

Inspiring Future Academics: The Human Element
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Introduction

Surveys like the NSS consistently show the importance to student experience of lecturers being available, approachable and engaged. But beyond immediate student experience, contact between teachers and learners is crucial to the perpetuation of academic life. As I will show below, the human element has been central in attracting newcomers into the profession, and positive relationships with teachers have facilitated their intellectual and personal development. With increasing reliance on technological replacements for human contact, it is important to recognise the role the human element plays in the long-term development of higher education, along with threats to that role.

This paper draws semi-structured interviews with 35 sociologists at six Scottish universities – 18 PhD students and 17 teaching staff. The interviews focused on participants' motivations and experiences of academic work, and this paper will focus specifically on their experiences as learners and teachers.

Inspiration, Encouragement & Mentoring

Two-thirds of participants spoke about convivial relationships with influential teachers who “brought sociology to life” for them at an early stage or encouraged them along the way. Many expressed the belief that without these influential teachers, they would not have chosen an academic path, highlighting the importance of personal relationships to intellectual work (*e.g.* Lamm 2004; Lindholm 2004; Mendoza 2007). In recalling influential teachers, participants emphasised lecturers' passion and intellectual clarity:

As my undergraduate career progressed, I really fell in love with the discipline, I had a couple of inspirational teachers, who were just fantastic, switched me on to the discipline. (*lecturer*)

He had such an enthusiasm for the subject, and he made it clear, he made it interesting. [...] If he'd been teaching history, I would probably have gone to be a historian. (*senior lecturer*)

I came across certain lecturers or tutors who have demystified [sociology] for me. And they did inspire me to go further, otherwise I wouldn't be starting a PhD. (*PhD student*)

Participants experienced enthusiasm not just for sociology, but for *sociologists*. They valued learning, but also the human contact that came with that learning. The discipline 'came alive' through contact with an appealing role model. Most participants saw teachers as catalysts or facilitators for their own deeper engagement with the discipline. They found the material interesting in itself, but contact with stimulating teachers provided extra motivation and energy to supplement their individual reading and thinking.

Later in undergraduate study and into postgraduate study, a number of participants received direct encouragement from teachers that would guide them into academic careers, emphasising the significance of positive learner-teacher relationships:

[A lecturer] encouraged me to develop [my particular research interest], so when I graduated I did a masters in sociology. [...] And in the course of that, I got interested in doing a PhD. (*lecturer*)

A lot of it is people taking an interest in you, and you taking an interest in what they do. (*PhD student*)

Previous research has noted the importance of mentoring for the success of postgraduate students and early-career academics (*e.g.* Austin 2002; Lindholm 2004; Dixon-Reeves 2003). Participants made it clear that even small amounts of personal attention had a significant impact, particularly when it was informal. In

many cases, these informal moments provided an opportunity to demystify academia (Lindholm 2004), especially for students from less privileged backgrounds (Dixon-Reeves 2003).

After completing undergraduate degrees, half of participants chose to pursue postgraduate degrees due to encouragement from teachers. In a study of academic career choice across several disciplines, Lindholm (2004: 620) discusses “critical incidents during [participants’ post]graduate training that ‘redirected’ them to an academic career path.” For participants in my research, these ‘critical incidents’ usually took the form of suggestions from teachers, emphasising the social context in which vocational decisions take place.

After my undergraduate degree, I [...] didn’t have particularly strong plans. [...] But [a lecturer] talked me into thinking about applying, and I did. (*lecturer*)

I bumped into my [future] supervisor, and he said, ‘have you applied yet?’ At the time, I was dithering [but] I said, ‘okay, I’ll get the application out.’ (*PhD student*)

Other scholars have pointed out the importance of social capital within higher education, especially social interaction between teachers and students (*e.g.* Austin 2002; Kameen 1995; Lamm 2004; Mendoza 2007). In a study of postgraduate student retention, Girves and Wemmerus (1988: 185) write that relationships with teaching staff can “indirectly predict doctoral degree progress.”

By the same token, positive relationships with students provide an important motivating force for teachers, allowing them to continue the process that brought them to the profession to begin with:

I love [teaching]. It’s fantastic. [...] The engagement with students and dissemination of ideas, I think is really enjoyable. I just remember how enjoyable it was to be taught in sociology, and I hope I can impart that to students. (*lecturer*)

I’ve always thought teaching is a privilege. [...] At its best, it’s a real interchange, and it’s a really exciting thing to be about. (*professor*)

When staff are available to engage, not just skills and ideas are passed from one generation to the next, but enthusiasm and dedication as well (*e.g.* Lamm 2004; Lindholm 2004; Tinto 1997). Most participants took pleasure in sharing their knowledge and enthusiasm, while in turn seeing enthusiasm, understanding, and curiosity reflected back to them from students who ‘get it,’ effectively completing the cycle.

Conclusion

Previous work about the drive to improve academic ‘efficiency’ and the resulting low status of teaching (*e.g.* Deem *et al.* 2007; Gottlieb and Keith 1997; Jacobs 2004; Law and Work 2007) generally focuses on threats to student experience and the working lives of academics. However, the importance of positive relationships between students and teachers reaches beyond the present and into the future: the human element is crucial to the continued renewal of academia. While there are strong signs of resistance from individual teachers, the trend towards minimising the human element will have far-reaching effects on the processes by which higher education perpetuates itself.

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