



The Craftsman with Professor Richard Sennett

Speakers **Professor Richard Sennett**
Professor of Sociology, London School of Economics

David Willetts MP

Chaired by: **Laurie Taylor**

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NB

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Jonathan Carr-Eest: Good evening ladies and gentlemen. I'm Jonathan Carr-West I'm acting Head of Programme here at the RSC and I'm very pleased to welcome you all here this evening. The subject of this evening's lecture is the Craftsman by Professor Richard Sennett. David Willetts MP is going to respond to Professor Sennett's address but we're delighted to have, chairing this evening's discussion, Laurie Taylor, writer and broadcaster and he'll introduce our speakers in a few moments but I'll say a little word about him.

Laurie writes and presents Thinking Allowed, Radio 4's weekly programme on contemporary ideas. He regularly contributes to The Times, The Evening Standard and The Independent and he is commissioning editor of The New Humanist. So please will you join me in welcoming Laurie Taylor and our two speakers for this evening.

Laurie Taylor: Well thank you very much indeed Jonathan. I'm mostly here tonight because as some of you might know, or might have read Richard Sennett suggests in his new book that it might take 10,000 hours to produce a craftsman and by coincidence that's exactly the amount of time I've spent mastering the art of chairing, and it's going to become very evident during the evening it's a tricky art but I'm on it.

Now thank you very much for coming, let me echo Jonathan's sentiments and briefly explain the format that in a moment I'm going to invite Richard to speak to you about his new book The Craftsman, for around about half an hour and then I will then call upon David Willetts to make round about a ten minute response and that should leave us with about thirty minutes altogether for debate and discussion and then adjourn to... when I say adjourn to the pay bar, somehow adjourn and pay don't go together well do they?

Now every so often I think we could say that a book comes along which speaks directly to the times in which we live, a book which provides an original diagnosis to some of our current ills. No, not a book though which succeeds by working within conventional parameters, not a book which tells us that happiness can be achieved by attending more yoga classes, indulging in transcendental meditation, finding our inner self, or surrendering ourselves to the latest esoteric cult. Not a book, in other words, that wallows in the pool of private troubles but a book which follows C. Wright Mills' classic injunction to sociologists, the injunction to connect private troubles to public issues and such a book is The Craftsman. I mean those who've read Richard's previous work will recognise some of the recurrent themes in this new study but you don't really need to have that background to enjoy reading it. As Boyd Tonkin put it in The Independent, he said, "Reading Sennett's work delivers not just enlightenment but pleasure of a kind that the state of society speeches of Gordon Brown or David Cameron, which so often sound like Sennett-lite with all the irony and empathy stripped out can never hope to match. Throughout, he aims not merely to diagnose our ills but to show how frail and often frightened human beings could be helped to do better."

But oddly enough for me, at a personal level, the most telling indication of the impact of this new book, and many of you will have read the glowing reviews which have appeared practically in every newspaper that one could name, but for me the impact was measured really, and you must excuse this self-serving reference, came in response to last week's edition of the programme I do, Thinking Allowed, in which Richard discussed his book with Grayson Perry and the responses were, people like to talk about sackfuls of mail and they're usually lying and they've had three responses but this was quite

extraordinary, the number of silversmiths and embroiderers and dentists and computer programmers, who all wrote in and said, "What a joy. What a pleasure," how much they agreed and please could these emails be passed on to say how wonderful it was to hear craft being talked about in the way Richard talks about it.

Here's just one little letter which just simply said, "This programme ought to be compulsory listening for policymakers in the field of education and vocational training as well as anyone who enjoys the exchange of well-crafted opinions of patient, thoughtful workers." Will you please welcome Richard Sennett.

Richard Sennett: Thank you very much for inviting me this evening and for those very warm words. Let me, on behalf of my fellow RSA fellows here thank Jonathan Carr-West and Henneke Sharif for organising this evening and I want to thank David Willetts for taking time out of what is a hideously busy schedule to talk in public about an issue that we've talked about in private, which is what are skills and what are the ways in which skills improve and that's the subject of my book.

Now I'm not going to read to you but I'm just going to talk informally and like most writers of books I usually forget the most important thing when I talk about them so you're going to have to forgive me for that but I did want to talk about three issues that it seems to me really are at the heart of trying to understand what we mean by becoming a craftsman today. This is a word that's very redolent of Ruskin and before him the 18th century, of people who work with their hands, the carpenter in his shop, wood shavings perfuming the air and so on and it may seem very far away from the world of computer programmers or people who work in services or people who work in less material kinds of practices and the point of my book is really to show what kind of continuity there is between the process of becoming skilled, for people who have worked manually with their

hands in the past and people who work in a less material way today. I've asked myself the question, "What do they share?" What is it that a computer programmer and a carpenter might share? And that's really the sort of point of departure for the book and then I've asked an even more complicated question, "How do people get better?" I mean when we talk about skills we often talk about skills in a very static way that you know how to do something or you don't and that's actually a very limited means of trying to make sense of what actually goes on in the process of being skilled.

Now like all college professors I'm terribly long-winded so I'm going to just put my little clock in front of me as a discipline which probably won't work but...

