Extracts from an essay addressing the question: ‘Was there a learning curve in the British army on the Western Front?’

This is the opening paragraph.

The most significant mistake made by most of those who argue for a ‘learning curve’ in the BEF during the First World War is to assume their task is to demonstrate that learning took place within the army over time. In fact, it would be extraordinary if, in an organisation of three million men over four years, some learning had not taken place. Instead, it is necessary to engage with the concept that the process of learning follows a curve in which, on average, the greatest improvement in aptitude occurs during the earliest phases of development. This was certainly not the case with the army on the Western Front, but this was less because it was not learning than because it lacked the tools to make itself effective. Much more significant than a learning curve, therefore, was the curve in British munitions production, which increased exponentially in the latter half of the war and thereby gave the army the equipment to impose attrition effectively on its German opponents.

(This is very good and comes close to the ‘flair’ that we discussed in our meeting. Although the writing is not exactly elegant, it demonstrates intellectual originality by taking on the essay title and re-working it, thinking outside the box. It matches too different curves together – that of learning versus that of production – and manages in this introductory paragraph to suggest its argument without laying it out in exhaustive detail.)

Here is a paragraph from later in the same essay:

Once allied with improvements in the direction of artillery, including air-spotting, sound-ranging and accurate predicted fire, the massive increase in industrial production of gun barrels and shells therefore enabled a suppression of German firepower that would allow British infantry to reach the far side of no-man’s land and to remain in the captured trenches. As Palazzo, in his study of gas tactics, has pointed out, this qualitative and quantitative improvement did not precede attempts by infantry formations to learn from their experiences in battle and to find solutions to the conundrum of trench assault, but rather allowed such endeavours to become not only successful, but also – as a direct result – acknowledged as part of a virtuous circle of training and adaptation.1 Victory on the Western Front, however, required the successful repetition of this process of fire and manoeuvre time and again: for that reason, the development of highly functional logistics system was crucial. Here, the key factor was not a ‘learning curve’, but instead the importation of knowledge and experience as the army turned to Sir Eric Geddes, a civilian expert in railway transportation, to solve the problems of feeding men and guns.

(Some over long and rather complex sentences, but I think that what is good here is a) the amount crammed in – this student gives the impression through their style of writing with confidence and b) the logical progression – the recapitulation of previous paragraphs first, then the fitting of this into the broader pattern of learning, then the turning of this slightly on its head with some more

critical thought about what ‘learning curve’ might mean. And we can tell when we reach the end of this paragraph what the next one will be about – Geddes and how he changed the transport system. The reference sums up a complex argument in the student’s own words rather than using an extensive quotation).