

A Good Practice Guide to Learning Relationships in Higher Education



What Works? Student Retention & Success



Introduction

This guide is an outcome of the project, 'Dispositions to Stay – and Succeed', part of a HEFCE / Paul Hamlyn funded Retention Grants Programme to identify, evaluate and disseminate good practice relating to student retention in the Higher Education (HE) sector. Northumbria University in partnership with Bedfordshire and Manchester universities conducted research from 2008 to 2011 (Harding, J. and Thompson J., 2011) into the retention and progression of students. A significant finding was that students' relationships with both staff and their peers were key factors in them achieving their goals and completing their academic programme. This guide draws upon systematically-gathered qualitative data from 32 employed graduates, 27 graduates and 10 members of staff. Its purpose is to explain and illustrate, for academic staff, how retention and progression might be improved in Higher Education through careful management of relationships, both with students and between them.

Why do Learning Relationships Matter?

The notion of learning relationships is implicit in the historic philosophic and educational theme of dialogic (as opposed to didactic) learning. A rich tradition from Socrates, Rousseau, Dewey, Piaget and onwards has emphasised the role of teacher as promoter of questions and exchange within the context of a learning relationship. The quality of such relationships is therefore of interest. The American Psychological Association's (APA) research-validated Learner-centred Psychological Principles (APA, 1997) established the importance of attending to the personal domain as much as to the technical domain, if the intention is to maximise healthy functioning and promote motivation, learning and achievement for all learners¹.

The Dispositions to Stay and Succeed project employed the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI), a model and on-line instrument developed in the Graduate School of Education at Bristol University that describes and measures seven dimensions of 'Learning Power'. (Deakin Crick, R., Broadfoot, P. And Claxton, G., 2004)

A subsequent study (Deakin Crick et al, 2007) explored the links between the seven ELLI variables and other constructs known or presumed to be key features of an effective learning environment. These were teacher beliefs and practices, students' perceptions of their teachers' practices; student motivational variables, organisational emotional climate and student attainment outcomes. The findings suggested strongly, perhaps predictably, that students who report themselves as having the highest levels of learning power, on the seven ELLI dimensions, also report their teachers as having the highest levels of 'learner-centred practices'. These are the practices originally found (McCombs, B. and Whisler, J., 1997) to be key influencers of motivation and achievement and include four core 'domains' to which the teacher must attend:

¹ The principle was further elaborated through empirical research at Bristol UK, characterising an optimum 'ecology for learning' by relating such learner-centred variables to measures of achievement and students' 'learning power', as measured by the 'Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory' (ELLI) – the instrument central to the Dispositions to Stay project.

Why do Learning Relationships Matter?

*providing positive classroom climate and relationships;
honouring student voice and providing individual challenge;
encouraging higher order thinking and learning skills; and
adapting to individual developmental differences*

(Deakin Crick et al. 2007 p. 45)

The bearing such practices have upon relationships in classrooms and seminar rooms is inescapable: if we want our learners to be self-motivated, confident and high-achieving, then we would do well to relate to them in accordance with this learner-centred paradigm.

What is still more inescapable and challenging for HE providers is the bearing their teaching will have on the readiness of new graduates for the workplace in the 21st Century. An overarching aim in Higher Education is to launch successful lives - and successful lives will be measured at home, in communities and in the workplace in terms of action. It is what we **do** in these settings that matters and action in the world is always contingent on collaboration with others. Such collaboration in turn is contingent on understanding of and skills in initiating and sustaining learning relationships.

Furthermore, if an aim of Higher Education is to cultivate 'future leaders', it is worth relating what we know about learning to what we know about leadership and change. A study by Towers Perrin (2008) of nearly 90,000 employees in 18 countries found that only 21% of employees were fully engaged and that improving an organisation's capacity to learn will only have the desired impact on performance if it improves engagement at the same time. Such engagement is promoted not by traditional leader characteristics (rational, analytic, dispassionate) but rather by leaders with emotional intelligence, a coaching orientation, authenticity and humility.

Even in the corporate sector, it seems, we find a tension between traditional didacticism and the kind of leadership that engages people through positive relationships. Higher Education practitioners will hardly be preparing students to compete for the more inspiring jobs if they, too, retreat into analytical rationality, resort to directing, instructing or 'being afraid of the soft stuff'!

A Good Practice Guide to Learning Relationships in Higher Education

In its second phase, the Learning Power research at Bristol interviewed many practitioners, learners and experts about the kind of teaching that they experienced as helpful in developing learning power. A number of key themes emerged, which give added emphasis to the principles already observed:

The most significant theme emerging from observation, teacher/ researcher reflection and teacher qualitative reports was the centrality of the relationship between learner and teacher. Each teacher identified this as very important ...

