  - (if time - something on therapeutic documentation)

## Re-wiring our brains

“whether it’s learning the guitar, learning to swim, learning French, or learning not to be depressed, it all comes down to finding efficient and effective ways to re-wire your brain”

Like it

On the fence

Not so keen

Hate it!

# Complex Practical Skill Interview

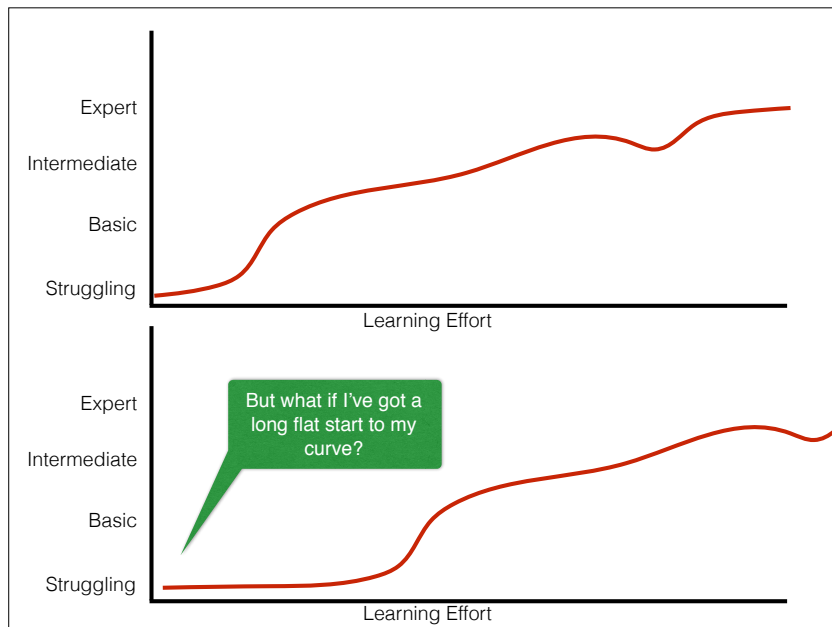
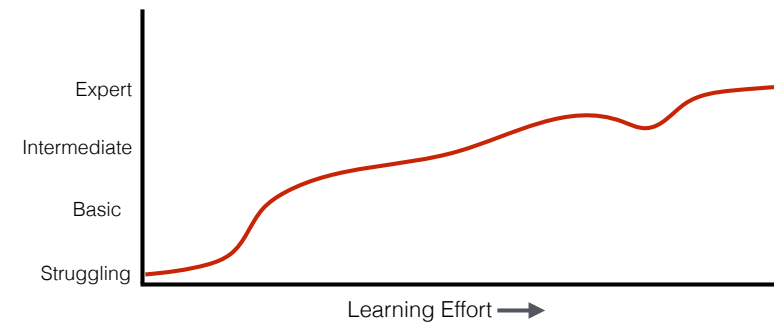
## Activity #1

In pairs – or threes if the numbers don't work out – briefly interview each other using the guidance on the handout.

We'll allow about 20 minutes for this exercise and I'll signal every **five minutes** so you can track how the time is going and make sure that everybody gets to share the experience.

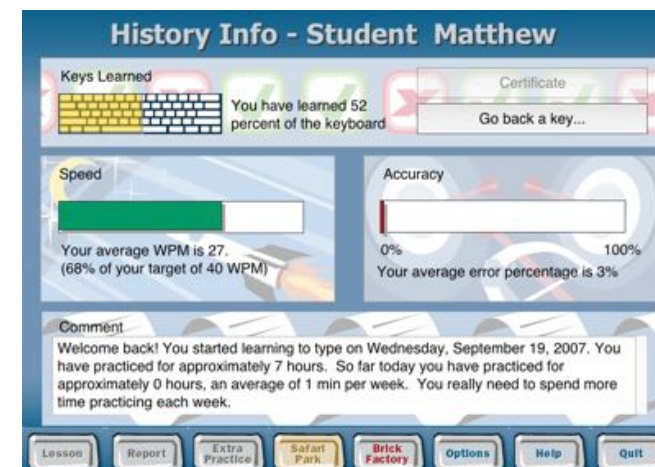
## Complex Practical Skills and discounting

