

The Fear of Being Assessed: An Auto-Ethnographic Case Study on Attempts to Engage and Motivate an Individual Disaffected Access Student

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Abstract

This paper explores how a tutor engaged an individual student who was abusive to teachers and would not carry out coursework assessments which tutors had set him in the Lifelong Learning Sector. It offers strategies to overcome barriers to achievement, particularly where a student resists carrying out required assessment tasks. It is a self-reflexive, auto-ethnographic case study. The research is based on observation, interview and a narratology of the researcher's own involvement in the situation. It is concerned with strategies that worked with this particular student. It argues a case for personal engagement, solution-focused and cognitive behavioural strategies in the teaching/learning situation and offers an overall humanist approach. It ultimately argues for the complexity of understanding the key relationship between teacher and student. It is also concerned with 'improving practice' which is the central agenda of this journal.

Key words

Disruptive/Disaffected Students; Mentoring; Coaching; Assessment; Behavioural Strategies.

Introduction

In the context of students now coming into colleges from many diverse backgrounds, many with '*...deep-seated learning difficulties*' (Wolf, 2011: p. 117), this paper is an investigation into teaching an individual student with these problems. Whereas most literature on this topic has looked at these issues within the compulsory sector (Haydn, 2012) or within Lifelong Learning as an issue of whole class management (Vizard, 2009; Petty, 2009; Rushton, 2010), this piece is concerned with a storied account of an individual who refused to co-operate with teachers. Much research into disruptive, vulnerable students (Atkins, 2013; Bathmaker, 1999; 2013) has also been focused on students Not in Education or Training (NEET) (Simmons and Thompson, 2011) or Level 1 students from poorer backgrounds, operating in alien classroom environments, but this particular student was working at Level 3 and was self-described as being from an affluent household (Cf. Bates and Riseborough, 1993). The question was: how I as a tutor/mentor or '*teacher-researcher*' (Nisbet, 2013: p. 40) could possibly engage this Access student who had been violent, un-co-operative, and had refused to carry out assessed work. What strategies could be used to help him achieve the assessment for his qualification within a deadline of six weeks? This paper will involve self-reflexive pedagogy (Schon, 1983; Brookfield, 1993; Garnett and Vanderlinden, 2011) of my role (Cunliffe, 2004), positionality, attitudes, and relationship with this particular individual and how this evolved, and also cover behavioural strategies employed to enable academic progress.

An Individual Biography of the Student

The Background

The construction of the life story of an individual is not unproblematic; character and personality are fluid. What or who do we believe? How do we interpret the construction of what students or teachers say (Winter, 1982)? The problems of exploring lives also have

ethical risks attached in that the more we specify details of an individual's biography, the more they become recognisable and raise issues of confidentiality, anonymity (Cohen et al, 2011) and research ethics (Gallagher et al, 1995). The college and my line manager gave me institutional permission to research issues of disruption because this was seen as a key college priority (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004). The student, henceforth anonymised as Bart, was over 20, and had signed a consent form allowing me to use his case study as the basis of research as per BERA guidelines (2011). In this case study, the names of all persons and institutions involved have been anonymised; all persons spoken to signed consent forms. However, details have been changed so as to protect the identity of individuals.

Through interviewing Bart, it emerged that he had GCSE passes with high grades. He described himself as living in an affluent area with parents; father was a lawyer. He said: *"There is so much pressure on me to succeed"; "I dropped out of my AS course at [...] private school at 17"; "I was on drugs; I spent nights clubbing and the day in bed"*. At the age of 20, he said: *"...my parents enrolled me on this Access course"* at what will henceforth be anonymised as The Greathope College. He said: *"I am now near the end of the course, but I haven't done anything..."* When I met him, there were six weeks until his coursework deadline set by the relevant exam board. Bart had refused to do assignments. He had missed most classroom sessions. He came to college sporadically, and a report on him said that he was seen to have been kicking a car in the car park. He showed much anger (Vizard, 2009). No damage was done and therefore the police were not called. He verbally threatened one teacher (Sellgren, 2013). His tutors wanted to expel him; the negotiated management of his stay at college seemed impossible (Hannah, 2012). *"Each time it comes to the crunch"* he said, *"I do the bare minimum work; my dad comes in and sees the managers"*. The pressure on college budgets to maintain numbers was critical in allowing Bart to remain on the course. However, four major pieces of work were outstanding, including a 5,000 word essay. At this point he was referred to me as student/staff mentor.