One way to get into this subject is to look a little into the past. The whole subject of the need for people in society in general to improve their skills really appears in the Enlightenment and it appears in two forms. One of those is a sort of more Northern, more Germanic way of thinking about skill. It appears particularly in, and this may seem almost impossible to you, in a newspaper column that ran for 18 years from 1777 to 1795 called, "What is Enlightenment?", and people wrote into this column and they gave their answer to What is Enlightenment. Imagine that in The Telegraph if you can and the gist of this way of thinking in this newspaper column, which I describe in my book was that basically becoming a more skilled person is becoming sort of more the rational master of material circumstances, understanding something without necessarily having to do it, in technical jargon having an understanding without a practice or a praxis. Another way to think about what is a skill, so that's a skill of pure understanding. Another way to think about a skill comes from the Paris Enlightenment and it more focuses on practice. We associate it mostly with

Diderot in the Encyclopédie Des Arts et Des Metiers which argued that there was a connection between doing something concretely, knowing how to do one thing well and enlarging your general mental understanding and that, may I say to other fellows of the RSA, was also the belief shared by the founders of our institute that simply an abstracted understanding of a process did not really make you competent and skilled, that you had to know how to do something concretely, to execute it, in order to expand more generally your mental understanding.

This seems anodyne doesn't it? It just seems, "Well of course, of course you should know how to do things," it was in fact in the 18th century rather revolutionary ideal. For Diderot the notion was that basically humanity shares a set of skills which are not very different in degree from what we think about prosaic activities to extremely skilled ones that there's a high degree of skill in even the simplest kinds of activities. This is why in the Encyclopédie, a little wickedly, the article on Roi, king, comes just near the article on Rôtissoire, of roaster. Diderot loved this. It wasn't just a way of knocking down kings by saying, "The knowledge you need to be a good king is not very great," it was really the idea was to lift up the notion of everyday practices as having a high degree of content and the same thing for Wedgwood in this country in thinking about artisanal skills here. The artisan is more full of knowledge than he or she may think and the other side of this 18th century belief, which was very provoking, has to do with citizenship.

Diderot was one of the first to advance the notion that you could only be a competent citizen if you developed a craft, that is that people who lacked skills, working skills, were people who should not be given political rights.

Now I know I just choose the example by chance that would mean that say, for instance, an aristocrat who

frequents nightclubs in London, in Diderot's mind, I'm mentioning no one in particular, should have less political rights than say the barman who mixes the drinks which make the aristocrat drunk.

This was a principle also taken in my own country by Thomas Jefferson who believed that we learn in the disciplines and the knowledge that we gained from work how to expand our political judgment. So this was an attack on inherited privilege, it was an attack on the notion that really you are able to exercise good political judgment if you are unskilled. That the Enlightenment did not believe and in order to expand the territory of political equality they therefore thought that what was important was to recognise and develop the competence of all citizens to work well. This was a rather revolutionary idea. And as I say these are the founding principles of our own society.

I'm going to talk to you about three ways in which these 18th century ideas have reappeared in the modern world in this context. The first of these three, about skill and about becoming skilled, the first of these has to do with what is technically called a *approfondissement*, that is, how do you get better at doing something? Laurie referred, rather wickedly, to what's called The 10,000 Hour Rule, which is kind of rule of thumb that to become the master of a set of skills, you can read about this in my book I'm not going to go through it with you, it takes about 10,000 hours of work and the number is less important than the way in which those 10,000 hours are organised. In an *approfondissement* the notion is that you become skilled through repetition and routine. The idea is that we don't have an instant understanding of something, that we have to go over it again and again and that by repeating rather than just mechanically reproducing the same thing that we become deeper in what we're able to do. That is to say that it's through repetition and through practice, organised in certain forms, that we learn how to vary

our practice, to criticise it, to make it deeper. For a musician this is obvious isn't it? Somebody who just simply practices scales, you know, two hours a day, without thinking obviously will get nowhere but on the other hand you can't understand the idea of a scale, you have to actually go over it again and again and again and I'm sorry I can't quite see in this light what I wanted to say here.

So the idea about this is that skill has a narrative and it's a narrative which has almost got a ritual quality to it every day. The idea that I advance in my book is that this ritual quality is something that has to be shaped so that in repetitions we learn not simply how to control something but what elements in our practice routines can be varied so that we get to be better at it. That is we need to learn how to repeat and it's learning that kind of designing, that format for repetition that gives us a way of becoming more skilled.

That's the ideal of *approfondissement*, that it's a narrative of skill which deals in repetition and the problem with it in the modern world is that the so-called Skills Economy does not favour this kind of deepening of skills. My colleague, Georgina Born has done this study which can only be read, it's so depressing that it can only be read in small doses, of the BBC and it's a study of what happens to people on short contracts in the BBC. I'm sorry Laurie I don't mean to embarrass you on this, you're on a long contract, people who work on six or even three month contracts, going from one thing to another, to another and what she, who is a very skilled anthropologist, is the way in which this very short term work takes apart the sense of *approfondissement*. People get just enough skill to get through the contract. They don't think that things add up, that moving from one element to another builds skill in any way and gradually, on the contrary, they begin to think that their capacity to learn is degrading because of this kind of short-termism. They're living in

a skills world without a narrative and in my view one of the gravest issues we face today in the design of work is how to challenge institutions so that we shape them in ways in which this narrative is nurtured rather than destroyed by the organisation of short-term, flexible work, moving from one thing to another. I've seen some of the same thing in studying hi tech workers who feel that they're not building up a sense of competence in the work but only a sense of making do and that their skills become more superficial, even though oftentimes they're very successful, in jumping from one thing to another. So this is one big issue. How do we *approfondir*? How do we deepen skills through creating a narrative of work?

The second big issue of skill that was first raised by Wedgwood and then I'm afraid stolen by Diderot is the relationship... Diderot was, I couldn't call him a magpie but let's say he was on the edge of magpie-like activity on the encyclopedia, was the relationship between problem solving and problem finding. Oftentimes when we think about a skill we think just about problem solving, how to get something done, how to make the pieces of wood join together or how to, if we're a computer programmer, how to work out the logic of the lines of a piece of computer code. This is not the whole story. What Wedgwood understood and what Diderot then expanded was the notion that as we get better at problem solving we ought to also get better at problem finding, that every solution for us, at the higher levels of skill, should open up new problems, otherwise what we're doing is simply equating skill with procedure.

