

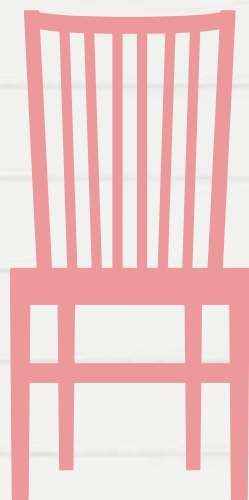
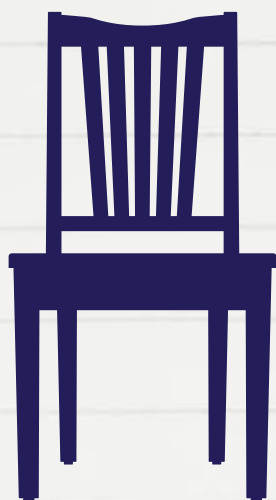
EMOTIONS

AND LEARNING:

in praise of a forum



Phil Topham describes how a forum to discuss emotions and learning can promote inter-professional conversations about student support and development



My experience as a practitioner was that, although academic difficulties were often the last straw that brought students to the counselling service, we did not often use counselling time to discuss them. Students would present with being unable to study or with anxieties around studying but would actually want to talk about other personal issues. At the same time, academic colleagues would express concerns about students' emotional health and its impact on their engagement with learning. From experience across the higher education sector, it appeared that attitudes to student support fell somewhere between two rather extreme poles: *'Students are not here to have emotional crises; they're here to get a degree,'* and *'Students are fragile creatures who must be given every support to survive and succeed.'*

The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) is the professional body in the US for what we would call student services staff. Their institutional members emphasise partnerships with academic faculties to ensure a rounded approach to student development. This contrasts with the view of one of my colleagues that – speaking psychoanalytically rather than cynically, I think – the counselling service is 'the toilet of the institution'. Learning stuff is done by academics and messy emotional stuff by us. This is peculiar, given the weight of evidence that our intellectual abilities are so interlinked with our emotional processes and general functioning^{1,2}.

Idea of a forum

My research advisory group had suggested convening a forum to map interests and concerns relating to psychological support for students. We identified emotions, learning and student development as topics that – singly or in combination – would be relevant to staff who worked directly with students. I organised the forum with a colleague who managed academic support and, like me, worked and had contacts across the institution. The publicised aims of the forum were:

'To reflect on the role of emotions in learning, on the connections between personal and academic development, and to share perspectives on the general development of students.'

It was described as an exploratory venture whose outcomes might include the identification of priorities for student development, topics for research collaboration and ideas for improving practice. More in hope than expectation, we suggested some preparatory reading³.

Process

We invited 50 people to the forum, of whom 13 were unable to attend but asked to be informed of the outcomes and any subsequent events. In total, 21 people attended – a majority of academics but also advisers, counsellors, specialists, managers and students.

We arranged the event for a three-hour period on a weekday afternoon in term time. A buffet lunch was provided and the programme was tightly structured to make the best use of time. It began with three 10-minute presentations to stimulate discussion around the forum topics.

I talked about my undergraduate experience, raising questions about the links between cognition and emotion in learning, the role of university in one's life history, and the links between personal and academic development. A colleague from the Business School presented her research on the changing relationship between student anxiety and independence through the undergraduate years, and how this was mirrored in the staff experience of students. A colleague from the Faculty of Education talked about the significance of the individual narratives that students bring to learning, illustrating this with stories about student names, time lines of students' family experiences and an example from her own history.

Colleagues were then allocated to one of four groups in order to achieve a mix of roles and departments. The groups were asked to address three questions:

- How do you understand the relationships between emotions, learning and student development?
- How do you work with (the relationships between) emotions, learning and student development?
- What are the implications of your discussion for (one for each group):
 - a. student support and guidance?
 - b. university policy?
 - c. teaching and learning?
 - d. research?

Each group was asked to keep a written record of the views, issues and options arising from their discussions.

Following the small group discussions, participants reassembled for a plenary session to report on their discussions and to invite further reflection. A note-taker recorded the key points of the plenary discussion. In the month following the forum, the notes from the small group and plenary sessions were collated and emailed to participants to review for accuracy.

Themes

The data did not justify a full qualitative analysis but the principles were applied. Discussion notes were categorised by topic and topics judged to be semantically related but distinct from other topics

were subsumed into six themes. Narrative summaries for each theme were prepared and checked against their constituent comments. This analytical account was sent to forum colleagues for comment and recommendations. The themes were as follows.

Diversity

(Student motivation; expectations; change)

Students vary widely in their age, background, lifestyle, motivation, expectations and experience. Staff and students have to negotiate varying expectations in changing contexts. Diversity is an asset to the university community but is not fully represented to the wider world; the institution and its staff could take more advantage of the range of students' experience.

Becoming a student

(Student narrative; learning process; reflection)

There is value in seeing the transition to university or college as a process, rather than a stage, whereby students develop an individual narrative and (original or revised) sense of agency. As past experience affects their adaptation to university learning, students will benefit from education and reflection on how they learn. The duration of this adaptation suggests an early start and fully-supported engagement with academic support systems.

Emotions

(Emotions and learning)

It is debatable whether there is a culture of emotional intelligence in the university. A varying range of emotions is prevalent in staff and students, with emotional stress being attributed to aspects of institutional infrastructure. There are important, known relationships between emotions and learning of which the university or college could take more advantage. The size of student groups is a limiting factor and there is concern about turning education into therapy. There may be value in working with specific functional and dysfunctional emotions; naming emotions and removing emotional blocks are helpful.