A Self-reflexive Account of Myself as Researcher

How are researchers affected by their understanding of themselves as ethnographer/participant in the interrogation of student as subject or object of teacher research (Barnes, 2001)? As teacher/researcher, I had over 30 years' experience as a tutor; a background of previous research; had worked as a senior tutor and quality reviewer; and had spent ten years working as an outreach ESOL tutor in several different marginalised and vulnerable ethnic communities. At the time of this case study, I had responsibility for mentoring 20 members of staff and several individual students. I was an external moderator at other colleges on the Access course, but was not working for the exam board to which Bart was attached. My role was as a Teacher Educator with an interest in researching and understanding the processes of teaching disruptive or disaffected students.

According to Vizard, many students enter colleges *'...disaffected from the learning process'* (2009: p. 1). For the purposes of this paper, I use the term 'disaffected' as a dislike for learning, whilst 'disruption' is interrupting, shattering or stopping one's own or others' learning taking place, based on Oxford English Dictionary definitions. However, disruptive behaviour can be seen as a socially-constructed notion – the parameters of which could be viewed as highly changeable and complex, depending on boundaries, and where and how learning is situated within an institutional context (Prasad and Caproni, 1997).

I had some superficial similarities with Bart. My own life history involved going to a grammar school, albeit in the state sector. My father was also professional (Eraut, 1994). Both of us were originally from different immigrant backgrounds, hence the pressure to achieve financial and social stability. I was also in rebellion against middle-class expectations in my early 20s, but never threatened or used violence. I passed all exams, but against my parents' wishes, idealistically went into teaching as opposed to more supposedly lucrative professions, such as law (Evans, 2008). I had worked extensively with a range of poorer ethnic communities, teaching ESOL, so had some understanding of working in a context of ethnic difference.

My ideological assumptions in work are that supporting individuals' wellbeing and academic progress improves results. My approach is humanistic, offering unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1961; Gatongi, 2007), helping students to self-actualise (Maslow, 1954); I am consciously opposed to the highly-pressurised grammar school culture of academic achievement at any cost which I personally experienced in the 60s. The problem is: what happens when students fail to meet the expectations of this process?

I had training in mentoring, such as the Goal, Reality, Options, Will (GROW) model; counselling (Rogers, 1961); Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT); and solution-focus therapies (Iveson et al, 2012). Sometimes I used one specific model; occasionally, an eclectic mix for the specific needs of an individual. According to Clutterbuck and Meggison (2004), classic mentoring puts the power with the mentee, is developmental, goal-orientated, keys into the mentee's vision for the future, whereby the mentor acts as model for the mentee to progress offering holistic solutions to personal challenges. Mentoring has been used as a deficit model for addressing the problems of those not achieving at school or college, offering a vision for aspiring young people in a variety of contexts (Colley, 2003). In this case, I was operating as a learning mentor, hoping to offer an individualised, therapeutic intervention to help address the socially-situated phenomena of disaffection and disruption (Ecclestone, 2012). Mentoring and coaching have been associated with increased teacher implementation of strategies, resulting in improved student behaviours (Reinke et al, 2008).

The relationship between teacher and student can improve students' performance (Lawrence, 2006), but can also involve an inter-reactive process of making sense of, or constructing, each others' personal background, history or the other's belief framework (Child, 2004). Life histories are constructed (Prasad and Caproni, 1997) and understood through '*connectedness*' gained (Palmer, 1998: p. 118) through the language of self and what has happened to the narratee as much as narrator. Both are fluid entities, and not easily framed within language.

The Narrative/findings

Through the window, I saw Bart driven into the college car park in his parents' four-wheel drive. He got out and I witnessed him kick the door closed. His father drove off without further interaction. Bart came into my room, sat down and sprawled on the sofa.

His parents and tutors had insisted on him coming to see me; thus, much of the power had been taken out of his hands and was located with adults, the institution, and me as mentor (Clutterbuck and Meggison, 2004). Hence, this was not classic mentoring, but coaching someone with their work.

