# Dr Julian Ayres

Foxholes: Understanding Grit and Resilience

*December 2024*

**Dr Sue Horder**: Hello, croeso i Prifysgol Wrecsam. My name is Dr Sue Horder and I'm an Associate Dean in the Faculty of Social and Life Sciences and I have the pleasure of introducing today's speaker, Dr Julian Ayres.

I first met Julian in 2015 when he was a student on the MA, and I taught him that year. I won't say any more about that. I knew then that he was a keen educator and committed to helping people with their professional development. Julian joined the education team here at the university eight years ago, I checked iTrent this morning, eight years ago and hasn't looked back since. He is a valued member of our team.

You will know from the write up about Julian that outside of his work, he is a keen and experienced ultramarathon and endurance challenge athlete. I don't think there is a weekend that goes by when Julian isn't running somewhere. Something you may not know about Julian is that he loves animals. He has three cats: Little Cat, Big Cat and Bru and a dog named Steve. They frequently attend our meetings when we're on Teams, don't they?

Julian's thesis, entitled “Evaluating the Impact of Resilience Training on Retention, Attendance and Graduate Success in Post Compulsory Initial Teacher Education” has already had an impact within the university through the development of a module on our new foundation year entitled “Resilience During HE and Beyond”. This module ran for the first time last year and resulted in a significant improvement in the retention of students during their first year at the university.

So, I am very delighted to present Dr Julian and his talk this evening on Foxholes: Understanding Grit and Resilience.

**Dr Julian Ayres**: Firstly, massive thank you Sue, for that lovely introduction. The cats and dogs joining was not my choice in the meetings, they just do. Firstly as well, a massive thank you to all of you for coming out here tonight. As kind of the numbers came through and people is getting interested, it was really great to see.

My hope for this evening is to cover quite a few different things. I am going to be looking at ultra running and endurance running, but I have promised that I'm going to try and maintain it goes back to research and education as much as possible. If you do wish to talk about events afterwards, I'm more than happy to do that. So, I want to look a little bit about resilience training, research, what I did, the reasons for it and I want to kind of look at some of the case studies that, informed myself even before I began the research, what was my inspiration for it? I want to look a little bit at the methodology as to the how the research was conducted, because it's something that plays a huge role in the programs that we started to roll out here at the university and just kind of give you some of the findings that we've gathered so far, not just from my own research project, but from the implementation of it cross sector and then hopefully throughout, what I consider my tenets of resilience. What I feel that has certainly benefited me in both my personal and my professional life and hopefully the students that we have in our setting.

Now, I know in this room, I've got a few of my friends here today who are ultramarathon runners, and they will probably also recognise that sort of face at the end of a race. Now, for those who don't know really that much about ultra or endurance running, it's where we take a marathon and we go, that's not really big enough. We can make this a larger event. So, let's see about if we add another couple hundred miles on to it, a few mountains and maybe some cake along the way. Now I started ultramarathon running, again I started with very small running, and I started building up and up, building it up. And I was quite good. I was okay at the smaller events, but something happend when I got to the larger events, I did what I'd never done before, which was I really struggled and quite often when I started these events and going into them, I was ending up with that face, which my wife calls my Skeletor face in the back of a medical vehicle when it had all gone Pete Tong.

Now, speaking to a friend of mine who I trained with a while ago, he said ‘well, tell me about your training, what do you do?’ I was like, well ‘I'll go to the gym, I do a swim, I do this, I do this’ and he said to me ‘well, what do the other people do? What do the professionals do?’ And he said ‘do you do really that much with your mind or anything?’ Now, I was raised quite close to Glastonbury growing up, so I kind of knew of these very hippy tendencies and kind of went ‘I'm all right for that thank you’, but I decided to kind of delve into it I looked at a few people. Now, one of my heroes is a lady called Nikki Spinks. Nikki Spinks for those who aren’t of her, she's a lady in her mid-fifties. She's a farmer from Yorkshire but she's also one of the most accomplished British fell runners and ultra distance mountain runners that this country has had the pleasure of having. She’s also somebody who overcame breast cancer in 2006 with surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. And then once she's done that, she went ‘do you know what, I'm going to go out and I'm going to set a double Bob Graham Brown record’, in which she covered 132 miles and 84 peaks in under 46 hours. If I was to put all the lists of her achievements that she had actually on this presentation, you'd be looking about 50, 60 slides because what she has done is incredible considering the adversity she's faced.