I'll give you an example of this at MIT where I've taught for a number of years. In MIT what are thought to be sort of ordinary bog... can I use the word bog standard in this country, I guess not, ordinary mediocre laboratories, a laboratory in which a problem is posed, you do an experiment and you either

falsify or confirm the hypothesis. That's considered to be low level work. The kinds of laboratories that people at MIT admire are places in which the master and the workers in the laboratory are as interested in wrong answers as in right answers. Sometimes the wrong answer is much more interesting than the right answer. The laboratories in which when you solve something you don't ask, "Well now what can I do with this?" in the sense of solve something else, you say, "Well if this is true what then is false?" It's at a higher level of skill in other words what we're constantly doing is trying to understand the relationship between procedure which works and this kind of liminal zone of what follows as a consequence therefore. The better people, more skilled they become, the more this should occur. Again in music it's something as a musician I know this very well if you just find the right way to play a scale on the piano or the cello you've lost the ability to improve whereas if you find the right way to move your thumb, for instance, you might learn something new about what these two fingers can and can't do. It's a constant process that helps us become better.

The problem here for us, modern society, is that almost all of our education is organised against developing this kind of skill. When we talk about teaching people to become more skilled we talk about teaching them to learn procedures. It's very difficult, for instance, if you're taking a test an O level or an A level test to write on the test, "Well here's the right answer but the wrong answer, wrong answer B is much more interesting than the right answer D." Again a kind of superficiality is encouraged by that kind of testing that is you try just to get as many right answers as you can rather than to dwell in a problem. It's not a particularly British problem it exists in the States. It exists in any educational regime which is oriented to the notion that skill is how to do something, simply a procedure rather than an investigation. To give you a contrary example to that when my wife and

I were in India this autumn and I had the chance to talk to somebody who runs an Indian institute of technology there, there are 11 of them and he said, "I've abolished what you in the West would call testing," he said, "I want people to explain to me what they're doing, even in the most technical work we ask people to explain what it is a procedure is about rather than simply show us that it can be made to work and that has proved a fantastic way to improve people's skills." So that's the second of these issues. The first has to do with this narrative of skill which requires a long period of time and the shaping of that narrative. This is one which has to unpack the relationship between procedure that is problem solving as an end in itself, instead it has to unite problem solving and problem finding. The more we do this the more skilled we become but our educational institutions were deeply against this kind of skill development.

The third way in which we become more skilled that I want to talk to you about, and I could talk to you endlessly about this but I'll do it very briefly, is the most complicated and it has to do with the question of the attitude with which we become more competent. We talked a little with Grayson about this on the radio. A kind of equilibrium in doing good work which is not a high it's something in which you are invested in what you're doing and a kind of calm, what Ruskin called a kind of state of calm surrender to the object itself. This is true again, take one more musical example, even when you see people wildly throwing themselves around the stage, if they're pianists or cellists, it doesn't really mean that they're in the throes of deep, deep passion, as Diderot himself understood in the book called *The Paradox of Acting*, in order to stay in control there has to be a certain measure of equilibrium and calm and that attitude is related to a phenomenon which is not intuitively self-evident. It is the phenomenon of surrender and by that I

mean the ability to let go of something to say, "It's good enough I'll start again. I'm not going to keep obsessing about this." If you're writers you know this instantly and it's true of any kind of work. When do you say, "This is as good as it can get and if I work on it any more it's going to degrade?" To have that understanding means that you have a kind of objective orientation to the thing in itself and what it can become, not how you can perform and show off how good you are but how good it can be and it's an objective judgment of the limits of what any particular practice can be. The kinds of people who never let go are the kinds of people who are showing through the work just how good they can be and they're always, in a kind of narcissistic way, testing themselves to say, "I've got to show just how good I am." This tends to degrade labour. It tends to have a very degrading effect on work and if you buy the book at this wonderfully reduced price as my publisher has put it you will understand a little more about how that degradation operates.

I'd like to say as a coda to that that one of the most interesting debates in the 18th century which continues today is applying this relationship between this kind of calm and the ability to objectively let go, to focus on the object rather than yourself. One of the most interesting debates on this in the 18th century came in the debate about whether parenting is a craft, to come back to what we were talking about before. In the 18th century enlightened proponents of the family like Rousseau argued that parenting was indeed a skill and that people had to learn it, that it wasn't natural, that you had to become better at parenting but his notion was that the parent had to present him or herself to the child as a kind of ideal version of what you should become and that the child should look at the parent and say, "Oh so that's how you do it. That's how you rationally think. That's how you comport yourself. I'll be like you." Rousseau was opposed by a very wonderful woman named Madame

D'Epinay who was a writer who also believed parenting was a craft but of a very different sort. She argued that the parent fixes the child in a kind of permanent dependence and sense of inadequacy by presenting him or herself as a kind of ideal version of how you should behave. The parent had to learn how to accept to present to the child and to think about his or her own parenting skills as being good enough rather than right and Madame D'Epinay's ideal was that rather than having to be 100% ideal parent if you were 60% of it this was a good thing. This was enough. Why was this? Because she argued that it's at that point when we surrender to doing a job good enough, rather than perfectly, that we are able to let go of our own children just the way when working with a physical material we can say, "Okay this is as good a job as I can do." The same thing she thought applied to parenting and that the children therefore got more freedom and she argued further that relations in the family became a lot less fraught, a lot more equilibrated in a situation where people are trying to do good enough rather than achieve an ideal standard.