- Turtle swimming - an “unlock” case

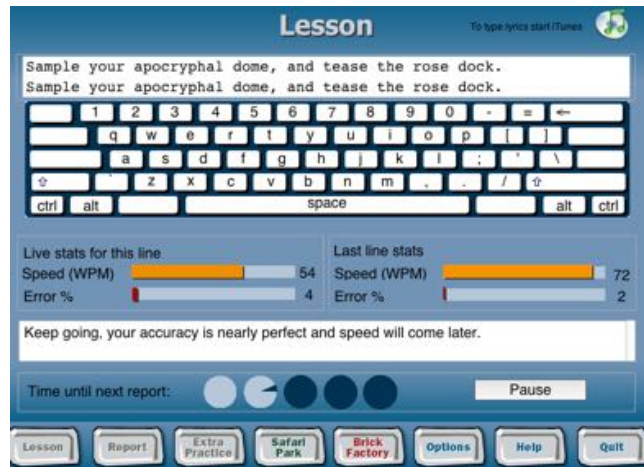


## Touch Typing

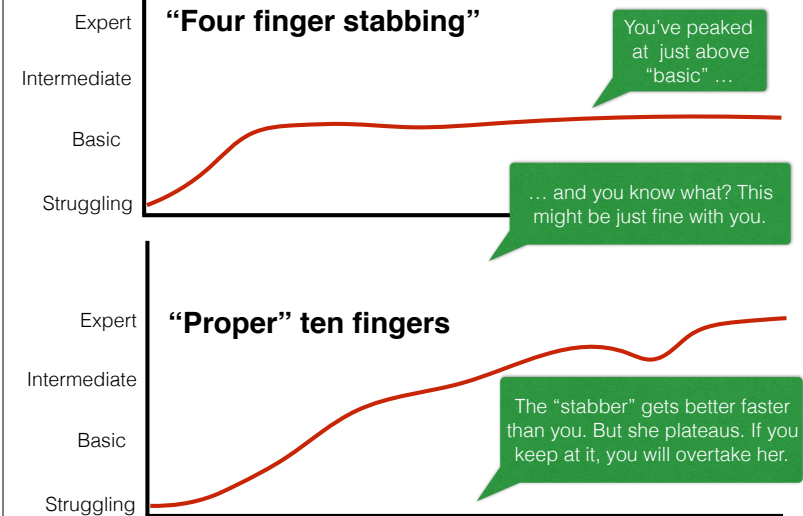
(oh dear, Matthew - 1997... really?)



## Touch Typing



## Touch Typing Curves



## Adults vs Kids

Many people probably imagine that children are simply quicker learners, but laboratory research suggests otherwise. In the few direct comparisons of 'procedural' learning in children and university aged adults, adults actually tend to be quicker learners than children. [e.g. in one study children and] adults all did a similar button-pressing task, kind of a simplified version of the piano... adults were systematically better, acquiring the new patterns in significantly fewer trials than children.

If children outshine adults, it's probably not because they are quicker to learn but simply because they are more persistent.

Guitar Zero (p 93)

## The 10 hour rule...

less discussed than the  
10,000 hour rule...

# Mindsets

- Carol Dweck  
*I'm really sorry, but I cannot recommend her popular book! The core idea is good though.*
- Growth Mindset vs. Fixed Mindset
- Can also be expressed using TA concepts of discounting (which I'd argue are more subtle and allow for more nuance - at least more nuance than in the Dweck popularisation)
- Some evidence that mindsets can be strongly manipulated (at least in short term and specific contexts) by simple interventions

"In a fixed mindset students believe their basic abilities, their intelligence, their talents, are just fixed traits. They have a certain amount and that's that, and then their goal becomes to look smart all the time and never look dumb. In a growth mindset students understand that their talents and abilities can be developed through effort, good teaching and persistence. They don't necessarily think everyone's the same or anyone can be Einstein, but they believe everyone can get smarter if they work at it."



Self-portraits before and after a 5 day course in drawing, e.g. 30 to 50 hours

Is, say, 40 hours, a lot or a little?