(Deakin Crick et al, 2007, p147)

In a recent blog the educationalist Professor John Cowan said '*if I can attend effectively to the affective needs of students ... then they will (almost) look after their cognitive needs for themselves*'² (Thompson, J. 2011) and many educators already know intuitively that the emotional climate for learning and the quality of interactions with other human beings are as or more important to the achievement of agreed educational and professional goals as all the technical and curricular components commonly and expensively marshalled under the name of 'educational provision'. The question we are left with is, 'What can educators actually do, individually and collectively, to build such factors into their provision?'

2 Learning in HE JISC MAIL, 26th January, 2011

What did the Northumbria Research tell us?

The 'Dispositions to Stay' study emphasises the importance of relationships between staff and students and between students in supporting student engagement and success. Despite structural barriers to such relationships – the size of learner cohorts, the formal teaching settings, the power imbalance between th/e marker and the marked – teaching staff are able to establish such relationships. When they do so, staff and student motivation is increased and decisions to leave, to stay and to engage are more positive. Students are shown to have positive relationships with staff who are enthusiastic and passionate about what they teach and who create a well thought out and engaging programme. Staff are more likely to form positive relationships with students if they engage with them actively in lecturers and seminars promoting interaction and a climate in which questions are encouraged. For many students the academic tutor is an intimidating figure and active attempts to acknowledge, discuss and break down power imbalance are important. Students seek some middle ground between a distant formality and an inappropriate friendliness and describe this ideal in terms of a mentoring or coaching relationship with staff. Here staff are professional but approachable, they actively listen to students, encourage and respond to questions and opinions, show an interest in students' progress and respond to their views about teaching. They even incorporate the interests of students into the programme, allowing them to help shape their learning and making the topic more engaging. A subtle but important quality appreciated by students is the ability to join with the students as a learner, to admit fallibility, communicate a sense of fresh excitement in the subject, empathise with the broader context of students' lives and share something of the broader context of their own. A key notion is one of mutual respect; students expect and want high levels of professionalism from their teachers - good timekeeping, well planned teaching, subject expertise and authority. This authority however needs to be tempered with humanity e.g. some sensitivity when responding to poor work or time management problems.

Meanwhile students talk negatively about their relationships with teachers who are seen to erect barriers between themselves and their class: seeming to avoid eye-contact, delivering through apparent reading of PowerPoint slides, overloading learners with large quantities of indigestible information

A Good Practice Guide to Learning Relationships in Higher Education

and offering few opportunities for interaction. Such an experience makes students reluctant to approach staff and reduces their motivation and confidence.

An important part of acknowledging the personal and wider context of students' lives is talking about learning. Students want and feel the need to think about themselves as learners and the broader context of their experience of university. Through such a process they expect to develop and grow and find success and their place in the world. This exciting and vital part of the student experience can be best engaged with and encouraged, not as a marginal activity, but as integral to the mainstream of the programme so that the emerging self awareness and confidence are part of and connected to progression through the degree. A powerful catalyst for this developing learner awareness in the Dispositions to Stay and Succeed project was the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI). ELLI intrinsically acknowledges the broader context of the student experience and values the students beyond their academic achievement. When integrated with modules and programmes, when properly contextualised, when clearly established as non-judgemental and when properly supported with appropriate material and processes, ELLI has consistently proved to engage students, raise their self awareness and promote personal development

What do Effective Learning Relationships look like?

The Dispositions to Stay and Succeed research indicates that we need to address questions about ‘How to be...’ and ‘How to act...’ in relation to our students, as we seek to establish effective learning relationships with and between our students. Again the ELLI research is prescient:

(Learning power is) a quality or a ‘way of being’ that is inherent in individuals and also appears to be powerfully influenced by the relationships within which individuals find themselves learning, particularly with their teacher and with key people in their ... community

(Deakin Crick et al. 2007 p. 303)

Having and utilising effective learning relationships is identified as a part of one of the seven key ‘dimensions’ of learning power in ELLI but here these learning relationships are to be seen alongside the need sometimes to get on with learning alone. Powerful learning relationships are set against both isolation as a learner and dependence as a learner.

The relationships established, observed and described by the teachers ... were characterized by trust and affirmation and, significantly, by challenge. Bond (2004) defines trust as a relationship of such quality that both parties are confident that it can withstand the challenges of inequality, risk, uncertainty and difference. In order to learn something, the learner has to move beyond their ‘comfort zone’ and often has to face uncertainty and risk. Furthermore, the teacher often does know, where the learner does not, and this is an unequal balance. The characteristic of trust, or the confidence that these things can be faced and negotiated, and that the relationship will not break down through abuse or fragility, appears to be a critical thread in the ecology of a learner-centred environment. It could even be argued that where there is no risk, uncertainty or inequality, there is unlikely to be learning. While relationships of this quality were observed and reported, they were difficult to provide quantitative evidence for, thus making it a finding that could be readily overlooked.

A Good Practice Guide to Learning Relationships in Higher Education

In fact, experientially, the teachers in the study described relationships as ‘foundational’ to building learning power.