I also have the personal pleasure of training alongside a good friend of mine who's here this evening. Hi, John. Thank you for coming along. Who is somebody who definitely, to me, is a perfect example of what I mean by resilience. John, a good friend of mine, previously of the Parachute Regiment, unfortunately had to cut that career short due to an injury. He didn't run really until lockdown. He was interested in those sorts of things, but, you know, wasn't really his cup of tea. Since then overcoming injury, overcoming, you know, the physio and the treatment from it, he went out and he crossed the Arctic Circle, winning it. That was nice, and then thought ‘you know what I’m going to do, I'm going to cross the Amazon rainforest’, winning it, which was nice, and then thought ‘well what about the mountains in Kyrgyzstan? Well, I'll do that as well’ winning it, which was nice. Then two weeks ago won the 250k race across the Namibian desert, being the first person in the world to not just complete all four, but to win them! Now, the key thing that was interesting for me. I spoke to John because he went out to the Namibian desert last year, and it didn't go to plan. Unfortunately, things happened beyond his control and he didn't complete. This year, he won by a considerable margin. The first thing I said to him, I said, well, what was what was it you did and everything he said to me in this text message, I was going, that's my research, that's my research, so I was very happy that he said all those things. I didn't pay him for it. But the key question is, the one thing I have to be really careful about very easily is how is this related to education?

When you're doing a research project, I can't just go off about my hobbies. So here at the university we had, at the point of me during this course, we had, unfortunately, a very high withdrawal rate. A13.28% withdrawal in 2018/19 which was unfortunately the lowest of the eight Welsh higher education providers. We have a large number of mature adult learners, with 54.4% coming from the local area, an area which is identified as an area of deprivation where more commonly, from the research, things like this can impact the confidence, self-belief and therefore highly increasing the kind of difficulties of retention. So, this kind of got me then thinking, well, this is also something where we have put strategies in place. We have what's called the Strategy for Supporting Student Learning, whereby we talk about how motivated and supported engagement learning. Those processes will certainly support the learning and up to most optimistic growth mindset by putting these in place will hopefully increase the retention rates, high levels of achievement, and increased likelihood and that's great but I had to think about what my role was. My role as somebody who trains teachers because it wasn't just the impact of our students, I was also thinking in the future and this comes to my job interview here.

You probably look at a tin can opener, but there is a reason for this. Now, Sue, I was very lucky she was my interviewer and for my interview question before coming to university she said the question I had to do a presentation on was ‘what is your philosophy as an educator?’ Now, I like to think a little bit left field with my ideas. So, I told a short story about a tin can opener and hopefully it’ll make sense for you tonight. When I went to university as a young man, my dad drove me down to Plymouth, very excited as I was and we got nearer to my campus and he said, I'm just going to go into Sainsbury's for you. I was like, fantastic. So, he popped into Sainsbury's and sat there because I hadn't prepared anything. Unfortunately, he was only in there for about four minutes and he came out with a Sainsbury's carrier bag. I was like, cheers dad, thanks for this. And in this carrier bag was a Pot Noodle, curry flavour, a pack of rich tea biscuits, which is by far the worst of the biscuit varieties, I can assure you. He really knew me! And 0.29p can opener. You'll notice there's something missing from that bag entirely, which was any sort of canned goods. But looking back now, I'm pretty sure my dad was actually trying to teach me some sort of philosophical life outlook. Realistically, he just thought it was funny, you know? Knowing my dad. Now, at the time, I didn't get why I had this can opener but looking back on it, that can opener was actually great because when I moved into halls there was a lad across the halls from me and he had hundreds of cans in his room, but no can opener. I was suddenly of value to this young man. We made friends over a shared exciting meal of beans and beans and that was it, you know, because he didn't bring bread. But my question, what I raised and my philosophy as educators is my job as an educator is to give my students can openers. Very often there is this idea that we should give them the beans, give them the knowledge, whereas I'm kind of more from the other side. Go, no, my job should be to give you the tools that you can unlock the beans yourself. You should be able to find your own way of doing it. If we're looking for critically reflective thinkers who can make a difference in the future, we need to give them can openers, not just purely knowledge.