How early do you need a "break through" to stay motivated?

From Dweck pp. 68-70 - reporting Betty Edwards *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*

# Discount Matrix

MODE	TYPE		
	T <sub>1</sub>	T <sub>2</sub>	T <sub>3</sub>
EXISTENCE	Stimuli	Problems	Options
	T <sub>2</sub>	T <sub>3</sub>	T <sub>4</sub>
SIGNIFICANCE	Significance of stimuli	Significance of problems	Significance of options
	T <sub>3</sub>	T <sub>4</sub>	T <sub>5</sub>
CHANGE POSSIBILITIES	Changeability of stimuli	Solvability of problems	Viability of options
	T <sub>4</sub>	T <sub>5</sub>	T <sub>6</sub>
PERSONAL ABILITIES	Person's ability to react differently	Person's ability to solve problems	Person's ability to act on options

Figure 18.1 The discount matrix

# Discounting

(thinking about discounts get set up and how they can be sustained)

- How do we do our initial accounting for given skills?
- Compare when you're a child vs. when you're an adult.
- When you're a kid, you expect to have to learn everything... it's normal for it to take a while and for you not to be good at the start...)

MODE	TYPE		
	T <sub>1</sub>	T <sub>2</sub>	T <sub>3</sub>
EXISTENCE	Stimuli	Problems	Options
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Figure 18.1 The discount matrix

## Accounting Matrix for New Skills

Is it a learned skill (or, say, natural talent?)		Skills	Learning opportunities
Significance		Interest in acquiring skill	
Learning Possibilities		General acquirability of skill	
My Learning Possibility		My acquirability of skill	How much time / investment would it take?

*Work in Progress - suggestions welcome*

## Rhythm: Two Over Three

### Activity #2

In medium sized groups led by a “teacher”:

- ✦ struggle with doing two over three
- ✦ overcome the initial struggle
- ✦ monitor closely what it's like to move from “can't do this” and even “can't imagine being able to do this” to “oh, I seem to be doing it” (.... that's the journey I hope at least some of you will have)

## Rhythm: Two Over Three

### Activity #2

What was that like?

## Learning: mystery #1

My experience (especially with music):

what felt utterly impossible a week ago (or sometimes a day or an hour ago) often becomes entirely possible after careful and slow practice – and the change from impossible to possible can feel utterly mysterious

I feel that it's important to remind ourselves and our clients of this **all the time**.

(Maybe I'm a bit obsessed?)

## What if...

- Managing relationships is like touch typing...
- You can definitely “get by” (busk it) in very many circumstances by being a “four finger” stabber
- We only notice the difference between “proper” and “four finger” typists in particular circumstances
- And, possibly, the difference may only matter at all when there is some kind of “stressor”

## Piano Plateau

- Being able to play grade 1 piano is - in my book - impressive.
- What happens if you put a grade 8 piece in front of a good grade 1 piano player?
  - What happens if you (or they) then start “shouting” and “insisting” that they play it?
  - What happens if the grade 1 piano player has formed the belief that the only reason she might not be able to play the grade 8 piece is that she is either (intrinsically) not “good enough” or just “not trying hard enough”?
  - No amount of effort or focus or “trying harder” (or X-factor like “really wanting it”) is going to make any difference here.



Grade 1 sample



Grade 8 sample

## Life Busking

If we have got good enough at living life to hack through most weeks reasonably intact, are the potential gains of slowing down, regrouping, and relearning, really worth the time and energy?

## Responsive to pep talks

- For any given pattern of thought, feeling and behaviour, we can ask this question:
  - Is it responsive to pep talks?
- (This is already assuming some level of accounting, i.e. that we can name the pattern and find in ourselves an appetite to want to change it.)
- Some patterns are. Some aren't. If a pattern isn't and the **only tool** we ever use is the pep talk, then:
  - nothing changes
  - we can start to believe that we're rubbish at change
- The pep talk is **one form** of scaffolding. But it is not the only form. Being in the **Adult ego state** means we have to be scientists. If the pep talk isn't working, we need to bail on that tactic and try something else.