(Deakin Crick, R. 2007 pp.147-8)

This notion of a ‘way of being’ in relation to others clearly involves mutual trust and might help to illuminate the practical difference we are seeking to make, by provoking us to attend to our own Learning Relationships just as we seek to enable our students to develop theirs.

This section looks at several ways in which staff represented in the Dispositions to Stay and Succeed research enhanced their relationships with students. These include spending more time with students, creating a professional and approachable image, being personable and creating mentoring-style relationships with students.

There is a clear link between the amount of time staff are willing to invest in student-related tasks and the students’ perceptions of their relationship. Making students feel valued and part of the academic community is an important factor in creating positive relationships with students. Staff can demonstrate how they value students by listening to them, by taking the time to take an interest in their progress, ensuring they fully understand the topic, incorporating the views of students into the planning of programmes and teaching sessions, being open to criticism and responding promptly to queries.

Students are more likely to have good relationships with staff they deem professional. Staff need not only to be well respected academics with a wealth of knowledge but also to project this image to their students.

“Your research sometimes that’s a way in isn’t it, it allows them to have a certain amount of respect for what you’ve done and that you’ve applied something rather just stood in a classroom.”

Member of Staff

A well thought out and engaging programme is one way to do this but there are also a number of other behaviours to take into consideration. Well organised staff project a professional image, replying to e-mails promptly and arriving at lectures and seminars on time, even if their students do not;

What do Effective Learning Relationships look like?

example is a very powerful teaching tool and if staff have a professional attitude then students are more likely to model their behaviour.

Although it is important to make students feel relaxed, staff should avoid jokes that could be considered distasteful or offensive as this compromises their professional image. Students have good relationships with staff who they feel treat them with respect and who do not abuse their power within the staff student relationship. Staff who abuse the staff student relationship by displaying a lack of respect for students are seen as unprofessional. This includes staff who are dismissive of students, ridicule students and get angry or annoyed when an assignments have not been completed.

“it’s ethics... it’s about having a sensibility about putting yourself in their shoes and also not putting yourself in a big pair of boots and thinking you’re the best thing as sliced bread because you could misuse your position. We are in a position of power and that’s not about our jobs or what we earn but also what we know.”

Member of Staff

“I’d say mutual respect - not patronising, not talking down, not giving the impression that students are stupid which I see colleagues doing which is appalling. I think it’s just good relationships generally, treat people how you would want them to treat you.”

Member of Staff

Students have good relationships with staff who they find approachable and available. To an undergraduate, academics can at first seem intimidating; so it is important for staff to signal that students can approach them. Staff who interact with students during lectures and who don’t rush off after lectures are seen as the most approachable by students. Staff who address students by name or with a simple ‘Hello!’ when they bump into them on campus and those who are willing to talk to students without appointments are also seen as approachable. We can build positive relationships with students by making some personal connection with them and demonstrating a certain

A Good Practice Guide to Learning Relationships in Higher Education

amount of empathy with them. Making such a personal connection can simply involve talking to students on a more informal level and engaging with them as people rather than exclusively as students. It also involves raising our awareness and developing some understanding about the lives of students. Students often lead complex lives and staff need to understand that wider context: perhaps adjusting to living on their own for the first time, feeling lonely, making friends, caring for parents, dealing with grief, coping with a disability or simply juggling other commitments including family life or employment

Promoting discussion and reflection about learning, raising awareness about the transformative potential of HE and helping students link these to their personal aspirations are powerful catalysts for learning relationships. Such activities reflect to students a broader interest in their learning and their futures than one purely focussed on academic results. Appropriate use of a tool like ELLI allows us to express this broader interest and care as a part of our programmes – integral to what we do. Indeed ‘Learning Relationships’ is one of the seven ELLI Dimensions and this presents opportunities to engage students in raising their own awareness about their own strengths and weaknesses, how they could develop these qualities and importantly the connection between learning relationships, collaboration and successful action in the world. Helpfully Learning Relationships as an ELLI dimension includes the parallel need sometimes also to take individual responsibility for learning³

Ultimately, to optimise the effectiveness of our learning relationships, we need to create and establish mentoring style relationships with our students. Such relationships strike a good balance: neither being too formal, as if

3 This dimension is about how a learner develops and uses the ‘social resources’ available to support his/her learning, whether in the family, in school, at work or at play. It involves learning from and with others, collaborating well and being a good ‘team player’, but also managing without them when necessary, rather than being either dependent, or withdrawn and isolated. Someone with strength in this dimension can move easily between the group environment and solitary learning.

Learning to Achieve: a Handbook of Intervention Strategies,
ViTaL Partnerships (2011) p.77

What kind of dialogue should we engage students in?

between teacher and pupil, nor too informal, like a friendship. The key to creating a mentoring style relationship is presenting an image that is professional, approachable and understanding. Students need staff who are well respected in their field and have a wealth of knowledge, but they also need staff who they can trust and feel comfortable engaging with.

“It’s about making yourself slightly vulnerable but also maintaining a distance which allows a professional relationship to go on. It’s a balance between hard and soft, authority and friendship not friendship that’s the wrong word rather letting your humanity shine through.”