Now this is just good common sense wisdom in a way but it raises the question about getting skilled that I'd like to leave you with which is that we really have two different kinds of standards for skill. One of them has to do with the right way of doing something, the ideally right way which can be destructive, that was her notion and the other is a much more humane way in which we try to do things as well as we can and then we judge using our own equanimity as a limit when we've reached the point where they're good enough. This is an issue that attends I think the most socially misunderstood part of craftsmanship and that's mentoring. I don't think we understand very much about how mentoring should go on, how it is that we enable somebody else in a social

relationship to become better at something.

So just to summarise what I have said to you. We're here in a place that took on the issue of skill as did its French colleagues in a particular light that is that you can't really expand your general skills without learning how to become, how to practise a particular skill well and that craftsmanship had to do with that kind of enablement of the particular. I tried to describe to you one form of becoming skilled was called *approfondissement* which requires a lot of time and time organised in a certain narrative and in the work world today that organisation of time is increasingly absent so that in the skills society we're not really giving people the chance to become skilled. I secondly described to you a wonderful thing that happens in becoming skilled which is finding a relationship between problem solving and problem finding but again, and here's our educational institutions which stand in the way, we balked this skill, we emphasise procedure, we disable curiosity and doubt for the sake of knowing that people are capable of executing a procedure and finally I've described something to you which seems very psychological, that is this spirit of equanimity, of being able to work without excitement and that is coupled to the notion of being able to let go, to surrender, that this attitude of saying, "It's as good enough as it can be," is something that helps us start over and over again, even if we're Stradivarius to say, "This is all this cello can be. I'll try another one," it's more than the one off. This turns out to have many dimensions. It has a dimension in terms of who we are as mentors in parenting. It also has a dimension of what actually we mean by quality, whether quality is the right way, an ideal standard, which is a way of imprisoning and taking away the freedom of other people or a way which raises people's game but also leaves them free and this, as I say, is an issue about mentoring, not just in parenting, not just in work, not just in education, it's a

general problem in our society. When I know something that you don't know and I want to help you know it what are the conditions under which I can do that without making you feel inadequate? A very fundamental issue.

So I've just chosen three elements of what have been on my mind in this book under the rubric what does it mean to get better at something and I look forward to discussing them with your further tonight. Thank you very much.

Laurie Taylor: Thank you very much Richard. Now I'm going to turn to our next speaker. I'm delighted we've got David Willetts here to comment on that talk. It's difficult to think of anybody more appropriate in so far as David is not only shadow Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills but he's one of the few politicians who, in my experience, are prepared to listen to ideas from wherever they come in the political spectrum and so I'd like to invite David Willetts now to comment upon what Richard has said.

David Willetts: Well thank you very much and it's a great pleasure to be here this evening and as Laurie said I guess the most obvious and simple reason for being here is I happen to have Skills in the title of the post I do at the moment but that's a trivial reason. Far more important is the respect that I have for Richard and the enormous contribution he's made over the years to public debate. I have to say Richard I'm afraid I think public man is still falling, I think character is still being corroded, respect may still be in decline but Richard has an uncanny instinct for putting his finger on anxieties that affect all of us and I think he's done that again with his excellent book but there's a third reason why I was particularly pleased to be invited here this evening and this is my own personal background because my family were Birmingham craftsmen and artisans. My father is an engineer and before that we were, my grandparents and great uncles

were practicing all the sort of Birmingham trades and we were silversmiths and gun barrel makers and glaziers and one of my grandfather's earliest memories was being invited to the opening of the great hall in the University of Birmingham because his father, my great grandfather, had helped put the glass into the great hall and when they were going to do the opening ceremony the glaziers who had put the glass in the great hall should go along as well as the professors and the academics and one rather hopes that such invitations are still extended today when a university building is opened but you're not totally sure it still happens. So my family's tradition is of working in these crafts, physical crafts, and it's great to find a book that celebrates them and takes our understanding of them to a new depth.

Now my reflections on Richard's book perhaps might take the form of one of those trivial articles that you find in the Sunday magazines about My Last Week, what I've been doing last week, because there were three episodes last week that between them led I think me to understand some of the issues in Richard's book. The first experience I had which was perhaps the most banal was visiting Pinewood Studios to learn about the British film industry and how Pinewood functioned and I had a conversation with the guy running Pinewood Studios which is just a complete caricature of a conversation which goes on all the time. He said, "We are producing so many fantastic people who want to write film scripts. We're producing fantastic producers and directors but," he said, "My problem is I'm losing the guys who can build a set. I'm losing the guys who know how to... who can do the carpentry you need to do if you want a set that's set in an 18th Century French palace, and in order for Pinewood to succeed I can't just have all these brilliant script writers I need a lot of physical craft skills for Pinewood and those are no longer being developed the way they were," and as we went into it again the classic explanation in the old

days a lot of these training schemes were run by the BBC and we used to recruit people out of the BBC which didn't just train journalists, it trained people in a lot of skills you need to put a TV programme onto a set and an industry grew up that was dependent on one large employer doing a lot of the training for an entire industry, it no longer does it so we've now got a problem. And I have to say in my current job I have that conversation so often. There's large numbers of people who tell me, "I don't know what my organisation is going to do when the current generation of skilled workers retires then we will face a problem." There's an almost demographic anxiety out there. So that was the first experience.