# Learning & Perception

- Claim: we **literally** cannot perceive the differences in experience that we need to learn at the start of the learning journey
- Nuance: **but** out experience does not change... because we do not believe (as we become more sophisticated in our perception) that the world has become more nuanced

(an intriguing puzzle... and this is a therapy workshop and not a philosophy seminar...)

The "semantic phenomenology" of learning to read music.

## Learning Phase 1



I know this is G, but it takes a moment to recognise it. I can't just "see" it's a G like I "see" middle C is middle C.

I've no idea what this is. I have to go up or down to get to a C or an A, then I figure out it is a B. This takes ages.

The best I can do is say that it's higher than C. I don't know what it is.


I just know this is middle C. It's first thing I learned and it's memorised. I've been exposed to it a lot and exposed when I've not had other notes to think about. I can remember learning it.

I mostly think this is C, but I sometimes think it is A. I'm not totally reliable.

This is mostly an A, though very occasionally I worry it might be a C until I settle on A.

I don't know what this is and I find it hard to believe that anyone does or could know what it is without counting down from C. Even though I've counted down lots of times, I still have to count every time.

## Learning Phase 2



Easy. Bullet proof recognition. It just see it as a G now.

Er... OK, B. Yes, it must be because, look, it's so clearly one position above the A and one below the C. But I don't see it as a B.

It's an E. I'm so pleased because I know this now and I used to have to count up to it. E. Hee hee. I'm learning.

It's one below and E so it must be, er, a D. Yeah. And one above C. How come I don't see it as a D.

Easy C. Bullet proof recognition.

This is C. Very few mistakes even at speed.

This is A. Very few mistakes even at speed.

I don't know what this is. Hang on. I've done this before. Wait. Er. I can do it without counting I think. Or maybe I just counted. It's an A.

## Learning Phase 3



G

B

E

Mmm, D

C - I can't imagine not knowing this instantly. It's like recognising the letter 'A' is the letter 'A'.

C

A

Er. A



## the “plinth” aka “standing on a box”

Activity #3



♦ serious credit to two of my clients who helped create the “box” / “plinth” idea and taught me a lot about the art of standing still

## How to Learn

- Theory is **scaffold** not **recipe** - (don't confuse insight / chat / theory with skill / real time capacity / coordination / intuitive (fast) meaning making)
- Practice **deliberately** and **a lot** (but you don't need to practice for 10,000 hours to be really, really good)
- Mix up your **attention focus** - this has multiple benefits 😊
- Be **curious** about mistakes (and see them as opportunities) - this is instead of reinforcing traumas!
- **Practice with a handicap** to increase your capacity to perform under pressure.
- It's OK to be **firm** or **assertive** with yourselves **in moderate doses**. Do this from **Adult**.

## Best Way to Learn?

- In sport, music, language learning etc. there are lots of arguments about the best approaches. Just as in therapy there are hundreds of micro-cults, often promoting their approach as uniquely powerful.
- Why have some approaches not reliably risen to the top of the pile? (Will one or other do so?)
- One explanation might be that the focus on differentiating each micro-cult tends to be on the shape of their scaffolding. Some of the materials I've been looking at, place more emphasis on the idea that whatever scaffold you have, you need to engage in self-compassionate, persistent, deliberative practice in order to acquire new, reliable, partners of thought, feeling and behaviour that will be resilient even when under pressure.

## Practice Literature

- When you practice you need to practice getting it “right” **and** you need to be paying attention to specific things
- You often need to use “tricks” (most common carefully directed attention) to sidestep interference of “conscious” or “theoretical” thinking...
- Better to go slowly and have it right than fast and learn (lock in) mistakes
- Adding on pressure, e.g. practice with ‘metronome’, without looking, in front of audience - building up strength and resilience - pushing towards automation





The Palmar grasp reflex is strong enough to allow the baby to be lifted up.