I began the encounter with a question: "*Bart, what do you enjoy doing?*". He answered, "*hanging with friends and music*". My second question was: "*Where do you have control in*

your life? After some discussion, I gave him a 24-hour week timetable sheet, which he was asked to fill in, rating each hour separately in terms of how much enjoyment and how much control he had from or over each activity that he experienced during that hour. There was a one to ten scale, with ten being the most control, and one being the least. This was a cognitive model of understanding behaviour (Greenberger and Padesky, 1995). I thought if his week could be divided into hourly units, patterns could be established for him to make conscious choices as to what was helpful or important to him.

Large sections of his life were spent in bed or at nightclubs. However, he rated these activities in terms of control and enjoyment far lower than mixing with friends. But were his answers to win approval for what he thought I might want to hear? I reflected on the question as to why my views might count.

Bart said, *"I'm surprised you are taking my enjoyment seriously!"*. I then asked what he wanted to do with his life. Were qualifications important? Yes. But then why had he not worked at school or now? He said: *"there is too much pressure"*; *"I don't see the point; there are no obvious jobs or career opportunities"*, and: *"I don't know what I want to do..."*. In any case, he said in a mocking sarcastic way, *"I can always rely on 'Daddy' to pay"*. He said: *"I want to be involved in leadership, buying and selling"*, but a smoking gesture implied the product might be drugs. I asked whether drugs were a rebellion against his lawyer father. *"I just do drugs"* he said.

His parents had forced him to stay at home during the evenings, but punishments did not work. So what would motivate him (Dweck, 2000)? Why did he kick cars? *"My parents won't pay for driving lessons unless I pass this course"*. So would he need intrinsic and extrinsic motivators (Capel and Gervais, 2005)? He had achieved everything before without working. But what about his self-esteem?

I started to ask about his course, in order to establish what the content was. For his Access course he had to write essays on Edward Said's Orientalism, war poetry, compare two newspaper articles, and a 5,000-word research project on the media. He had six weeks, had not started any of the assignments, and did not seem motivated. I arranged to meet him twice a week for an hour for six weeks and instructed him to bring his laptop.

The next session he came without his laptop and fell into the chair, looking exhausted. *"So, Bart,"* I began, *"what do you know about Orientalism?"* He talked about attitudes, prejudice, colonialism and post-colonialists, eastern cultures as exotic, but the West's desire to control; he mentioned Said's book.

"Why are these ideas important?" I asked. This was the question he had been set in his assignment.

"Because this is about power; who controls whom."

We began discussing our outsider status as both coming from ethnic minorities. Said's text seemed important because it related power and disempowerment to ethnic/cultural difference. This discussion seemed to connect Bart with the required learning. In my role as learning mentor, I asked him to write down what he had said.

He looked disconcerted.

My strategy was for him to write down just one or two sentences, a rough note, a word or diagram. I would then ask him to type this up. Once he had typed the initial phrases or sentences, I would then ask him to print it out and start correcting or overlaying more ideas onto the first version with a pen. Adding words and phrases by hand and then correcting what has been written brings in a level of self-criticality. It also breaks the tyranny of students believing that everything written in print or on screen is correct. It is a constructivist view of building on previous knowledge and understanding (Bandura, 1977).

If Bart had brought his laptop in, I would have asked him to type up what he had written. However, as I spoke to Bart, it emerged that he only wanted “*to get top marks*” but also “*I never want to write anything which is going to make me fail*”. “*What is failure?*” I asked. “*Not being top...*” he replied. He said “*I want my work to be perfect*”. The course tutors had not realised that in his words he was “*very clever*”. However, he had never demonstrated this by writing essays. He had attacked the teacher verbally when she asked him to write an essay. I realised that this could be interpreted as striving for perfection, but also an assumption of privilege, and sexism, and could be understood as part of the relational context of disaffection; namely, Bart developing coercive relationships with his teachers (Ladd and Burgess, 1999).