Member of Staff

What kind of dialogue should we engage students in?

Higher Education staff have been able to build relationships with their students, to improve engagement, retention and progression, simply by talking to them about their learning. Students benefit from understanding how they learn and how they can learn more effectively. This improves their motivation, self-awareness and self-efficacy and makes them more likely to succeed. Talking to students about their learning is most effective when integrated into modules and introduced by staff teaching their programmes, rather than being a marginal activity only undertaken by guidance tutors. Building this type of reflective activity into a module helps students to contextualise their learning, think about their futures, understand their strengths, know how to apply them and see where they might have room to grow as learners. There is also good evidence that performance is enhanced.

There are many ways in which staff can encourage students to reflect on their learning, but one that has proved successful in the Dispositions to Stay and Succeed project was using the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI). ELLI is an online tool for measuring the notion of ‘learning power’, that is, the attitudes, values, beliefs and dispositions required to be an

A Good Practice Guide to Learning Relationships in Higher Education

effective lifelong learner. As soon as a learner has completed ELLI's 90-item questionnaire they receive a personalised profile, or spider diagram, showing their strengths and weaknesses in relation to ELLI's seven dimensions of learning power. These seven dimensions are: Changing and Learning, Critical Curiosity, Meaning Making, Creativity, Resilience, Strategic Awareness and Learning Relationships. (See the Booklet '*My Learning Power: Using ELLI in Higher Education*'). Conversations which use the ELLI profile as a starting point have proved to be engaging, productive and straightforward to manage.

With reference to the definitions of learning power e.g. in the '*My Learning Power*' booklet, students can be prompted with open questions and reflection on their profiles, such as in the following example:

With reference to what you know about yourself, look at your profile and consider these questions:

- *What do you think about your profile and how well do you agree with it?*
- *How well does it describe you as a learner?*
- *How would you like your profile to be?*
- *How could you use your learning power to improve your learning and performance?*
- *What might you learn about yourself from this?*
- *Reflect on how you learn in different situations. As your understanding of the seven dimensions increases, consider how well you use each of them*
- *Which Learning Power dimensions do you think you could work on developing?*

Learning Relationships could itself become a primary objective for improvement, either for some individuals or for a teaching group as a whole. Taking the owner of the profile in Figure 1, for example; it happened that this learner reported herself as strong in all the other dimensions, but realised

What kind of dialogue should we engage students in?

quickly that collaboration and team working were not her strengths. In dialogue with a tutor, she was able to use her strengths as a learner – such as being creative, easily making sense of things and having a strategic approach – to help her to improve her Learning Relationships. She decided to use her Critical Curiosity to help her to be more interested in other people, asking questions to find out where they were coming from, rather than judging them too quickly. Her natural Resilience, of course, helped her to keep going in this endeavour until it yielded positive results and her learning relationships improved!



Figure 1: Example of an ELLI profile

A Good Practice Guide to Learning Relationships in Higher Education

In order successfully to implement ELLI, or any other tool, to promote learning and learning relationships, a number of issues need to be considered and facilitated:

- An explanation of why they are being asked to use such tools, which includes the idea of increased reflection on their learning and themselves as learners.
- A careful introduction to the tools, which:
 - makes clear that they are not another assessment: it is self-report that the tools rely on and the purpose is non-judgemental (this is important!)
 - comes as early as possible in the first year so that it raises their awareness of what is expected of them as learners in HE and impacts on their own expectations of what they want to achieve and become.
 - ideally includes some input from students who have previously used ELLI, describing the benefits that it has brought to them
- The availability of resources that students can refer to for help in interpreting their profile and advice about how to develop as learners (see the 'My Learning Power' booklet)
- Where possible follow-up support through learning conversations using the ELLI Spider Diagram as a reference point.

What about students' relationships with each other?

The Dispositions to Stay and Succeed project also emphasises the impact of peer relations on student engagement, learning and achievement. The relationships students have with one another have a significant impact upon retention and progression in Higher Education. Students who have poor relationships with their peers are more likely to experience feelings of isolation and drop out of academic programmes. Peer relationships are also important in terms of progression as students rely on one another to help

What about students' relationships with each other?

gauge their progress, build up skills, keep motivated, cement their learning and help broaden their knowledge about a subject.

There are a number of different ways that staff can encourage positive peer relations in Higher Education and help to create an environment where students can get the best out of their peer relationships. This section will explore the value of peer relations and demonstrate how staff can help to promote the different ways students can support each other not only in terms of their learning but by helping each other to cope emotionally with the stresses of completing a degree programme.

The Value of Peer Support

One way in which staff can impact upon student relations is through explaining the value of peer support to students. Students are often each other's first port of call for personal and academic advice. Students not only help each other cope emotionally with the stresses of completing a degree programme but they also provide academic support to one another. Students rely on one another to help gauge their progress, to build up skills, for motivation, to cement their learning and to help broaden their knowledge. They do this by working as a team, preparing for seminars together, bouncing ideas off one another and pooling/sharing resources.

