Issues in teaching and learning:

student retention in higher education

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the learner as they 'are' rather than 'how they should be or become' is important if we are to address the attrition rate in higher education. Systems of higher education all too often impose an inflexible 'recipe' approach to education upon both student and lecturer which may be unhelpful and contradictory in supporting and facilitating students to achieve their potential. I would argue that before we encourage students to engage with the stepped aspirational treadmill of academic study, time exploring this process with the student would be beneficial for both student and institution. We need to know 'where students are' before we begin to know how to help them get to 'where they want to be'. Effective teaching and learning requires all parties – student, teacher and institution – to take time to 'listen and understand'.

INTRODUCTION

Writing in the context of working alongside adults who have profound and multiple learning difficulties, Varnier (2013: 35) advises that, 'it takes time to listen and to understand' and that happiness and well-being can be found in 'presence and relationship'. This concept of 'presence and relationship' is of importance to all institutions, teachers and learners. There is an established growing body of literature and research into what constitutes the most effective model of the 'ideal' educator and what it means to be a 'successful' learner. Roffey (2012) reminds us that these two interrelated elements of teaching and learning are not separate and are themselves closely entwined with the 'needs' and purposes of the institution.

The fulfilment of each of these three sets of 'needs' is influential to the success of student, teacher and institution. They each require an element of time and effort to build an effective learning partnership if they are each to experience an element of 'success'. Attrition rates in higher education and schooling are a reminder of the importance that must be given to the process of constantly re-examining these three areas of 'need' and seeking effective ways and means to resolve them.

Student well-being, teacher well-being – the importance of 'relationship

Roffey (2012) points out that notions of 'social capital', ie expectations and interactions that come together to 'promote trust, respect, value, and collaboration' between the student and teacher (p. 8), are significantly important in promoting both teacher and student well-being. Roffey draws upon a number of wide-scale research projects to conclude that a clear link between teacher and student well-being exists. Roffey describes 'three dimensions' of teacher well-being: feeling valued and cared for; feeling overloaded; job stimulation and enjoyment (p. 8). Wherever teacher well-being is enhanced, student attainment and well-being is also positively influenced, characterized by students having more positive feelings and attitudes, positive relationships, resilience and higher levels of satisfaction with learning experiences (p. 9).

An important element in developing well-being for both students and teachers is that of having the time

and opportunity to form a meaningful relationship together.

We are social animals (Roffey 2011: 2ff.) and recognise at the deepest level there is an innate motivator which seeks connection and belonging reflecting a 'eudaemonic' quality of well-being which Roffey recognises in, for example, Seligman's (2002, 2011) positive psychology (pp.3 ff.).

Te Riele (2006) asserts that teaching as an activity is akin to a 'caring profession', requiring the forging of a relationship between student and teacher containing elements of enthusiasm for the subject together with friendliness and rapport in order to motivate and engage students in effective learning.

Keddie (2014) draws upon Moreton-Robinson (2013: 341ff.) to further highlight the concept of 'relationality' to demonstrate that through relationship develop feelings of reciprocity, cooperation and obligation between student and teacher. Noddings (2003, 2005) questions the focus simply upon 'achievement' at the expense of student autonomy and the effective forming of a learning relationship.

The aspiring student needs to begin the relationship with their institution and their teachers very early in the application process to allow them to adjust their thinking and prepare more fully for higher education. Canning (2010), for example, outlines pre-enrolment relationship-building opportunities including regular 'face-to-face' meetings, online forums, social networking, directed reading, etc.

Why we need to identify, and help students overcome, barriers to effective learning

Falasca (2011: 586ff.) cites two main barriers to successful adult learning. The first concerns 'external or situational' issues. These comprise issues often outside the control of the learner such as health, ageing, employment, etc. The second is concerned with 'internal' or 'dispositional' barriers such as failing to explore different perspectives on a subject or a negative mindset; relying upon old or inappropriate understandings of how people learn; being overly anxious or very single-minded. Educators can and do play an important part in helping learners to overcome all of these barriers by building a warm, welcoming and student-centred learning environment involving a high degree of learner autonomy to decide what is studied and how. Learners who are actively encouraged and facilitated to diagnose their own learning needs work out the best strategies and receive support to achieve their learning goals. Cross (2004) suggests that establishing a 'friendly and open atmosphere', managing the degree of difficulty to match the student's ability, is essential, together with subject interest and relevance. Ryan & Dowling (2006) maintain that whatever institutional approach is adopted, success is more likely if the needs of the learner are identified before they start their study. Before induction it means developing a sense of 'connectedness' with fellow students, subject, teachers and the institution. Bekhradnia (2013) in the Higher Education Policy Institute Report 61 notes that only 8% of students felt their experience of HE was as expected, with students who received fewest teacher contact hours being the least satisfied.

Krishnamurti (1990) points to the dilemma that exists between the 'ideals' of the institution and the actual reality experienced by the learner. Does imposing our own ideals as educators of where we want the student to get to lead us to obscure the perceptions and understandings of the learner, Thereby leading to a concentration on 'what should be' rather than on 'what is'? As educators we have carefully mapped out the learning points and stages which we feel allow students to glide smoothly onwards towards the end point of each module and programme. However, to begin this journey before properly understanding and preparing for the starting point, before addressing the motivation, fears, anxieties and skill sets of each learner, surely leaves out an important and pivotal element of the learning process, an element that can only be achieved through developing a meaningful relationship between the student, their teachers and the institution. ■

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