The academic community

(Teaching and learning; student choice; staff experience)

There is a sense of a fragmented community and of a distance between staff and students. There is a need for learning communities within the mass context. A focus on programmes rather than modules would be more cohesive and regulations should accommodate a range of individual student needs. Integration of academic and pastoral functions varies across the institution; student choice is central to integrating student needs, emotions and ways of learning.

Staff well-being and feeling valued is important to their work with students. They need to be able to work openly and non-defensively. They need opportunities to process emotional aspects of their teaching/pastoral experience and to develop understandings of the

learning process. There is a considerable body of international research on student development that is largely untouched in the UK and which would be beneficial to the university and its staff⁴.

Student autonomy

(Student support; student consumers)

Students need to take more responsibility for their learning rather than relying on staff. Increased competitiveness in the higher education sector might lead, through increased student support, to students becoming more dependent.

The dialogue about student support tends to focus on what is wrong and should focus more on healthy functioning. Students from some backgrounds need more support and there is value in all students being known to a member of staff. Students benefit from continuity of support and from staff being available to them when they are ready to engage. Students are consumers in some institutional relationships and clients in others; there is a concern that they do not become demanding consumers in the classroom.

Staff-student relationships

(Equality; student feedback; talking about things)

Relationships between staff, students and the institution are an integral and important part of education. Staff vary in their motivation to engage in relationships and mature students are easier to work with. There can be power inequalities in adult-to-adult relationships and if staff manage expectations students will perceive a parent-child relationship. Staff need to show that they listen to students and the institution must give students the information they need to debate their experience. Staff should discuss their varying relationships with students but these and other conversations are not taking place because no one owns them.



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Feedback

Feedback was obtained from 13 of the 21 forum colleagues, who described the experience as 'welcoming', 'enjoyable', 'valuable', 'interesting', 'useful' and 'pertinent'. They appreciated an opportunity for inter-professional dialogue, which did not happen elsewhere in the institution but was seen as necessary to developing shared views on the student experience.

They supported a further forum with a clear focus, increased student involvement and, for some, an action plan. They made a number of proposals for future forums, prominent among which were further exploration of:

- a) the role of emotions in learning
- b) working relationships between staff and students.



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Implications

Although the forum discussions were enthusiastic – and perhaps for that reason – the notes taken were not substantial (five pages of A4) and were sometimes partial or ambiguous. Therefore the analysis should be read as tentative and requiring confirmation.

The view of participants was that emotions are pervasive and relevant but do not have a clearly assigned role in teaching and learning. They thought that staff and students could usefully understand more about the learning and development processes in which they are involved, while the challenges arising from their working relationships with students are open to debate and negotiation. Readers may like to compare their experience of their own institution against the narrative summaries above; any of the themes identified could be a focus for your own forum.

I wanted to write this up because the content is informative – however provisional – and also because the process was instructive. It was clear from participant feedback that the forum was experienced as a relatively unusual and rewarding event that combined affective engagement with constructive debate. I suggest that this positive staff engagement says something about what is often missing from current further and higher education culture, possibly not helped by our institutions becoming more corporate and competitive.

Based on their websites, most institutions now aspire to be global centres of educational excellence (now that may be a bit cynical). The quality of the student experience is a priority and counselling services are expected to justify their funded existence by the extent to which they contribute to that experience. Engaging with faculty staff on psychological issues that affect students is one way to build a contribution and maintain a profile.

Our forum was cheap and easy to organise. In these straitened times there are reduced opportunities outside agenda-led meetings to meet with colleagues across the faculty-service divide. There is little reflective space to consider topics of mutual interest, as above, for restorative or developmental purposes. As a practitioner-turned-researcher, I know the challenges of collaboration from the perspectives of both academic and student services. If permanent arrangements are hard to maintain, it may be that periodic, energising events such as an afternoon forum would be a healthy alternative.

I have heard it said that higher education is like housework: there is always something to be done. There are certainly endemic features that arise from the core aims of educational and personal development. Based on their recurrence over the years as topics of institutional or sector-wide interest, these include transition to university, retention/withdrawal, mental health and interpersonal/cultural conflict. Because institutions have no long-term memory, there is a tendency to reinvent the working party wheel – good for taking a fresh look but not so good if past work is duplicated. In the UK we have no models of student development in common practice and no NASPA to hold the ball. Regular faculty-service forums would enable the academic and cultural capital relating to student support to be held and transmitted and create a precedent for a reflective space.

The student buzz in the corridors and cafes seems pretty much as it ever was, although research indicates that today's young students are more individualistic, narcissistic, materialistic and instrumental in their approach to further or higher education. They are certainly better dressed. If the counselling profession is becoming more research-oriented then these findings, our forum findings on emotions and learning, and the relatively untapped literature on student development indicate that there is plenty of scope for conversations between faculties and services.

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References:

- 1 Damasio A. *Descartes' error*. London: Vintage; 1994.
- 2 Pekrun R, Goetz T, Titz W, Perry RP. Academic emotions in students' self-regulated learning and achievement: a program of qualitative and quantitative research. *Educational Psychologist*. 2002; 37(2): 91–105.
- 3 Hoare CH (ed). *Handbook of adult learning and development*. Oxford University Press; 2006.
- 4 Participants were not asked to reference their assertions, but the following journals would be a useful start:

Journal of College Student Development – <http://www.jcsdonline.org/home.html>

British Journal of Guidance and Counselling – <http://www.tandfonline.com/action/aboutThisJournal?show=aimsScope&journalCode=cbjg20>

Journal of Further and Higher Education – <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cjfh20/current>