So again, thinking back to what is my role as a teacher? I've got to be thinking about what's the tools I'm giving them for the long-term future. I was giving them training, how to write a lesson plan, how to write a scheme of work, how to do all those sorts of elements, but I wasn't doing anything with regards to how I prepared them for the role in the long term.

Now looking at teaching as a topic in the future, straight away from the research, we can see there is a significant problem with teachers once they're in post. When they're here, we can make them as happy as they can be. We can give them all the support they need, but from the literature, once they're out in the role, there's an issue. The workforce in FE is declining every single year with a huge amount of them moving from full time roles to part time roles, mostly due to things such as high workload, high stress, the difficulties with regards to the working conditions and salary. Morris writes two papers, pressure valves one and two, and she says there's a massive increase with regards to counselling, occupational health services and work is actually declared as a mental health hazard. The HSE actually calls teaching number two in terms of most stressful jobs you can have. I used to have very long hair, I can assure you. Alongside this, there was a big problem with professional development. The opportunities that were there were very short, sharp, but not allowing for clarity or reflection of detail.

So why grit? Why resilience training? And it goes back to my tin can opener every single time, which was I was doing too much of the issues I had with ultrarunning. All the strength training, but none of the mental preparation. My job therefore, and my aims of my research was to go It's not just about giving you how to write a lesson plan or scheme of work, it's actually about give them something that's going to be beneficial with regards to handling the stresses that we noted. So, grits as a topic, this came to me because actually it was the first book I really read when I looked into it. Angela Duckworth, study on grit. Her idea, she called it ‘Perseverance and passion for long term goals’, with grits entailing that we can work strenuously towards challenges, maintaining effort and interest over a period of time with the gritty individual approaching the achievement as a marathon. The advantage being stamina. Duckworth’s study, she looked at over I think it was over 1500 Navy Seals going through their induction ‘hell week’. A six-week process of weeding out people who could and couldn't make it. She looked at spelling bees of children in America, and she looked at the SAT exams that many students took and she stated, ‘with my questionnaire I could spot those who were going to make it, who weren't going to make it’. Purely just off their mental resilience, their mental grit and their attitude when faced with adversity. So, I continued looking at this notion of grit and I kept coming across this other word, but when my clicker works it will slowly appear, now there's resilience.

Resilience as defined there, is the ability to respond effectively to stressful or traumatic experiences. The things that impact our emotional and mental wellbeing with resilient individuals displaying traits such as they're able to adapt with creative problem solutions. Use of flexible approaches. The committed to personal goals whilst understanding that at times we will need to change, we will need to be able to think and they can also utilise various strategies to bounce back from adversity to overcome previous struggles. Now, at first I found this, I kept moving one between the other. What's going to be more important? Is it great or is it resilience? What is the key thing? So, the only way I could do this was through some form of model, because I like stuff normally with arrows but this time I went for circles. I looked at over 150 different research papers on both grit and resilience and my aim was to go, is there some sort of common consensus? Is there some common themes that help me then recognise which is more important and I came up with this Venn diagram, and I'll let you have a quick second to look at that. There was definitely some form of pattern between the two. The gritty individual, as we said, passion, perseverance, overcome adversity. There were certain themes and certain key words that kept coming up. Self-discipline. Stability. Determination. Effort. Long term. Endeavour. On the resilient side, something slightly different, that was a slightly different theme that kept emerging. Emotional support. Flexibility. Developmental. Changes. Optimism. Bounce back. In the middle, though, there was this constant self-efficacy. Adversity. Challenges. If I look back at that definition of what I was there to do with regards from a can opener and the needs of my students. I started to move gently towards resilience going ‘I think this is the way I need to do it. if I'm identifying that students and especially my student teachers, are going to be having problems with regards to their emotional and mental well-being, resilience is definitely going to be the way that I need to push’.