After questioning, it emerged that Bart had a problem writing the first letter on the page. Once that letter was there, it was a commitment to one word, perspective, or what he felt was an unchangeable direction. Coursework has the dubious advantage over exams of offering many more possibilities for first sentences. The questions always were; what if something better could be said? What if the first word was ‘wrong’? Bart said: “*I have a mental block against writing that first letter*”. He said: “*I am worried if I write something down, it might be worth less than a distinction*”. By writing, he said: “*I am going to be judged and I can’t bear the possibility that my tutor is going to think, I am not intelligent*”. The problem, as he expressed it, was that he had been told that he was an A* student by his parents, previous school, and via the exam system. As a result of this he said: “*if I’m not going to get the top grade, it’s really not worth writing anything*”.

I was anxious that he might turn violent on me. I was, after all, asking him to write an essay. My thought was: ‘you take drugs, spend days in bed, kick cars, threaten teachers, don’t do any work, yet you are worried about not writing the perfect opening sentence to an essay on Orientalism!’

Instead, I said: “*Bart, you have got to engage in a dialogue with yourself and others, ultimately on paper about the subjects you have been set. You have also got to start the process of writing somewhere; preferably it should be here now*”.

‘[D]isruptive behaviour has been viewed as a characteristic of the individual student, as resulting from a deficiency in the teachers’ skills of classroom management’ (Kaplan et al, 2002: pp. 193-194), but here, disaffection was being constructed on an individual level as part of the dialogue between myself as tutor and Bart as student; a humanist vision of learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and goal-setting behavioural tasks that had to be done (Jones, 1980), but were being subverted. Bart started to write down the points he’d made earlier. The first essay on his course for that year had finally been started.

At the next session he brought the laptop and had written 1,000 words. We printed it out and I asked him to look at the assignment outcomes and start to act as if he was an examiner, viewing the work in terms of whether it met the required outcomes. If given access to the assessment outcomes, learners are in a far greater position of control

(Heywood, 2000). Bart checked his essay, made several changes and realised that it fulfilled all criteria for a distinction.

We worked on a literature essay. The method was set. Bart started making notes; writing down single trigger words and a comparison diagram between two poems. It was now difficult to stop him. The session was spent with Bart barely speaking, but relentlessly typing. By the next session Bart had finished both extended essays, did an exam and completed several outstanding shorter pieces.

There were now two weeks left and he still had to complete a 5,000-word research piece on reactions to adverts in the media. He produced questionnaires, gave them to friends and then discussed the problems of convenience sampling. He also carried out some phone interviews. He had led a focus group in his class. The deadline was nearly up and he had finished 3,000 words.

It was Friday afternoon at 1pm. I had my final session with Bart booked for then. The coursework deadline was 5pm. Bart had not turned up. Through the teacher's lens, I reflected that this might happen (Brookfield, 1993). He was going to subvert the effort, qualification and meaning of the work he had done at the last minute. The previous week he'd said: *"I don't want to be judged!"* or later *"all this is only worth doing, if I'm going to get a distinction"*. I kept telling him to forget about the result and focus on the content. *"But I've lost faith in myself..."* He also said: *"If a year's qualification can be done in six weeks, is it worth doing?"*.

At 1.15pm, his father drove into the car park, got out of his car, came into the building, knocked on my office door and said: *"Bart won't come in. Will you speak to him?"*. I went to the car with him. On the way he told me how violent Bart had been at home. The parents had called the police because he had attacked them physically. According to Cooper, disaffection in schools cannot be isolated from what is happening in the family and must be understood or constructed in terms of the student being both part of, and segregated from, the family unit (2002).

When we got to the car, Bart was sitting in the passenger seat. He had earphones on and looked half-asleep. I said *"Bart, do you want to speak?"* but he did not acknowledge me. He was sitting in a kind of stupor, holding his laptop, but staring ahead. I said: *"We don't have to do any work today, let's talk about what's happening"*. He did not move. Then, without speaking, he suddenly got out of the car and walked with me into college. His father mouthed *"thank you"*.

Bart sat in my office, staring ahead, and not speaking. Then he said: *"I'm getting too much pressure at home...my parents only want perfection. They want me to get full marks"*.

I said *"So you don't want to finish this? Because if you did, you would actually meet what your parents wanted and that would be bad, wouldn't it?... On the other hand if you don't finish it, you will turn 22 next year and your highest qualification will be your GCSEs...It is, unfortunately, purely your choice..."*.