After the first few months is that "the cortex sends descending fibres down to actively inhibit this brain stem reflex. The reason the cortex does this so early in development is to free the hands up from this primitive grasping reflex so that the motor areas in the cortex can take over the hand and turn them from a primitive pair of pliers into an orchestra of ten dexterous fingers..." (Lou Cozolino - Why Therapy Works - p. 115)

Cozolino uses this example to make the case that sometimes what we are doing in therapeutic change work is not creating a new mechanism to do X, but a new mechanism to prevent us doing Y (where Y is a sort of basic / neural default)

"Just like the inhibition of the Palmar reflex, the cortex also sends descending fibres to the amygdala to influence its activation in response to the world. When we are able to assist a client to get over her fear of intimacy, we have actually built new neural connections that are inhibiting the amygdala's ability to activate our fight-flight response in relationships."

The details are less important, I think, than the idea than the idea of "layers" that work somewhat independently.

## Cats and Cucumbers



This, I think, is what unregulated emotion looks like.

When clients wonder why they "over react", we might consider playing with the idea of how they manage, so much of the time to, "under react", i.e. manage "hair trigger" emergency behaviours, such as we see here.

The idea we might play with is that very strong emotion is not the "weird" thing. Rather, it's a kind of "primitive" normal that is coming out. So the "weird" thing - the learned / acquired thing - is having this mad stuff kicking off and being able to deal with it.

## Learning: mystery #2

My experience (especially with music):

although the way in which the learning arrives is in some sense mysterious – that it will arrive if you practice what is nearly but not quite in your current reach – it is very reliable in arriving

The reliability of learning music - when we undertake systematic and deliberative practice - is awesome. I would dearly love to have some parallel awesome for my clients.

## Transactional Skills, Driving, & Speaking #1

- Driving - I'm going to suggest we "busk" it - it's not like the 10,000 hour stretch-practice violin players - we plateau
- Speaking - I'm going to suggest we are virtuosos.

My intuition with learning to use words is that it is hugely demanding because it is endlessly creative. Rather unlike driving, it constantly presents new challenges. And so I tend to think of almost every word user as something of a virtuoso. Of course, there are those people who stand out because they have a special ability to play with words and delight others with their poetic powers. But the complexity and creativity of any speaker – the ability to form jokes and appreciate the jokes of others – the ability to form arguments and be sensitive to the arguments of others is immense... So my speculation is that using words and being in a community of word users is akin to playing jazz and being amidst of community of jazz players. We all have the ability to sit in on a session and riff. We're not all John Coltrane, but none of us are in anyway slouches. We're way beyond basic busking.  
(Me, Talking It Better, in preparation)

## Transactional Skills, Driving, & Speaking #2

- What's the name for "psychological skills" - I keep trying out different ideas?
  - For today's presentation "Transactional Skills" came to mind.
- Are T-skills more like driving or more like language?

The skill I'm thinking about, the skill to manage our own psychology in an effective way, is one that I suspect sits nearer the 'driving' end than the 'using words' end. But I think it is often an un-named skill. And what is not named is not thought about, not subject to examination, not subject to practice and improvement. My hunch is that with language our we are, in the learning process, hugely stretched. And that jokes and argument keep us on our toes and playing at a high level. By contrast, my hunch is that with our own psychology we are often crunching the gears, bumping into the kerb, making a hash of our parallel parking and totally unready to handle skid conditions.

## Questions (activity #4)

- Do most people just 'busk' psychology – that is perform adequately for the task in hand, but underperform relative to their potential?
- When people are in psychological crisis, as they often are when they appear in the counselling room, is it because their psychological skills are under-developed or is it because they are taking on a task that's beyond their skills and most people's skills? (Is it that they are a below par juggler or is it that they are trying to juggle too many balls?)
- If, psychological skill is like skill in other areas – such as drawing or woodworking – what are the equivalent practice activities – those activities that demand of us competence we don't quite have and through repetition that pays close attention to mistakes and successes, allows us to extend the scope of our competence?



## Therapeutic Documentation

(Make Your Own Certificate)

We'll have two mini-sessions on making our own certificates. So in session #1, it's all about making a start. No pressure to finish.

**Letters**

**Certificates**

**Lists**

**Pictures**

often suitable for sharing with others

ANNOUNCING !!!!!

That on Friday, 15<sup>th</sup> March  
Alitra says that  
she knows how to have

FUN

and keep away from headaches.