This was also similarly noted when I looked at other case studies, I went back two slides. So, I looked at three key areas. The Armed Forces, sports and nursing. This came out because what I noticed a lot of time from those who were ultra or endurance athletes, there's quite a surprising number of them, when I spoke to them, who actually worked in those three disciplines anyway. There must be some form of connection, so I started to look at what do these sectors do. What do the armed forces do. Because in each of these areas, they will all face their own personal adversities, their own barriers, their own difficulties. The armed forces has had issues in the past of retention problems. Nursing, especially during Covid. It boggled my mind how, you know, I was whinging that I couldn't go outside that much more than once a day, how they did their job. I still to this day, I'm kind of. I think I used the term ‘fair shout’, which is quite high praise. Looking at the case studies of them, though, there were these, again, these patterns that kept emerging and this is what I thought would be something for me to consider as a structure of a scheme of work.

The armed forces talk about this ‘pillars of mental resilience’ based off the Panabaker resilience test they used in the armed forces in the USA. The British military called the pillars of mental resilience for their induction training. All soldiers, all new recruits go through these pillars. The idea being that a structured foundation over an extended period of time, not a one-day course, was what they needed, building them up slowly to fully understand. This idea of dealing with threats and challenge, it was prevalent in both the armed forces and in sports. A lot in sport was how you do it. I looked at the rugby camps during the Rugby World Cup when England won it. Sorry! And a lot of that was about how you deal with threat and how you revert to challenge in those situations. The notion of competition was a big one. It's quite prevalent as well in grit, where actually dealing with adversity, you turn it on its head. It's not a barrier, it's something that you go, okay, this is what I'm going to move from. I now see this as a bit of a competition with myself, that's something for me to take on. A big key word that kept popping up in both nursing and armed forces was this need for psychological first aid. This idea that actually the mental health training and resilience training was another form of first aid that, you know, goes a little bit deeper. It was what I actually needed personally when I came back from my own adversities and my own DNF was actually that psychological first aid. Then, this idea of the positive values in adversity. The nursing played a significant role, mostly through how they gelled together, how they pulled each other through and actually using the positives in those situations. Then a big one was this notion of reflective writing and reflective discussion, something that we had already begun here at the university based off Dr Sue Horder’s work. It was something that was used quite often within the nursing sector, again, something that was quite new for me.

So, my consideration was to go ‘I now have my structured scheme of work, I now have something that I need to build off. I'm going to use these three areas because they've proven to be successful.’ This is how I call my tenants of resilience. These are the things that will make us resilient.

So, my research aims. I looked to look at the impact of a resilience-based training module, specifically at first looking at trainee teachers. It was a problem that we had and I wanted to see if this was specifically support them. I want to look at Duckworth's grit assessment. I want to use it as a questionnaire. I want to give it to them and go ‘can I spot those who may potentially struggle early on?’ Stop it before the problem becomes larger, rather than deal with it when it's a little bit too late. The next stage after this was to examine how those features from resilience-based training would relate to teacher training. It was an area where at first when I was saying, I'm going to use strategies from the Army, that people straight away went to Band of Brothers mindset and was going, well, no, it's a bit deeper than this. I'm not getting them to crawl through fields, as much as I want to at times. So, my plan was as follows. I started off by identifying my low-grit students. I gave the questionnaire out to a group of 50 and from there using Duckworth's model I identified 13 students who, according to Duckworth, were low grit. I'm going to come back to that later on. I invited them to these extracurricular training programs, they then engage in eight sessions, one a month over the course of the program, where they'd discuss and share reflective diaries in a medium of their choice. Based off a series of questions that I give them all of my resilient tenets. At the end of the course, they'd resit the questionnaire, aiming to see has it actually made a difference? Has it altered? Has it changed? And then I had some great semi-structured interviews with them and then six months after completion when they'd left me and they were on their own, a reassessment, had I actually made a progress? Had they been able to implement theory in practice, which was the fundamentals?

