

Anxious learners? How the wisdom of those that have gone before and have become the successful senior academics of today can help transform the current student learning experience in Higher Education. (0303)

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Part 2 – 789 words max.

Many studies have looked at stress and anxiety in the learning context and have asserted that student learning anxiety may be widespread (Crump and Dudley (1996), Furmark(2002), Russell and Shaw (2006)).

Recent relevant research with college students include work by Gamez, W., Kotov, R. and Watson, D. (2009) and with younger students, the work by Balle, M. and Tortella-Feliu, M. (2009). All found evidence of anxiety or related issues. However, as Putwain (2005) acknowledges, there are “conceptual and methodological difficulties... when designing and conducting research in this area”. He also notes that “there is an overwhelming bias in the research towards quantification and ways of ‘measuring’ stress and anxiety in students”, whereas, as Sutherland (1983) put it, “as educators, we should be more concerned as to what people do when feeling anxious”.

A concern regarding not how to measure student stress but regarding what students do when anxious, underpins the approach of this follow up study to a paper by the author presented in 2007.

In that work, a small scale study which explored the nature of anxiety and how it affected Higher Education students on a Master’s degree course, the students described the various coping strategies they employed to manage their anxiety.

From this first study, one significant finding was that it became apparent that the students found it empowering to appreciate just how common their feelings of anxiety were; that some level of anxiety was widely experienced amongst their peers too seemed to help lessen their feelings, particularly of whole class presentation anxiety.

But why do some students develop to cope so much more effectively than some of their peers? How do some change to become more appropriately academically assertive in terms of their learning (Moon (2009); Ashcroft and Foreman-Peck, (1994)).

In merely exploring what students did when anxious, and not offering some suggestions as to how they may change, the author was concerned that it only offered part of the picture. In wanting to offer suggestions that would help the anxious student keen to transform their learning, this new study talked to senior, successful academics who had themselves often experienced hurdles, barriers and difficulties in their own academic career – but had gone on to overcome them.

The interviewees in this study are a range of academics working in Higher Education. They represent a mix of gender, age and type of HE institutions. Many are or have been Heads of School. Many are Professors. Most, like the students from the first study, admitted to experiences that could be broadly termed as related to issues around anxiety which they had to manage within their early academic career in order to progress.

The interviewees were gathered using non random sampling, an opportunistic approach being necessary because the seniority of the colleagues contacted often meant that although most indicated interest in the study, work commitments created difficulties in terms of being able to talk with them within the time available.

Using a constructivist interview methodology over email, telephone and face to face, again as convenient for the interviewees, those that entered the study were asked to recall occasions and incidents that they would now reflect on as having been pivotal in their own learning development. How they managed the challenges and what measures they used to overcome barriers and become the successful academics they now are, is both described and then explored in the paper. Preliminary results suggest that few if any had an unproblematic experience as their career developed within Higher Education. The reasons suggested by the interviewees varied from issues around confidence and poor prior experiences of learning, to cultural and possibly gender related. How they sought to overcome the potential impediments to progression varied even more widely so that the paper offers a series of mini case studies by which to most effectively reflect the data.

Where experiences were common and could be generalised, these tended to be around the support structures that the interviewees encountered – and in particular the value these had in enabling further development. In this respect the study reflected the earlier study where the Master's students had also said that the support of their lecturer and peers had a positive impact on their feelings of anxiety.

There is clearly more work that could be undertaken and in time and with a broader range of interviews to draw on it would be hoped that further more generalisable data could be generated that could offer useful implications for learning in HE. However, in the meantime the findings of this smaller study can be used to offer at least initial suggestions for students wanting to develop a more robust assertive style of learning today – and for the supervisors, tutors and lecturers that want to support them.

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