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Making connections: students' experiences of academic advice and guidance discussions

Within the current market-based model of UK higher education (HE) (Brown, 2011; Universities UK, 2014; HEFCE, 2016), mass HE is characterised by high student numbers (Nicol, 2010) and resource constraints (Price, Handley & Millar, 2011). Within this system Middleton (2015, p.3) observes a dilution of 'personal, inclusive and supportive' learning environments, whilst other authors specify that dialogue is being 'squeezed out' (Nicol, 2010, p.501; Blair & McGinty, 2013). However, influential learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and subsequent research advocates the benefits of personal interaction and support for learning and personal development (Cooper, 2004; Wisker et al, 2008; Turner, 2011). Therefore, concerning the political mantra calling for students and their learning to be placed at the heart of the HE system (BIS, 2011), Middleton (2015) contends that a challenge facing universities is how they genuinely do this, by supporting each individual student.

Amongst the various practices supporting a personal and inclusive learning experience for students, one which ought to be kept on the educational landscape, according to Wisker et al (2008, p.1), is one-to-one work. These authors highlight the value students place on the opportunity to work one-to-one with professionals in a variety of roles. Within Learning Development (Hartley et al, 2011) many universities offer one-to-ones as part of academic advice and guidance provision (Turner, 2011) which is the area of practice on which this doctoral study is focussed.

To date findings constructed from a pilot study (Charmaz, 2014) highlight the importance participants attach to the establishment of positive connections with someone they believe will guide them as they navigate their studies. These findings support King's (1993) work around 'guide on the side' as well as evidencing Alexander's (2010) argument of education being underpinned by connections. This qualitative interpretative study utilises Stake's (2000, p.447) 'cases within the case study', acknowledging variation of experience of a situation or event shared by individual participants.

The findings presented here are drawn from the second stage of a pilot study in which two extended semi-structured interviews were conducted; one with a female, stage 2 Business, mature, home student and the second with a male, Business postgraduate EU student. Key findings constructed from pilot data include emotions of studying and learning, connection to people and place, social interaction and the approach of an advisor to support learning and techniques to aid learning.

Emotions of studying and learning are heard throughout students' various experiences, evidencing Illeris' (2004) recognition that learning is emotional as well as cognitive. Emotion associated with studying initially prompted the students to approach academic advisors for guidance. For instance, student 1 noted the newness of the academic environment, feeling overwhelmed, worried about assignments and being 'in the dark' about what to expect, especially not having yet established connections with academic staff. Student 2, who had studied at the same institution the previous

academic year noted differences in contact time from UG to PG study meaning that the latter was 'hard' owing to fewer contact hours with staff.

Furthermore, strong links are emerging between emotions of studying and learning and students feeling connected to people and place. Both students talked about being **connected to people** through close working relationships and not only knowing advisors but also the students themselves being known. For instance, student 1 mentioned how advisors 'know me by name' making her 'feel important…rather than just another student' whereas student 2 talked about benefits of an 'advisor knowing your style', evidencing Cooper's (2011) argument concerning the positive effect of students being known. The students also commented on issues concerning **connections to place** whereby they referred to familiarity with their place of study and feeling confident about orientating where guidance is available. Student 1 talked about 'knowing there's somewhere to go if you're struggling', the visibility of the advisors in reception and feeling confidence around university knowing that she knew these aspects of university in semester one, stage 1. These findings support Thomas' (2012) work around the importance of nurturing students' sense of belonging which for these students includes a focus on people and place.

Concerning academic discussions, the students talked about the **interaction** being collaborative, in the sense that both advisor and student mutually contributed to discussions [student 1] aided by having sufficient time to enable two-way explanations [student 2]. Similarly, Alexander (2010) discusses talk as a powerful tool for learning and Laurillaud (2002) writes about effective dialogue including two-way exchanges, whilst Blair & McGinty (2013) comment on time being conducive to students learning from feedback. Moreover, the **advisor's approach,** as a sub-category of social interaction, was mentioned by both students who talked about the value of the advisor '…wanting to help you make your work better' [student 1] and the belief that '…you've got to be supported by somebody that's very open-minded…, not judgemental in <u>any</u> way and just very down to earth' [student 2]. These comments connect with Illeris' (2004) notion that learning is a cognitive, social *and* emotional process and Vygotsky's (1978) contributions concerning learning being facilitated by a relationship between talking and thinking, in which emotions are significant.

Finally, not only did the students mention aspects of academic literacies (Lea & Street, 1998) being the subject of discussions, but also **approaches to learning** concerning different techniques initially discussed with an advisor being subsequently utilized by the students in their independent learning. For instance, one student talked about finding herself asking the same questions asked during discussions facilitating her to become her 'own student support' which lead to increased confident in her own ability, resonating with Alder's (1982) socratic seminar.

This pilot study has provided invaluable insights into the importance the students have attached to establishing positive connections with academic advisors who they believe constructively guided them in their learning. Similar themes are emerging through the main study interviews, in which powerful analogies convey how students have viewed one-to-one discussions and advisors as guides through the turbulent and uncertain terrain of their HE journey.

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