Now. The hermeneutic dialogue circle became the key structure for my argument as to why this works. The best way I can describe this, because I always say, if you can explain it like I'm five, it means that you understand. That's the key thing. So, Caputo's idea I have basis also of Alverson and Skulberg’s idea is that very often when we do reflection, reflection on our own we're only really going to be looking at our own beliefs and our assumptions. If we take it from a mental health perspective, if you're in a negative place and you're reflecting, it's a bit difficult to turn around and go, you're great and you go, oh, okay, it's worked fantastic. If it did, that would be miraculous. But Caputo's idea is that hermeneutics is the process of interpretation through these new, re-emerging ideas of interpretation.

Simply put, and the best way to describe it for myself. Let's say you're going out to the cinema and you see a poster for a movie. Now, straightaway off the top of your head, you may look at that poster and go, that looks rubbish. I'm not going to go see that. And you don't go and see it. There we go. Caputo's idea, though, is that actually we need to engage with that post, maybe we go and watch it. What will come of this is actually there may be some new patterns we may have seen in go, actually, that wasn't that bad. It looked terrible on the poster because it had big red fonts and it was like a third in a series, but actually it's actually quite a good film. Very often with our students or people facing adversity. When you give them a challenge, they go, I'm not doing that. They're stuck here, but actually engaging with it, is an opportunity where they go, actually, that was quite good. That wasn't too bad. I'm working with a group of ladies at the moment who am training for the first ultra next year. They're called the early birds and they gave themselves that name, I can assure you. But, if I said to them a year and a half ago, I said ‘by the way, you're going to go run 37 miles across the coast of Pentland Welsh coastal path’, I know that they'd all be stuck here. There are features that I've kind of use with them, unbeknown to them, that have certainly helped move it to this new interpretation. In fact, three of them have already, ahead of my schedule, they've already gone off and they've already completed them, and they've completed huge races on their own and they had a whale of a time. This is fundamental to the hermeneutic dialogue circle, which is the next stage.

Again, moving from that process of just self-reflection on your own. The dialogue circle moves it to where actually you have people in groups, in collaboration. So, you're not just talking with yourself, you're talking with also other people who are also talk about the problem, who are also talk about another problem. My idea was to give them the reflective text and then to discuss it with people who also had that reflective text to share the feedback ‘What did you discover about yourself, well I discovered this? Did you really think that?’ and then the new ideas that emerged from it. The simple way again to put this. The first question I gave to one of the groups was ‘when was the last time you failed?’ and for a number of them, it was something they don't really want to talk about, they hide away from it, but I give them a month. They have a reflective diary. They can draw. They can write. They can shout down a kind of microphone or they can ignore it, but either way, they've got to come back. What I do is I sit them in a room, there’s three groups and the most important thing is I leave them to it. I walk out of the room and go ‘the floor is yours’. First two weeks wasn't too bad, they were starting to open up ‘What did you write?’, ‘I had this idea, I had this idea’. What we found by weeks four, by the fourth and the fifth session was they were actually coming and going ‘Oh, I thought about this. I had this problem. Well, I can help you with this. Oh, I had this problem. Do you really think that's a problem?’. They were suddenly in the little reflective group, they were actually resolving each other's problems and providing assistance where needed.

That group became much more than just reflective dialogue, it became a team of resilience. It became a unit together who worked together. Exactly the same fundamentals that we see in endurance sport, in the armed forces and in nursing. During times of adversity, people would share, they would work together. They didn't need a hierarchy, didn't need a leader, didn't need a boss to tell them what to do, how to think. They just worked together. So, this discussion and these groups really help them merge, it helped them gel, it helped them develop together and they became a cohesive unit. This was evaluated using Kirkpatrick's model, which is reaction, learning behaviour and results. I started with the semi-structured interviews with the students, then followed up with semi-structured interviews and questionnaire, getting their feedback, and then I had to take a pragmatic approach with mixed method, it allowed me a couple of things. If I had 100 students who did it and they all came back and said ‘you know, I feel fantastic, it was great’, that's useful but from my perspective as a teacher, I find only 10% of them qualify for the job or a huge amount of them leave, it’s not so good. So, I had to take employment data. I had to look at retention data. I had to add a quantitative to my qualitative.