The second experience was going to a protest meeting that was embellished, that's the only word for it, by a group of fashion models because this was the fashion industry saying, "We're producing all these fantastic designers but we haven't got the skilled cutters and tailors physically to make the design." So at first I thought this was a repeat of Pinewood but then talking to some of the people there, they went a stage further. I talked to a student at St Martins and she was studying clothes design but she also wanted physically to make clothes and part of her course at St Martins involved physically making clothes but she said, "At St Martins," and I don't think this is unusual, "We get endlessly taught about clothes design. Nobody is teaching me how to cut clothes or how to sew clothes but I'm expected to do that as part of becoming a proper designer." There'd been a loss of respect for the very skills that Richard so beautifully celebrates in his book.

And perhaps the third experience was... which gets to the heart of all this was launching, with David Cameron, a report that he asked me to produce on childhood and what was happening to childhood and the quality of childhood in Britain and researching this one of the

things that struck me was how many of our children are being brought up in a two dimensional world and although the globalisers celebrate the fact that the world is flat, in terms of child development, it's an extremely bad thing that a child's world is flat and when you look into the body of work that's been carried out on this there's Piaget's great insight was that even our most refined abstract conceptual skills depend on, first of all, experiencing the world in three dimensions, experiencing forces against your body, experiencing throwing things, hurting yourself against things, messing about with, be it in the sink or in the sandpit, and the argument was that our conceptual development was impeded if we no longer experience the world in its sheer physicality and as some of you will know there's a researcher at Imperial, Shea, who has measured the conceptual grasp of 11 year old, their ability to get the basic concepts of Maths, you know if you take water from a tall, thin beaker and put it into a squat, flat beaker is it the same volume of water and has recorded, in the past 20 years, a shocking decline in children's ability when they're aged 11 or seven to grasp those basic concepts and that might be partly because they are not any longer experiencing the world in three dimensions in their formative years, in their early years. So I think those three experiences just in one week came together reading Richard's book and they made sense.

Now there is one person who has, I think, put this perhaps, may I say it, as well as Richard has done in his book and that, of course, is one of my heroes David Hume and perhaps I can just read a paragraph from his great essay of Refinement in the Arts which I think puts all this as elegantly as anyone has, "Another advantage of industry and of refinements in the mechanical arts, is that they commonly produce some refinements in the liberal; nor can one be carried to perfection, without being accompanied, in some degree, with the other. The same age,

which produces great philosophers and politicians, renowned generals and poets, usually abounds with skilful weavers, and ship-carpenters. We cannot reasonably expect, that a piece of woollen cloth will be wrought to perfection in a nation, which is ignorant of astronomy, or where ethics are neglected. The spirit of the age affects all the arts; and the minds of men, being once roused from their lethargy, and put into a fermentation, turn themselves on all sides, and carry improvements into every art and science." And that seemed to me that brings out the interconnectedness of what are often seen as intellectual accomplishments and separately treated as physical ones.

Now just very briefly in conclusion Laurie kindly said that this was not one of those speeches where the politician has to give a long list of "So what would you do?" but let me just bring out two or three things that I think are very relevant. First of all a lot of what Richard is talking about is tacit knowledge. It goes back to that great debate between Hayek and socialists in the 1930s about whether you could have a planned economy and one reason why Hayek said you couldn't have a planned economy is that it would be impossible to write down all the things that you need to know in order properly to function and that seemed to me to be a very important insight. A lot of this knowledge is tacit knowledge but the bane of my life as I read so many official publications, including for example the Leech Report is the way in which skills and qualifications are treated as synonymous, a skill just is a qualification, a qualification just is a skill but there are large parts of being skilled which is not caught in a qualification and churning out paper qualifications is not the same thing as improving people's underlying skills. Something else that I thought came across very strongly is the sheer embeddedness of a lot of what's been talked about and we know if you look at what creates a sense of well-being, what

makes people happy, it's a sense of being rooted and embedded in things that make life worthwhile.

And that led me to my final observation, rising to Richard's question at the end about mentoring and how you can be a mentor without the person who is being helped feeling inadequate and both in the past when I was responsible for my party's policy on schools and now thinking of skills I'm struck by the powerful connections between effective teaching and real apprenticeships and in both being a teacher that's able to transmit a body of knowledge and command authority in the classroom and an apprenticeship in its true and authentic sense which isn't, sadly, what many apprenticeships necessarily are today but when someone who has those 10,000 hours of experience behind him or her is transmitting what he or her has learnt to the next generation the thing that solves the problem that Richard rightly identifies is surely this. They don't say, "Let's now randomly experiment to find out some tiny corners of the world's knowledge which we may discover by going on a journey together," nor do they say, "I am the great panjandrum, sit down and listen to me because of who I am." What they say is, "Between us let us confront something which is bigger than either of us." There is, be it a body of historical understanding or a body of craft skills, which is bigger than the individual teacher as well as bigger than the individual student but the teacher, the master in the apprenticeship is trying to help the student get access to that body of knowledge or body of skill of which he or she has greater experience and in my experience of sitting now in the back of quite a few classrooms, including at the back of one or two lecture halls and observing some apprenticeships, that is a shared quality of good teaching and of effective apprenticeships, that sense that there is something bigger than any individual before which both teacher and student alike are confronting and trying to learn from and that I think may help us

understand some of the powerful insights in Richard's excellent book. Thank you very much indeed.

Laurie Taylor: Thank you very much. I remember, just talking about that tacit knowledge, just reminded me I remember some years ago someone told me that Hewlett Packard used to have a notice in the boardroom there which just simply said, "If only Hewlett Packard knew what Hewlett Packard knew," in the reference to the tacit knowledge that the people who worked there had which they never found any way of bringing out or using.