Staff can use programme guides and their contact time with students to provide guidance and advice on peer relations. Undergraduates are new to Higher Education and at first many do not understand the importance of the relationships they have with their fellow students. By simply explaining the importance of learning through interaction staff can help students to begin to understand how they are expected to work with one another and help them to establish positive relationships.

Staff can also impact upon student relations by helping students understand that they are integral to each other's success. It is useful to let students know that if they choose to cooperate rather than compete with their peers they will get the best out of their time in higher education. All students wish to pass and all students want to succeed and this is dependent on how they work with each other in class; it is important for them to understand how their behaviour affects the whole class dynamic. It is therefore essential that

A Good Practice Guide to Learning Relationships in Higher Education

staff to point out that it is mutually beneficial for students to form positive peer relationships so that a positive group dynamic can be created and maintained.

Staff can also provide advice and guidance to students about what the characteristics of an ideal learning partner are. Students require learning partners who they can trust to pull their weight, those who do not take advantages of others, those who are able to share, those who can provide constructive criticism and those who are good listeners. Staff can also promote self awareness among students in order to mitigate the impact of those who have undesirable traits i.e. those who might at first be overbearing or patronising.

Ice breakers

One very practical way that staff can help students make that first step in forming relationships with one another is through the use of icebreakers. These can be a useful and even enjoyable when they are well thought out but basic ice breakers such as 'say your name' can cause students to simply feel embarrassed and can be counterproductive. Staff often use ice breakers at the beginning of the first year to help students get to know one another but their use is helpful throughout academic programmes as students benefit from the frequent opportunity to form new relationships with their peers. There are different kinds of ice breakers and some are more extensive than others but devoting a significant portion of class time at the beginning of a module to allow students to bond makes for a dynamic and engaging environment that is mutually beneficial.

There are two main types of ice breakers; ones that are subject specific and ones that are generic. Generic ice breakers are a nonthreatening way for students to get to know one another on a personal level and are a good way to ease students into peer relationships. Course specific ice breakers have the added benefit of covering an element of the course and can help students to develop skills related to their course. One example of this is group work that is not assessed such as creating a poster or a verbal presentation which will only help to break the ice between students but also helps students to be less anxious when it comes to writing their first

What about students' relationships with each other?

essay as they have already built up skills for example in sourcing books and referencing.

Seminars and other Group Work

Seminars and other forms of group work are some of the best ways for staff to foster an environment where students can develop positive learning relationships with other students. Giving students the opportunity to engage with each other through group discussion, group assessments and encouraging students to prepare for seminars together all help students to build positive learning relationships. In addition to this, group work also provides students with the necessary team work skills they will need once they leave Higher Education and enter into the world of work.

Although group work can help to form positive peer relations, unless it is well managed it can also be the root of poor relationships within Higher Education. Students can feel disgruntled about staff who do not allow them to work in friendship groups. To avoid this staff need to explain to students their reasoning behind forming and mixing groups, so that students can understand the purpose of each formation and the benefits of working with a range of people. Negative peer relations can emerge when some individuals feel they are doing more of the assessed group work than others. Staff need to be open to discussion about group problems and be ready help students to work through any difficulties. If seminars and other forms of group work are not run effectively and difficulties between students are not dealt with appropriately then the whole teaching group can suffer and peer relations that are more negative can emerge.

One way of avoiding difficulties between students is to work with students to come up with a set of ground rules prior to group work. It is important to create an environment where all students feel safe to express their views and make mistakes, and that a congenial, relaxed atmosphere is developed and maintained. This can be done by co-creating with students, at the start of a session, a set of guidelines that they feel are appropriate for the task at hand. Typical ground rules may be:

- starting and finishing on time
- coming prepared

A Good Practice Guide to Learning Relationships in Higher Education

- listening to others without interruptions
- participating
- saying when you don't understand
- when anyone is speaking, addressing the whole group and not just the teacher
- switching off mobile phones
- treating others' contributions with respect
- keeping personal issues out of the session
- maintaining confidentiality within the group.

Location

Staff can help students form positive learning relationships with their peers by providing them with information on the different learning spaces on and off campus. There will be a number of locations where students form and develop positive peer relations including the library, at each other's homes, in spare classrooms, in the students union, in cafes / bars and in computer labs. There are other less obvious locations where students engage with other students such as lobbies and corridors whilst waiting for teaching sessions to begin; it is important that students know that even participating in such micro interactions can enhance their knowledge and help them to form positive peer relations.

Students who have access to project rooms and studios find that these places significantly enhance their learning and help them to build up important learning relationships. These locations are largely reserved for those studying certain programmes but this type of environment where students have their own space to work with their peers can be beneficial on any programme. Giving students their own projects rooms may not be practicable on all academic programmes but there may be ways that staff can make informal student working space more available.