My fear was that I was being manipulative or pressurising like his parents; nevertheless, it turned out to be one of those moments of disorientating realisation (Mezirow, 2000). Bart briefly faced me, took out his laptop and started typing. I let him stay. He was obviously very articulate and wrote 2,000 words in three hours.

He completed the assignment, handed in everything in time, and got distinctions in all areas.

During an interview Bart said: "*The reason it worked with me was that before I felt isolated. I needed to connect with someone*" (Palmer, 1998). The fact that I shared my outsider status as ethnically different from his teachers in the college was helpful. Bart also said: "*You showed an interest in me. You weren't judgemental...the writing technique helped break my need for immediate perfection...*".

Some Analysis

This auto-ethnographic research raises issues of how we carry out case studies. There are problems of objectivity where '*...partisanship is an essential ingredient*' in educational research (Carr, 2000: p. 439). My engagement with the student meant that the nature of experience was affected. The evidence of the findings came from my own construction of a story about teaching an individual. Is there a different way these events could have been captured in writing if perceived from another angle or if written from the perspective of the student or a neutral observer? Are these experiences beyond formulation in an academic paper? The core aspects of the findings are the elements of dialogue, actions and strategies. The dialogue was written in a teaching log at the time. The actions were the specific events of the case study; the strategies I had previously used successfully on a number of occasions, but in this instance, were particularly effective.

The research might be questioned in terms of ethics. Is it right to write about individual students' experiences? There was consent, but the critical aspect is whether formalising and publishing the relationship between tutor and student in a journal is somehow making public the inter-personal (Denscombe, 2010; Cohen et al, 2011; Lankshear and Knobel, 2004), only mitigated by the need to explore practice, whilst protecting confidentiality. All research, particularly that based on teacher/student experience, must be subject to strict ethical controls; its rationale is the ability of the researcher to explore these experiences in the hope of learning how to improve and develop practice.

It could also be argued that the use of CBT assumes a medical model, whereas this was supposed to be mentoring a student through academic work. In fact there may have arguably been a case for therapy, and this was suggested, but Bart had rejected this route. Depending on our understanding of models and versions of therapy, transference, projection, power relations and a welter of other psychological complexities, much of how we understand one another as teachers/learners must remain unacknowledged (Child, 2004).

Another question is whether the research could be replicable? The CBT form is used regularly in therapy, whilst I have used the writing strategy as an effective teaching tool in many different contexts. The problem is more how we understand the psychological interaction between tutor and disaffected student and the extent to which individual solutions to the problem of disaffection/disruption are impacted upon by wider contexts of economy, power and the continuing diverse nature of the student body and complexities of constructing an understanding of the individual in terms of their family, school and community.

However, the specifics of the tutor/student relationship, Bart's particular problems, his perfectionism, the nature of his relationship with his parents, and the wealth factor, all make this a highly-individualised case study which cannot be generalised. Nevertheless, in terms of improving teaching and learning, the agenda of this journal, focus on

understandings of difference, nuanced discussions of privilege, and strategies for encountering disaffection might raise issues of tutors' feelings of anger at the student (Winnicott, 1947), self-reflective practice, the interactive relationship of teaching and learning, plus the complexity of being teacher/researcher seeking understandings of the learning process, all of which need constant scrutiny.

Conclusion

If we, as teachers' trainers, are not exploring and debating the issues of how to improve the work of disruptive or disaffected students, then the value of teacher education becomes diminished. This case study opens up some complexities of working with a student who came from an ethnically different culture to that dominant in his college. There was also the complexity of interaction between tutor and student, plus contextual issues of power, privilege and youth culture. It is an ethnographic study through which I have explored the problematics of teaching a particular individual and outlined some behavioural strategies that were useful in this particular context. Ultimately, our understanding of students is constructed and we can only make limited guesses at how individuals operate or are motivated in learning situations. In the end this piece argues for teachers as reflective practitioners/researchers interacting within a highly complex social world that must be continually probed and explored through ethnographic study and other research methods to gain some understanding of ourselves and our interactions with students from a wide range of cultures.

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