SIGNED BY:

WITNESS 1: \_\_\_\_\_  
CLAUDETTE

WITNESS 2: \_\_\_\_\_  
A. MORGAN

This good news is to be shared with:  
Mr Browning, Mrs Thorpe, Mr Thorpe, Amy Rowan,  
L. Newman and P Anderson.

PTO

This is some of the FUN that Alitra has had:

- > Staying at Amy Rowan's house and playing 'Spice Girls'.
- > Staying up late and not going to sleep at Amy's place, telling ghost stories, and having a midnight snack.
- > Amy has been to Alitra's house to stay and did a play together.
- > Rollerskating party.
- > Went to Ellie's house twice, bumped down the stairs on sleeping bags, and swam in the pool.
- > Watching TV in the morning.
- > Having McDonald's for breakfast.
- > Going to Canberra.
- > Swimming in the Hyatt pool with Sally for hours.
- > Watching Hot-air Balloons at 6.30 in the morning.
- > Going to Teddy Bear shops.

AND THERE IS MORE TO COME !!!!! .....>.....

Notice:

- Witnesses (it's not secret; confidentiality isn't acting as an inhibitor here - message: there is no shame in having and overcoming this kinds of difficulties... (discuss))
- The details are **very specific**. This is not about general lessons. It's about finding hooks in lived experience that resonate.

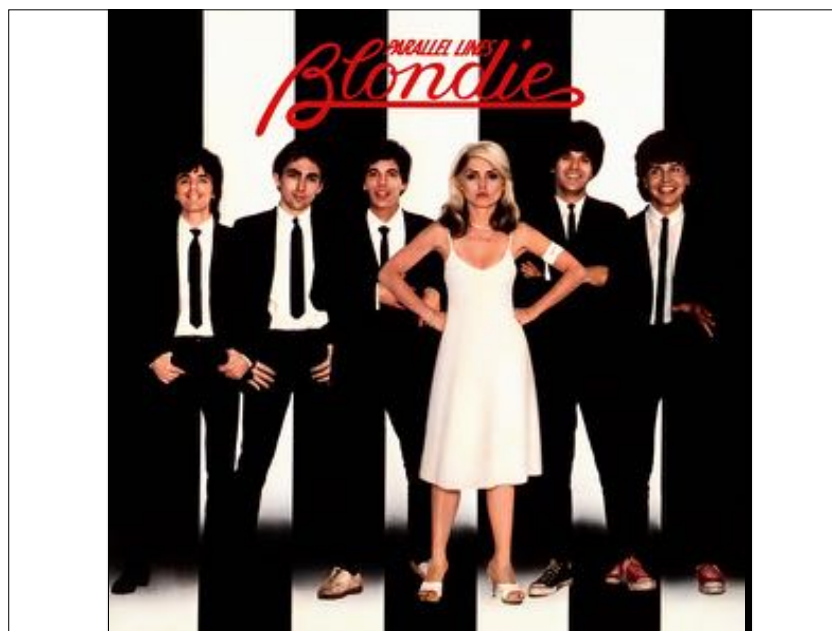
From Alice Morgan *What is Narrative Therapy* pp 94-95