What we found, post six months after the research 92% of them engaged with the programme successful completed. Bigg increase from where we previously were, which is a 57% increase. What we found it was those ones, if one wasn't going to turn up, the others pulled them in and go ‘come on no, let's work together on this one’. That was a huge breakthrough for us. We had the highest average attendance for taught face-to-face sessions in the last five years, where previously we had 71% attendance. Again, it doesn't look massive, but I can assure you that's huge when the PGCE, as I know we've got a few who teach on it here, it's fast moving, it's quick paced. You miss one session, unfortunately you miss a lot of information, so you've got to stay on top. Again, with this, it was about people pulling each other through. It was people working together, giving them that feedback, that encouragement that, you know, ‘you can do this, keep going’. Of those who identified as potentially being low grit 100% of them completed the PGCE and are already actively working in that post, which is all down to them. 100%.

That’s the key element here, sometimes when we're implementing a plan, we think it's going to put more workload on staff. In fact, this actually took workload off me because it was all on them. Go in a room and go and discuss and I'll see you in an hour's time. Sounds like a cop out for research, I can assure you, but I had theory to back me up, which was good. The key thing I always liked and it's the most interesting bit with doing any research is those findings, those results, when you first open them up and you first get to see because there are some things that I hadn't considered those darks because the little spots that you don’t see, the unknown unknowns. Some of the feedback I had was this notion of positive light. “Listening and talking with others helped me to see things in a positive light where I previously struggled.” The great thing about this, it's not just about come on, you do this. It's about going, come on, you can do this because you've achieved this and that was so often the case with many of them. It was that realisation ‘yeah, do you know what, I actually can’. For my own personal struggles when I have failed or DNF after the event, the people around me, the ones that go ‘yeah, but come on, you've done that, you've got this, you can do this’, it's that positive light that sometimes we all need. Really interesting was the very much the notion of safe space. The reason I left the room, from a theory point of view, was what we call the Hawthorne effect. If I'm sat in the room with them while they're doing the reflective diary, they're not really going to open up about it, I can assure you but actually, for many of them, they found that it was this place away from assessment. It's a place away from marking where they could just be free and they could just be themselves and what they are writing, I was never going to read the diaries. What they write was theirs and theirs alone. I didn't actually have a look at them, but it's an opportunity for them to share concerns and get support, more importantly from people going through the same issues.

Again, for those who are from the running community, from the ultra thing, it's the people around us who help get through the dark times. An example I have for myself, for those that have been up in Yorkshire, you may know a place called Crossfell. Anyone here know of Crossfell? I know two of you definitely do. Now, on a beautiful sunny day, Crossfell is beautiful but I can assure you at 3 in the morning it is not. It is a dark, damp, scary place and a couple of years ago I was up there I was about 170 miles in, I wasn't in the best position. I didn't feel that happy it was 3 a.m. and I was lost, but two people came up, I saw these head torches. I thought I could have gone somewhere else and there were angels who are coming to look after me, which was positive. But those people got me through because suddenly I was also now going through the challenge. We were doing the race together, and I was in a safe space because we could all whinge, we could all moan, but we could all pull each other but we were all going through the same thing. I was in my safe space and that made a huge difference to me. Regardless of physical attributes, those people got me through.

I was always interested in this one, that “the sessions provided a place where I could escape the hectic nature of the classroom.” That opportunity just to withdraw yourself a tiny bit, you're still there in the academic setting. You're still learning. You're not going off back home on your own way or potentially isolated. You are still there. But that pressure wasn't there. It was quiet. It was calm still just a classroom, but it was an opportunity for them to learn and then most importantly, “I wasn't on my own. I could get support from others as well as assist others going through the course”. It was this reciprocal nature of resilience. It's not one way. It's not one person saying, this is how you do it and this is what you do is people going, even then, ‘I don't know what's going on. I'm stuck. Well, I'm going to help you with that’ and then returning the favour. It was a huge part of effective resilience that we do need to consider.