Building work placements, field trips and residential activities into the academic programmes are other ways in which staff can facilitate good peer relations. When students work in these environments they report a number

What about students' relationships with each other?

of benefits. They not only note how they are able to form tight bonds with their fellow students but how they begin to get a better grasp of their chosen field and begin to form a sense of professionalism.

The Bristol research echoes this emphasis on peer learning relationships, urging teachers to stand back from assuming responsibility for – and controlling – all the learning interactions in a class. The learning relationships available to those who foster them and use them well are numerous. Students learn from each other and their social networks far more readily and continuously than they ever do from teachers. The principle is summed up by Deakin Crick:

As well as the quality of relationship between learner and teacher, the quality of positive learning relationships experienced by the learner both in class and in the home and the community was found to be a key theme. Listening to the learners' own stories, enabling them to tell their own stories either generally or in relation to the learning task, seemed to be critical. This quality of the lived experience of the learner, and the capacity for that to be received and accepted in the learning community, by both teacher and learning colleagues, was a key theme that emerged in different ways again and again. Learning identity appeared to be developed in relationship to others

(Deakin Crick, R. 2007 pp.147-8)

At the heart of this is the sense of a 'learning identity', often unformed in those who have not yet acquired a language for thinking and talking about learning, nor yet experienced a learning environment in which such dialogue is commonplace. The teacher/tutor clearly has the key role in creating the conditions for this to be true.

Although teachers and tutors are only responsible for the formal curriculum and much of the personal and social learning goes on elsewhere, the power of the formal learning environment should not be underestimated. Didactic teaching, the imparting of specialist knowledge which the students do not yet possess, while it has its important place, tends to militate against a collective learning culture. Where students are encouraged, or required,

A Good Practice Guide to Learning Relationships in Higher Education

as in most problem-based learning environments, to take responsibility for investigating and solving problems through collaboration, reflection and collective presentation, they tend to report a dramatic improvement in their learning relationships – and they often give the credit for that to their tutors

“The learning style is different from school. In school we were always writing tests; here we have presentations and assignments... where I find things out for myself... It’s better to find information. We interviewed people, searched websites and articles and other reports”

“We have good opportunities for teamwork – group presentations and assignments.”

“After doing the first ELLI profile, I tried to improve my skills. I did more teamwork; looking for meaning in everything, asking for answers if I didn’t understand anything, being more sociable in the way I learn – more teamwork.

“ELLI gave me a great push. My Learning Relationships was low... I tried to be more flexible.”

I hated school! Here, I don’t even want a holiday!”

“Now, they treat us as adults.”

(Small, T. and Deakin Crick, R. 2010 p. 15)

How does Assessment affect Learning Relationships?

To what extent does staff responsibility for assessment somehow compromise or undermine teacher-student relationships. Is it possible to be approachable, supportive and empathetic, in a mentoring-style relationship with students whilst at the same time being the one who assesses and reports on their progress against grade criteria and other benchmarks?

As long ago as in the 1990s, members of the Assessment Reform Group brought to our attention the enormous influence that formal assessment and testing exerted on students' experience of schooling in the UK:

The practice that most determines what actually goes on in learning and teaching and in the school curriculum as a whole is assessment

(Broadfoot, P. 1998)

This influence, they asserted, need not only be negative. If assessment could be framed to support and encourage quality learning processes, rather than focussing exclusively on the summative assessment of learning outcomes, then it could become more 'formative' and strengthen students as learners. The Assessment for Learning movement in Higher Education has been well documented and has led to much reformed practice and much more clearly focussed attention on the relationship between learning and assessment (Knight, P., 2004; Boud, D. and Falchikov, N., 2007). Nevertheless this fundamental power imbalance between learner and teacher remains a tension and a specific context for learning relationships. Acknowledgement of this inescapable context to the relationship is important. Students of course need to understand the assessment process and an unambiguous explanation of their role in this process – and this will include their rights in the event of the process being flawed. Notwithstanding this tension, the Disposition to Stay and Succeed project

A Good Practice Guide to Learning Relationships in Higher Education

identified key ways in which relationships of trust and confidence could be constructively maintained:

- offering opportunities where required for students to develop and improve the skills necessary e.g. essay writing skills, maths support, presentation skills etc.
- offering opportunities to practice assessment and to get formative, critical and constructive feedback on their efforts
- offering unambiguous explanations about what is required to succeed in each assignment – particularly popular is showing students examples of good moderate and poor work and asking them to mark the work – then explaining how the actual marks were arrived at.
- offering feedback to both formative and summative assessments that was personal in style and specific in content. Even when marking is anonymised students appreciated a style of feedback that indicated that the marker was addressing an individual learner rather than simply responding to a depersonalised piece of academic work. Students were also frustrated by feedback that was too general – e.g. ‘good work’. They appreciated specific guidance about how they could improve their marks in future and what specifically was done well.