A "therapeutic document" created in final session

**Cheat Sheet** (it's not cheating at all – it's just me being smart and reminding myself about stuff)

*my client agreed that (with one "mantra" removed) this could be shared*

- talk to myself about my life as I talk to others about it
- **carrots** vs **sticks** – I can make a conscious (and thoughtful choice) about whether a carrot or a stick is what called for right now (remember: if I make the wrong call, it's OK to change my mind)
- is it **fear** or is it **excitement**?
- take small steps
- **is it me or is it the world?** – make this an explicit question to myself (if I'm not sure, that's OK – I can review my thoughts later or even get someone else to help me with my reality 'testing')
- be **curious** rather than critical
  - am I hoping for a **magic bullet**? – magic bullets are very, very cool (the slight downside is that they don't exist and I'll be a long time waiting for them to appear)
  - **find what pace works for me** – the idea here is not to be caught up with someone else's time keeping agenda – I can make a conscious (and thoughtful) decision about pacing (and remember I can always change my mind and either speed up or slow down later) – *weird thing is that sometimes I actually get more done when I'm not stuck in my 'busy and gotta make progress' frame of mind*
  - **enjoy being helpful to myself** – I know about coaching – think of time I coached and supported Robbie for marathon training – apply that to me
  - **how many points do I get?** – I can award points to myself – it's OK – I've taken permission for myself to do this
- do I want to be on the **sidelines** or on the **field of play** – when I'm on the field I can fall over and there is a risk of humiliation – **and** the field of play is good – I like it when I'm out there – falling over and getting muddy is worse in prospect than it is in reality – and I get better at playing when I go and do it (I never get better when I'm waiting on the sidelines... waiting to line all my ducks up in a row so I can shoot them down with my magic bullet)
- **schedule the repeated thoughts** so I can get on with other stuff – doubts and worries may well deserve some thinking time, but not every hour of every day – I can try to schedule time to think about the self-doubt / big worry stuff – once I've scheduled the time I can tell myself (if the thoughts come) – "you'll get your turn – but it's not right now"
- when I say "**I don't care**" (or **what's the point?**) check out with myself what is going on: am I scared, afraid of humiliation, in need of a rest, something else



# LC quote

- Lou Cozolino on responses to criticism. If the client is seeking to become more secure she needs to consider that:

"[as] soon as it becomes personal, anxiety rises and executive functioning plummets. When insecure [clients] are criticised, that criticism goes down a tube into their stomachs, and they feel forced to take it in. Instead, have your clients imagine putting criticism on a tray, taking a look, and considering whether they want to swallow it or not. Remember, very few people are actually paying attention to us - [the insecure clients] are worried worried about what you think of them, [the secure clients] have better things to do."

# I Know but I Don't Know

Uh, I dunno!

I know but I don't know  
I know but I don't know  
I know but I don't know  
I know but I don't know

I give but I don't get  
I will but I won't yet  
I lose but I don't bet  
I'm your dog but not your pet

I know but I don't care  
Then I know but I don't see  
Now I see but I don't know  
I care but I don't care

I could but I won't be  
You can but not with me  
It's all a mystery  
Locked out without a key

Now I care but I don't care  
And I know but I don't see  
Now I see but I don't know  
I know but I don't know

Now I know that you don't know  
And I see that you don't see  
I care but I don't care  
I don't care that you don't know

# Explaining Ourselves

- Psychology shows, very clearly, that we're often absolutely terrible at explaining ourselves.
- The biases literature, for example - see Kahneman - basically shows that we jump to conclusions using heuristics and then "make stuff up" about why we've concluded what we have. We definitely do not have any direct insight into the wheels that turn when we make (almost all) of our judgements. And this isn't even about emotional stuff.
- It's credible - and I'd argue true - then, that when emotions are involved, something similar happens. We **say** and **believe** that we are responding for a given reason **but** if we could study the pattern more objectively, we'd have to conclude that we weren't
  - My "road rage" - it turns out that Edinburgh drivers are much less considerate to cyclists **when I've had a bad night's sleep**. And it takes active work to remind myself this because it feels as if **I am just observing** unusual levels of bad driver behaviour.
  - My partner's "criticism" - it turns out she does what she always does. And if it feels as if **the only conceivable reason** for her saying that is because **she thinks my needs aren't important at all**. That's the only sense I make of her behaviour. In the same way as I can be blind to heuristics about statistical judgements, I am blind to the heuristics or shortcuts I take to figure out what people think. The heuristics / shortcuts are ever present and take effort to set aside or have some detachment from. It's **normal** for us to think the world is as we our brain concludes it is. That is, we really think that's what is out there and we have unmediated (and un-distorted) access to it.

# Nuancing Up

It's like the expert piano teacher, who can point out weaknesses in your playing you had no idea about. Your starting point was that you had to play the notes starting at the right time and in the right order.

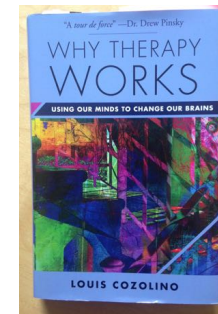
Just when you think you are making decent progress with that, the teacher provides a richer description of what you are doing. A description that includes all manner of parameters - such as how loud or soft you are playing, your phrasing, or the fact that although you are mostly in time, you are rushing some passages and dragging on others.