Right now we'll move to the discussion. Actually it was Richard who did say to me, "Make certain that David is not asked any questions about, 'So what are you going to do about it,' " so it was Richard who put that thought into my mind but can I just reiterate please, do not treat David as someone who is about to articulate the essentials of the next Conservative manifesto. Alright so the...

David Willetts: I don't want you to think I need that protection.

Laurie Taylor: So we have a roving microphone.

Unidentified speaker: Hi. You spoke about difficulties in design of work, poverty of the skills narrative and the structure of the labour market and I was wondering if you could reveal your attitudes to the added question regarding the policy discourse on skills which is the content of the economy and this is something that I don't hear discussed very often and I'm curious to know your attitude to the fact that the skills discourse nowadays is essentially oriented towards an imperative that the skills better match the content of an economy that doesn't really cater well for a nurturing of crafts mentality. I'd be interested to know your view of that actually David as well?

Richard Sennett: Well what's lurking in this question is, in terms of sheer economics, is how portable are the skills that you have? That is to say, I'll give you an example of this, in the 90s computer programmers who had learnt how to programme mainframes were out of fashion and out of work, today mainframe computing is back in fashion and those computer programmers are in work and the ones who learnt how to work on adapted PCs are out of work. This is a kind of normal rhythm of any dynamic economy. The issue is whether there are skills that you can take from one of these ruptures to another. The problem that, and this is a practical problem that we face today, is that there aren't very many companies that are interested in helping you make that journey, that is it's a substantive question about whether skills can be designed in such a way that they travel in time but what makes that substantive question doubly complicated is that relatively few firms are interested in enabling that. I know about this in retraining schemes which tend to take middle aged workers whose skills have evaporated in one realm and teach them another set of procedural skills which may evaporate in five years.

So the issue is really whether companies that are in the skills economies are really committed to developing skills and my sad conclusion on this is that the most trendy companies are the least committed.

Ali Kasmie (fellow): Thank you Richard. I just wanted to touch upon, or elaborate upon something that you mentioned in your address it was in relation to citizenship and specifically what I wanted to ask in the area of moral ethics is that a skill that must be acquired, taught like other skills?

Richard Sennett: Ah what a wonderful question. The question is, is citizenship a skill like other skills? My teacher Hannah Arendt would have

answered that question with a resounding No. In her view citizenship should not, whatever it takes to reason about somebody's speech that a politician gives or a document proposition, should not draw on the knowledge that we have of how to labour. She looked at the world of work as irremediably unequal and that some people just were better in it than others, whereas citizenship is something in which you have to take, by definition, the fact that all people are competent. So her answer to your question would be no, citizenship is not... it is a skill but it's not a skill that we can refer to other things.

This cuts deeply for us today in that she didn't believe that, for instance, the suffering of a particular population, be it Jews, Blacks, Islamic or whatever, provided the kinds of information that made people skilled citizens. To her politics was a skill unto itself. The alternative view to that is the view of the founders of this institution and it particularly focuses on labour and what it assumes is that the discipline that's involved and commitment that's involved in experiencing something better over the course of time, I used to do it in a mediocre way now I can do it better, that the conditions that allowed me to go from point A to point B are exactly the conditions that allow me to evaluate, and I use that great 18th century word, progress. How can I know whether we're going to have progress or, in the words of Barack Obama, turn a fresh page, unless I've had that experience of doing so in my own work. That was the contrary argument to this and my own view of this is, it will surprise you, I'm on both sides of this. What is strong about the Arendt point of view is that it looks at, you know we wouldn't assume that because somebody is a good carpenter they can be a good singer, why should we assume that because somebody is a good carpenter they could be, they should be good at politics but on the other side of it what I think is profound about this 18th century

Enlightenment idea is that you have to experience the notion that you can make yourself more competent. In order to have a political judgment that is realistic about things like how much change is possible, are we condemned just to have the same old nonsense year in and year out, if that hasn't been true in your private life as a worker then you're going to be more optimistic in an adult way.

So I think there are arguments for both of them. This is a really important issue and I have to say my book skimps on it.

Laurie Taylor: David do you want to...?

David Willetts: Well I think understanding what it is to be a citizen can be transmitted and needs to be learned. I'm not sure it can be explicitly taught.

Laurie Taylor: Thank you very much.

Unidentified Speaker: This is sort of related to the same point in that I wondered whether you thought, Richard, there could be a dry run for skills within schools because in the UK at the moment there's an ambition to mix academic work with vocational work and in the past you would have had in this area of London hundreds of miserable apprentices, you know, under draconian masters and then the other model I suppose is that you have this special relationship with a teacher where you are on a kind of one to one love relationship and that's how you transfer the skills but in a kind of mass education how maybe is that possible?

Richard Sennett: Well may I say as a preface to this that I don't know how many of you followed all this, do you remember when the government proposed a couple of weeks ago the notion of things like giving people A levels by working in McDonalds? Well you laugh I didn't. I thought this was a terrific idea and I think

we have to get over laughing about this because there has to be a way in which people feel the things they may do in life like be a service worker are something that actually they can get better at but more that connect them with the adult world and I, far from wanting... seeing this as fraudulent, I only wish we'd had more of exactly this kind of connection and I gather David you feel the same way.

I tell you a further... sorry about this, I was in Germany the week that this was announced. Now Germany has a mentoring programme which we do not have in Britain which involves nearly 40% of the adults serving as mentors to young people. If you go into a publishing house for instance you have a formal role as a mentor to some younger person in that publishing house. I think the mentor probably gets more out of this than, is there such a word as mentee? Yeah. For the Germans this is a natural connection between work and the generations and I just wish it were more natural for us.