Assessment can affect learning relationships either positively or negatively, depending on its purpose and nature. Just as teaching can be experienced as learner-centred and facilitative or purely didactic, assessment might be experienced as either more personal, formative and relevant to the goals of the learner, or more impersonal, summative and serving a purpose completely external to the learning experience. In both cases, the evidence suggests that the former, will strengthen learning relationships, whilst the latter is unlikely to do so, whilst in practice of course we need to understand that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive.

The Dispositions to Stay and Succeed research produced substantial evidence of both the positive and negative impact of assessment practice on relationships. It illuminated the ways in which assessment can build or damage a student’s confidence and how it plays a key part in students’

How does Assessment affect Learning Relationships?

perceptions of, and relationships with, academic staff. Both the advice and support that students are given before assessments are submitted and the feedback they receive on their work, clearly have a significant impact on their relationships with staff. The evidence is unavoidable, that students appreciate staff who are simply open and available to answer any questions they have regarding assignments and who give guidance on how to complete assignments successfully, including advice on how to write and structure essays and help with essay plans, both inside and outside of class. When it comes to feedback on assignments, students need clear and comprehensive feedback that demonstrates how they can improve and avoid mistakes in future. Feedback that is unclear, too positive or gives no indication of how the work might be improved, gives students the impression that the tutor is not interested in their progress and has a negative impact on their motivation. Choosing the right wording in both oral and written feedback is important and the best feedback avoids being over-personal, suggests specific improvements and is situation specific.

Here is some feedback on feedback, allowing students to have the last word on assessment:

"I've had a couple of essays handed back with like one or two sentences of feedback which I thought that was a bit useless since I'd spent all that time writing the essay and I've got two sentences saying good structure, good argument, it doesn't go into much depth about they could have wrote a little bit more...I have got some back with big paragraphs about what to do and that's the best feedback you can get that kind of constructive criticism. If someone writes 'good argument, good essay, 63', you're sort of like so well I'll take the mark but you could have told me something else I could have done. You're here to learn something and you only learn from your mistakes so if you write an essay that's not 100% what they want then I think it's only fair for them to say what you need to do - not just two sentences"

Undergraduate

"I think providing good feedback on the essays is really important. There are a few where it's just like a couple of

sentences saying this could have been better, that could have been better but not actual suggestions like specific suggestions for what could be improved in the next one. Being available to talk through the feedback is also important.”

Undergraduate

How can staff monitor their practice in maintaining effective Learning Relationships?

The Dispositions to Stay and to Succeed project emphasises the role of positive learning relationships in promoting student engagement and success. However the drivers to address learning relationships in HE do not come solely from this need. The success of Higher Education is to be measured by more than academic results; students will be measured in all aspects of their lives beyond university not by their credentials but by what they **do** – the extent to which they make active contributions in work, community, social and familial spheres. Higher Education must own some responsibility for preparing students for lives of leadership and crucially of action. Effective action in the world – in all spheres of activity is contingent on collaboration. This is not a nice political point but rather a fundamental reality. Collaboration is the cornerstone of effective social, political and economic activity and in turn collaboration is contingent on effective relationships. An understanding of these crucial connections and the skills required to establish, maintain and work within relationships is a central quality of successful people. It would seem appropriate that these issues should be at the heart of what is delivered and how it is delivered in Higher Education. Baxter Magolda (2004) has written of the need for HE to actively engage in supporting student progress towards Self Authorship – towards cognitive development (knowing how to know), identity (knowing who I am and who I want to be) and relationships (knowing how to make meaning of knowledge with and through other people and how to share knowledge and expertise in collaboration and action). In a variety of ways learners address these questions and issues while they are students in HE

How can staff monitor their practice in maintaining effective Learning Relationships?

and good examples exist of how these questions and issues are harnessed within academic programmes. The suggestion here is on the one hand not extreme – to improve and develop learning relationships need not have a huge impact on the content of what is taught in HE. On the other hand the proposed agenda is radical because what is suggested is a re-framing of the HE task that puts the professional development and personal growth of learners at the centre of how we describe what we do, how we manage expectations of learners from the outset and the way in which we design the learning experience. With an overriding objective of realising learners' potential and preparing them to act effectively and collaboratively in the world the establishment of learning relationships at the heart of the university experience is an important priority. To do this requires strategic leadership across and within institutions, innovative and imaginative practice that will include student involvement, risk taking and evaluation. It also requires individual practitioners in HE to take responsibility for carefully examining their own practice, for thinking about ways in which they can control the quality of learning relationships experienced by their students and for supporting one another in this process.

With this focus on personal accountability in mind, the checklist below (adapted with permission, Small, T. 2004 and 2005) might prove an useful tool for individuals to reflect on their current context and practice and to begin exploring ways in which steps can be taken to move good learning relationships nearer to the centre of their students' experience. What might you do more of – and less of?