Now there is a massive critique of group grit that I found, and it goes back to my very definition of it. From a point of view of where grit is often used, passion, perseverance to overcome adversity. Businesses love it. They go, yes, grit. Pull your socks up, get on with it and deal with things. But it comes with its flaws. Grit, in my opinion, is the ability to overcome a mountain. What happens though, if you can't get over that mountain first time, second time or third time? And this is where resilience is needed. Duckworth study, the questionnaire, again it comes with flaws. Can I truly pick out of a group of 50 people, 13, who I think have got low grit from a questionnaire of ten questions on that morning? The researchers straight away I can feel you kind of twitch and going ‘no you cannot’. Because your feelings, your ideas, your beliefs are all going to change on that day. I also found it interesting that question one was ‘I'm a hard worker’. Now let's think you're an induction day for the start of a new course. How many of you get to say to your teacher, no. And then the kind of reverse of this is actually resilience is all about self-awareness and if you're aware that you're a not a hard worker, that to me is a positive. It made sense in my head. So, we actually, Justine and I, who teach this module, we now have taught a module for the last couple of years with our foundation year group because, again, same problems, retention, withdrawal and we made an active decision to remove grit because this isn't something that's needed just for some people. I think it's something that all of us need in a way. We all have to face adversity in our lives no matter what it is. It doesn't have to be physical trauma. It doesn't have to be horrific mental trauma that can impact us. It's those challenges that are there to stop us at times.

So, we removed the Grit questionnaire. We've been running exactly the same module now with all students on the foundation year. This group has already, you know, in the last few years, identified huge kind of moments in their life about how actually it was, you know, it gave them confidence, the ability to overcome setbacks, this idea a strong mindset. This is something that goes out to many of our students. I always remember one of my personal biggest goals from this, I had a student who openly spoke about the impact of body dysmorphia on them. For my students in that room, this was a guy who was physically able, physically strong. He looked incredible, but he talked about the impact it had on him and his confidence. I had other people in that room turn around and go, how much it inspired them that even the tallest, even the biggest will sometimes find those moments of weakness and that was such a big eye opener for them that actually we're all fallible at times. We all need support. We're all going to face adversity. So, for our foundation year students, this has been something that has been really fascinating. Has it been easy? No. The first barrier we face often with this for many people is that because it is a process based on opening up and reflection, it takes time and this again goes back to some of the issues where we see it in a lot of businesses where resilience and grit training is used, often it's a one day course, ‘come to our one day resilience training’. I can assure you now, I've been running since 2012 and I still will face adversity, and I still need that confidence boosting now and again, a one day course isn't going to suddenly make me feel amazing. It takes time. We have some students who won't open up. They won't write the diary until maybe seven weeks in, but that's what we're catching. We're getting them on that seven week when they've had that chance. For this to be effective, it needs to be instilled over an extended period of time.

So, the grit strategy, what we need to do. We need to be able to provide open and honest sharing platforms for students and for staff in any business, regardless of whether it's education, regardless whether it's any sort of area. Those opportunities where you can openly talk about the problems that you face. Again, it's interesting when you do this piece of research, someone would tell me there was a technical term. You start to notice things a lot more, and some of you may already be aware of there are programs out there for farmers to talk to one another. Farming is a massively isolated industry. Cases, unfortunately, of mental health. Suicide of farmers is very high. So now you have these farmers talking communities, men's talking groups, men in sheds. Again, looking at it, they've just stolen my research. I can assure you. I think they were first, though. Men's walking groups. Again. They've identified a potential problem. What do you do? Let's get them together as a hermeneutic dialogue circle. Let's go out and go for a walk. Let's talk about how we're feeling. Just as I was coming to finish this, I saw one in a village hall and it was a first-time mums group run by other first-time mums. As you know, the people who've been there, they've done it. They get to give advice, they get listen, the get to share. It's that reciprocal nature of it. This idea of developing peer collaboration is so important where students could engage in informal and relaxed manners. Sometimes we need to take the assessment out of the learning. Assessments are important, but there are times where actually just being in the classroom and sharing together is more important than anything else. They don't always need to be measured for success. It's that opportunity where actually just open discussion is sometimes the greatest development of the skills. Very much like we all probably have settings. We may go to the gym, or we may go to the coffee shop or something like that but there are peer support groups. You don't assess one another in those settings, but it certainly works.