David Willetts: I agree with that and in fact we did not, I carefully avoided trying to get into the sort of predictable opposition to that McDonald's proposal. There are some questions like how properly policed but I completely agree with what Richard says and what strikes me, and again there are parallels across education and training, A levels were best and most credible when they belonged to universities and universities were running... different groups of universities got together to run A levels so they could select who was best able to benefit from going to university. A lot of our skills training historically has emerged from the requirements of different crafts and trades and when they are still policed and run by people who are using this qualification as the criterion for getting into the craft or trade which is what their company does you get qualifications that are still credible and are still respected and are properly policed. It can't be solely McDonalds it

has to be, as I say, it has to be within that... has to be some kind of external scrutiny but in general having qualifications that are developed by people who are going to need... I know the greatest interest in the people who emerge with those qualifications being capable of doing whatever it is that that qualification measures is the best way of ensuring that they are credible, worthwhile, rigorous, useful.

Richard Sennett: This gap between qualifications and skills also attends to the relation between craft and art. One thing that has struck me is that we are attempting, for instance in art schools to roll into a set of qualifications. This is true in medical schools as well. We're trying to formulate, as a set of legal or formal principles, ways to do things which can't be formulated. It doesn't mean that an artist or, God forbid, a surgeon, works by inspiration. The very thought of it is too much but I think what David has mentioned is a very important thing. We have to separate the world of qualifications which is essentially a bureaucratic enterprise oriented to explicit rather than tacit knowledge from the practicing of a skill which is something which oftentimes involves showing rather than telling, is non-verbal and which can't be bureaucratically regulated and the demon in this is where you are in Britain. You have very weak mentoring programmes and you have highly bureaucratic systems that identify skill with qualification. So you get the worst of both worlds. When you're Minister for Skills, Education and whatever we will look forward to you solving this problem within three months.

Laurie Taylor: There we are a delighted invitation from Richard really. One of the very few Americans I know who casually almost describes himself as a Socialist. Can we have... I did actually pick somebody out, yes there oh good thank you.

Unidentified speaker: Can I say that from somebody having spent part of their life either being an art student or teaching art students, what you've had to say is almost painfully true in terms of the decline of the skills as recognised and valued so that one has been through the farce, for example, of being required to establish criteria for aesthetic judgments which any elementary experience or knowledge of Kant would tell you is a nonsense and it's precisely this issue of the requirement that we make explicit that we do not honour or understand the tacit that I have a slight problem with in your presentation. It seems to me terribly important that, as Michael Polanyi said that skills are seen as tacit knowledge. Yet you did raise this idea of the narrative and then you described that story of the Indian technical college where the students were required to say what they were doing rather than doing it and it seems to me, as somebody who's taught people who are being very inarticulate but extremely skilful, that maybe there's a kind of contradiction there. If we are going to...or maybe you're talking about more than one thing at the same time but if the idea of tacit knowledge is of value then how can you reconcile this with your description of the benefit of the Indian college that you gave us?

Laurie Taylor: Thank you very much. Because we are so short of time I'm going to ask you to take that question on board Richard and perhaps come back to it in a moment. I want to take a few other burning questions on areas which haven't been talked about. Shall we have this gentleman down here at the front?

Nico McDonald: Your concept, you talked about the phenomenon of surrender. There's a writer you may be familiar with, an academic from Chicago in fact called Mikhail Csikszentmihalyi who writes about flow and I'd just be interested if the two concepts map in some way there and he talks about going

to the edge of your expertise but with a degree of confidence.

And secondly there's a term, which I'm sure you use in the book, which I've not read yet, which is the idea of pride and it's something I've reflected a lot on in the decline in engineering and transport and other sectors in the UK where the government tries to instrumentalise improvement by, you know, various incentives and penalties and so on, yet my sense is that historically those systems ran well because people took real pride in, for instance, designing and running a railway system and that went beyond anything that could be incentivised and I wonder if there's a connection between that concept of pride and the idea of the decline of craftsmanship or the sense of craftsmanship.

Laurie Taylor: Thank you very much. I just want to take two more and then we'll just leave it to both of you to pick up. Any other burning questions? Yes.

Unidentified speaker: Is there an antidote to the China syndrome which we all know what that does, sort of from the bottom upwards we get this problem with no interest in skills of repair and maintenance which is sometimes the mother of learning for both mothers and fathers and their kids.

Laurie Taylor; Thank you very much and then at the back there?

Unidentified speaker: I wonder in the book if you address environmental issues at all and this certainly touches on China because huge numbers of people are employed making stuff that we don't need out of materials that probably shouldn't be used and then are shipped across the globe and I thought a long time ago that probably a combination of William Morris and the Slow City Movement could save the planet but of course Morris and Co didn't last very long, they went out of business because it couldn't employ

people at a living wage, people couldn't afford the products, you can reconnect hand and eye and brain but if people can't afford it and it leaves an awful lot of people either not working at all what do you do?

Laurie Taylor: You can really begin to understand can't you why we were flooded with emails after people listened to Richard talking because we just really want to go on all evening but I know we can't. Just one last... is there one last burning question that no one has yet asked? Yes we'll just have this very last question and then I'm going to give David and Richard the impossible task of trying to respond to six questions in the remaining forty three seconds.

Tanya Cook: I just wanted to ask a question about the idea of responsiveness and self-critique in what one's doing as an inspiration to getting better at doing things, David you mentioned one sort of inspiring way that perhaps teachers can help students or can teach students without patronising them and that would be to refer to a body of knowledge which is bigger than either of them but another something for me that I find very inspiring is the idea that there is no right way necessarily to doing something because it always depends on the context and the situation in which you're doing it. So if you can develop the skill of observing the effect of what you do in each situation so you build up your repertoire of ways of doing it so that it's appropriate in any particular situation I'd be interested to hear your views on that. I don't know if I've made myself clear.