Learning Relationships Checklist

How often and well do you do this?

| | I do this all or most of the time | I do this some of the time | I occasionally do this | I hardly ever do this |
|---|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| listen to students, as individuals as well as groups | | | | |
| talk to students about your relationship with them and their relationships with each other | | | | |
| discuss ground-rules for the conduct of relationships in lectures seminars tutorials etc | | | | |
| encourage them to think of themselves as partners in their learning by posing questions of their own rather than simply answer those posed for them | | | | |
| coach them to question your fallibility / doubts etc with 'why?' and 'how?' questions and refusing to accept your propositions at face value | | | | |
| admit to 'not knowing' but suggest how to find out | | | | |
| take time out to get to know individuals in their own right | | | | |
| put time aside for learners to find out about each other | | | | |
| create opportunities for sharing personal 'stories and journeys' and relating them to the curriculum | | | | |

Learning Relationships Checklist

| | I do this all or most of the time | I do this some of the time | I occasionally do this | I hardly ever do this |
|---|--|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| seek and use opportunities to help students link the content of the curriculum to their existing knowledge and experiences | | | | |
| take a genuine interest in the lives, feelings, preoccupations and views of students, beyond the university programme | | | | |
| ask open questions, such as enquiring what students really think and feel about things, giving time for reflection and listening intently to the answers | | | | |
| ensure that all students are included and involved in ways that suit their learning needs | | | | |
| model and encourage relationships characterised by trust, mutual respect and challenge | | | | |
| see quality of relationships, between teacher and students and students and each other, as a prime responsibility and hallmark of good teaching | | | | |
| make a feature of co-operation and collaboration, to build trust and enable all students to develop learning relationships and learn about the connection between relationships, collaboration and effective action | | | | |

A Good Practice Guide to Learning Relationships in Higher Education

| | I do this all or most of the time | I do this some of the time | I occasionally do this | I hardly ever do this |
|--|--|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| encourage students to take an increasing level of responsibility for their own learning | | | | |
| make use of students' ability to teach each other | | | | |
| relate what students already know to what they need to find out and learn | | | | |
| progressively 'let go' of the need or desire to control things single-handedly and make explicit everyone's personal and collective responsibility for respectful, orderly conduct and collaboration | | | | |
| involve students in formulating the expectations and 'ground rules' which create conditions for respectful dialogue and discourse | | | | |
| take responsibility for upholding these and periodically renewing commitment to them | | | | |
| with the students continually review learning processes and respond to the students' voice | | | | |
| build in time for reflection, for yourself and your students | | | | |
| reflect back to individuals and groups the learning about learning being demonstrated through the collaborative processes | | | | |

Learning Relationships Checklist

| | I do this all or most of the time | I do this some of the time | I occasionally do this | I hardly ever do this |
|---|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| include these intended learning outcomes about relationships in the objectives set for sessions, modules and programmes you plan | | | | |
| involve learners in self-evaluation as part of the assessment process | | | | |
| practise articulating your own social vision and values whilst encouraging a critical, questioning response | | | | |
| encourage students in the same practice | | | | |
| make the processes of learning an explicit part of the curriculum and its assessment | | | | |
| in particular, foreground, develop and assess a wide range of communication skills as a key aspect of learning | | | | |
| understand and remember that academic achievement is enhanced by successful personal and social development | | | | |
| notice and reflect back to students their increasing ability to move between concrete or literal thinking and abstract, figurative, critical or scientific thinking | | | | |
| reflect back to students their progress towards 'deeper meanings' and their development as 'interpreters' and scholars | | | | |

A Good Practice Guide to Learning Relationships in Higher Education

| | I do this all or most of the time | I do this some of the time | I occasionally do this | I hardly ever do this |
|--|--|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| remember that thinking, feeling and action are closely inter-related and avoid seeming to place intellectual development in a realm of its own | | | | |
| attend to your own wider learning relationships | | | | |
| practise reflective self-evaluation, with the help of professional 'critical friends' and monitor the extent to which your teaching models and expresses (non-verbally as well as verbally) the values you seek to promote | | | | |
| be ready to ask for help, ideas and examples, including chances to see and discuss colleagues' professional practice and to encourage colleagues to observe and discuss your own. | | | | |

How can staff monitor their practice in maintaining effective Learning Relationships?

and how well do you avoid these things?

- seeing yourself as the main repository of knowledge or wisdom
- using the content and knowledge-base of the curriculum as the sole organising principle for your planning
- arranging students in rows facing the front
- using your power to suggest an unequal right to opinions, attitudes and beliefs
- assuming that learners understand why they are there and what they are intended to learn
- stopping students talking by talking too much yourself
- thinking that academic success can be achieved simply by accumulating knowledge
- dismissing feelings, ideas, personal connections and anecdotes as irrelevant
- limiting the development of thinking skills by restricting discussion to what is already known or strictly relevant
- seeing yourself as the prime decision-maker and controller of learning
- being suspicious of digression and reflection
- controlling behaviour by denying opportunities for interaction
- thinking that the way something 'has always been taught', however well, will always be the best way
- seeing intellectual or academic development as somehow separate from feelings, relationships and personal growth.

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