And finally, this willingness for us to identify problems early, able to listen, support and signpost. The great thing I have found here is a number of staff who have mental health first aiders. One of the things I learnt from that was it's all about networking and signposting to the right professionals and with our students working together. I had a number in the study who go ‘just so you know Jules, that person, they didn't pass or assignment, they didn't feel so good about it. I think you may need to give them a heads up’. It's like brilliant, thank you and that's the information they may be reluctant to tell me about because maybe hierarchy, embarrassment, fear, worry. That fear of failure.

Now the title of this. I called it foxholes, and at first a few people, I had to explain it a couple of times what I meant by foxholes but it does make sense. And that is, for some of you may recognise, if anyone here has watched Band of Brothers, it follows the lives of true story about major Dick Winters, who follows Easy Company through World War two and reading his memoirs one of the quotes right at the end on his section leadership, he talks about war, brings out the worst and the best in people. “Wars do not make men great, but they do bring out the greatness in good men” and he talks very highly about the notion about how actually adversity and challenges will really shape and mould us. They make us who we are. He talks about, in his memoirs, The Battle of Bastogne, where soldiers were pinned down for several days in foxholes in the forests with gunfire going above, inadequate clothing, poor weather, but it was the people they had around him in the foxholes with them. During those moments, they were all going through the same mire, the same difficulties, the same problems but it was those people amongst each other who helped get them through, help pull them up when they were facing adversity. So, you know, it was hugely positive for me because every time I went through something else going, who's in my foxhole with me? And I'm very lucky. I've got a few people who, when called upon, they're in my foxhole. They've been there. They've done it.

It's funny thinking about this, after an adventure a couple of years ago, John and myself did a race up the 280 miles up the Yorkshire Spine and it wasn't very pretty but we met in a coffee shop later on and it was a little bit of a trauma moment. Emma and myself also had a traumatic discussion and we sat there and went ‘other people won't get it’. When you talk about how hard or how horrible it is, you've got to have lived it and I have the same thing. I'm not a student going through the same barriers as many of my other students. I'm not, for many of them, maybe a single parent. I'm not raising children at the same time whilst doing a program, not having to do this and balance a job. I'm not having to travel or catch buses or trains. How much do I really know? How much do I really understand? Well, the best person really is a person who is also going through it as well, because they can share that experience. They're in their foxholes together. So, you know, it was particularly prevalent for me, reading that section in his book.

So, how can I use this to support my workplace? We need to be thinking about if we're to prepare students for the future. Then we must ensure that there's time for people to learn from their experience. John Locke talks about how people are born as a blank sheet of paper, but you learn your knowledge and you gain it through experience. We've got to be able to provide people with that opportunity. We need to allow them peer to peer collaboration in an informal and relaxed manner, most importantly. Sometimes, removing ourselves from the equation is actually when they're going to open themselves up a little bit more and we need to also remove the negativity of failure. Setbacks and not setbacks are opportunities for us to make progress. All my progress in my life, whether it's been academic, whether it's been personal, have been built on the foundations of my failures. Many of my students who have struggled on the course have made progress from the perceived failure, and we need to make sure that they are aware as to how they can use those. Those who withdrew, many of them had failed in an assignment, or they struggled whilst on placement, or they had a barrier and they went ‘that's it’, but a lot of it they hadn’t had chance to reflect, hadn’t had chance to look at it and a chance to build on it.

We need to take the time for both self and peer reflection, a chance to review your progress and receive feedback on your development. We need to provide that opportunity for students to reflect on themselves. Allow them to share in groups, we need to utilise our peers. We need to be open to critical feedback is fundamentally important. We need to build on those foundations of how we do that. I know for myself, I happily will take on feedback from it because I know that it's only there in a positive light. You know, we don't have set backs. We just have new opportunities and we need to more importantly, take the time to rewind. We can make progress, but sometimes it's good to just stop and restart and think and learn from it. I really do hope that some of the ideas will slowly start to infiltrate into your own thinking and you know, I am looking to really take this forward. Justine who are delivering this foundation year, have already started to see positive growth in those individuals and we really do, you know, their feedback and their engagement has been superb and if this is something that you would like to maybe potentially take forward in your own organisation or you want to delve into further, I'd be more than happy to talk to you about that later on. So, thank you very much.

Lecture proceedings closed by Dr Sue Horder.