Laurie Taylor: There you are we'll now go to our speakers and give them the impossible task of answering all those questions.

Richard Sennett: Gosh couldn't you have asked simpler questions? It's terrible. Actually I'm going to bundle a couple of these together. When people

work in a skill it isn't that they work tacitly or explicitly they work both. There is a cycle, and in my book I try and show how that cycle operates, of naturalising procedure, learning how to work with it and then starting to think about it and think, 'Oh well I don't really like that I need to do more work on it,' and this rhythm between the tacit and the explicit is a way in which people get better and both of these moments matter. There are some ways we get better by embedding or engraining what we know how to do and then there are other ways we get better by disembedding and saying, "Well what have I done here?" So that's where the issue of self-critique comes in but what I've argued in the book and I try and show is the rhythm by which this occurs and the events that set off the notion, the wake up call, you know,. "Oh I better not take this for granted." So that's a very important point that's made here. I want to say about this issue about... people always say to me, "Well surely the reason that people want to become skilled is that they want to respect themselves, they take pride in their work," and so on and I remember when this book was just started my editor Stuart Croft who is here and who is a craftsman of a formidable sort said to me, "Well do you think that's really a universal desire? Do people really want to get self-respect through their work?" After all you can do perfectly well in this world by getting by, being very superficial, be very rich that way, you know. And it's a question that's haunted me and I just take this opportunity to tell you know what I think about this which is that pride in one's work is the more important the lower down the social ladder you are and I think, this is where we would get into the political issue on this, although there are solicitors and barristers who worry about, say, the loss of the law as a craft I think that my answer to the question that you posed to me all of four years ago would be that the gravity of being able to believe that you can do good work matters the less the financial rewards

you're likely to get in society. You know I'm sure you'll disagree with this and I wanted to just say to the person who raised the question about the environment I should tell you this is the first of three books, if I live so long. You know I fully... I smoke quite a bit and I expect to go under through smoking. It's a decision I've freely taken but if I live to the third book I want to explore exactly the issue that you raise and to reformat it in a slightly different way which, as we know, there are all sorts of technological ways in which new crafts can address the environmental issues there's also a cultural issue which has to do with dealing with less, which reverses in a more fundamental way our patterns that our culture has had which have been based on a kind of cornucopia like experience of the material world and the third volume of my book which is called Bless is exactly about how we might change the terms of our culture in that way. So you're absolutely right to make this connection and if I don't smoke myself to death I will write the book.

Laurie Taylor: Thank you very much, David.

David Willetts: First of all I completely agree with the point about flow and the only thing that stops me talking about flow is that I can never pronounce the name of the guy who writes these books about it.

Richard Sennett: Csikszentmihalyi

David Willetts: Thank you very much and I think that flow is very much related to embeddedness and to some of the things that Richard describes by the exercise of a craft and also what you observe in the classroom but there is this very odd feature isn't there that flow is not quite the same as completely giving yourself. It is 90% of you is doing this thing and 10% of you is observing you doing the thing and that is part of the satisfaction. Even, dare I say it, as a politician and there is a craft to politics,

when you're delivering a speech 90% of you is delivering the speech, 10% of you is thinking, 'Am I making eye contact with the correct parts of the audience? Should I be raising my voice? Should I be lowering my voice? At what point... how many minutes have we got left? Is this the right moment to...' and we tend... and it's just like acting or anything else, 10% of you has to be observing yourself and that's I think... so flow doesn't mean there's a complete loss of sort of self-consciousness.

Two other very quick comments. I completely agreed with Richard's point about tacit and sort of explicit conceptual crafts going together and if you were to try to summarise one of the many things that has gone wrong with our qualifications framework in this country is that the introduction of vocational qualifications, when my party was in government, came at a time when a kind of behaviourist ideology was dominant and a lot of our vocational qualifications just say we have to observe the craftsman doing something. You are observed doing things and boxes are ticked rather than requiring any underlying conceptual grasp of what it is that you are doing as a plumber and compared with, say, German qualifications a lot of our vocational qualifications are far too weak on the conceptual side, just as we have academic qualifications that are far too weak on the practical side and I think the final comment I'd make is that yes the intrinsic rewards are different from extrinsic rewards and there is even some uncomfortable evidence isn't there now coming in from the behavioural economists that if you put too much stress on the extrinsic rewards you actually reduce the intrinsic rewards of an activity and that is something that I think is one of the challenges that we look forward to Richard tackling in his next book.

Laurie Taylor: Thank you very much indeed David and let me thank you all again for coming tonight and thank you for the great relevance of your questions. I hope you'll agree it was a very focused

evening and that was due partly to your questions but of course perhaps more significantly to the way in which Richard and David entered into a dialogue. So would you join me please in thanking Richard and David for their contributions. And now I'm going to pass over to Jonathan who's going to explain the oxymoron contained in the idea of the hospitality of a pay bar.

Jonathan Carr-West: Actually I'm not but I am going to tell you that if you did enjoy that as much as I did you can continue the discussion at the RSA Lectures Bar. Tonight's event is part of the RSA's annual programme of over 100 lectures and debates. That's made possible by the support of our network of RSA fellows so if you are a fellow thank you and if you're not feel free to make a donation on the way out. Equally if you're interested in finding out how you might become a fellow please visit our website or talk to any of us here this evening. Finally before you all rush off to buy the book or buy a drink I'd like to reiterate on behalf of the RSA our thanks to David and to Richard and of course to Laurie Taylor for sharing the fruits of 10,000 hours of chairing experience. Thank you.