The teacher wants you to perceive the world in a richer way, to pick up on details that previously may have been affecting your own appreciation of music, but that you didn't have concepts for talking about let alone the skill to vary at will.

How good a piano player do you want to be? You might want to **stop** at some point. There may be only so many hours you want to invest. The piano playing cult want you to never stop, but to keep on improving and refining. That might not be your goal.

What might **turn** on being a "good enough" piano player? (What if you needed to pass a sight reading test in order to get a job, woo a life partner, be given a license to have children, feel that you were entitled to a place on the planet?)

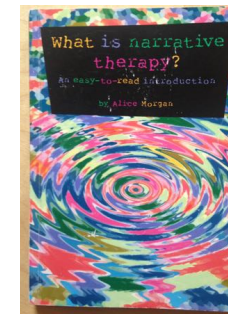
Now substitute: "handling relationships" for "playing the piano".



Very readable exploration of credible "mechanism" for how therapy works.

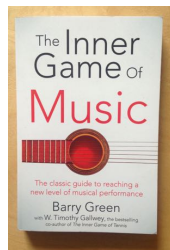
Approximate summary: Two systems - with different characteristics - interact. We can work more directly with "verbal" system, but we need to find ways to re-tune / re-train the non-verbal system.

Some of this involves deliberate practice / repetition against the backdrop of making new meaning.



Super readable guide to narrative therapy. The language is simple and the ideas are powerful.

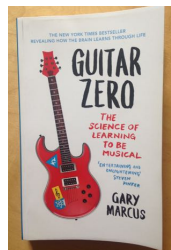
Some of the material that looks if it might be mostly about working with children is deeply relevant to working with adults. (The trick is to make sure the grown up is up for working in this way and not feeling condescended to.)



Building on a popular book about improving sports skills.

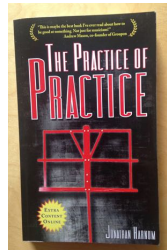
One key idea: Self 1 (verbal) interferes with Self 2 (intuitive)

Key prescription:  
Develop good self-talk  
Vary targets for your attention when practising



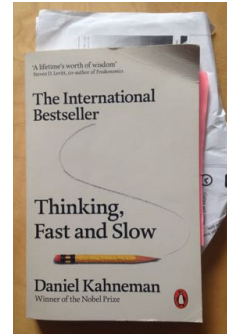
Key message: it's never too late to learn; learning takes sustained and deliberative practice (and we can be surprised by how much)

Lots of science to back it up. And a personal story of starting from a low base and getting to beyond beginner stage.



Multiple angles on how effective practice is not just a matter of repetition, but something to be approached mindfully and with a plan.

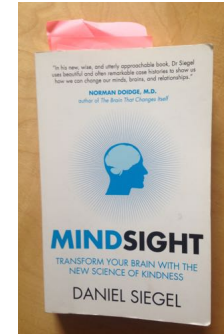
Like the other two, good on being explicit about how emotional learning can be. It's important to have a positive view of making "mistakes" and to have supportive self-talk.



Hugely impressive book that is deeply informative and well written.

Even when not stressed in anyway, we massively rely on "intuitive" cognition (fast thinking) and often just "make stuff up" when we attempt to explain justify what we think.

We're not irrational, because we can be super smart when we make the effort. But we prefer shortcuts.



Mix of psychology / brain science and therapy, including plenty of case studies.

Emphasis on plasticity and the capacity to "re-wire" brain, especially around high energy responses.

We can learn new associations to old (and persistent) responses.

Lots of talk of chemicals flooding the brain, systems being over-active etc. And this is nicely linked to the personal, to the experiential...



Not recommended. And the core idea is good. (Related to discounting in TA.)

Some people think that their abilities are fixed. This prevents them trying new things and also makes them anxious about being judged (because they can't do anything about their abilities.)

Some people think that their abilities are flexible. This supports trying new things, working at them, seeing errors as an opportunity to learn etc.