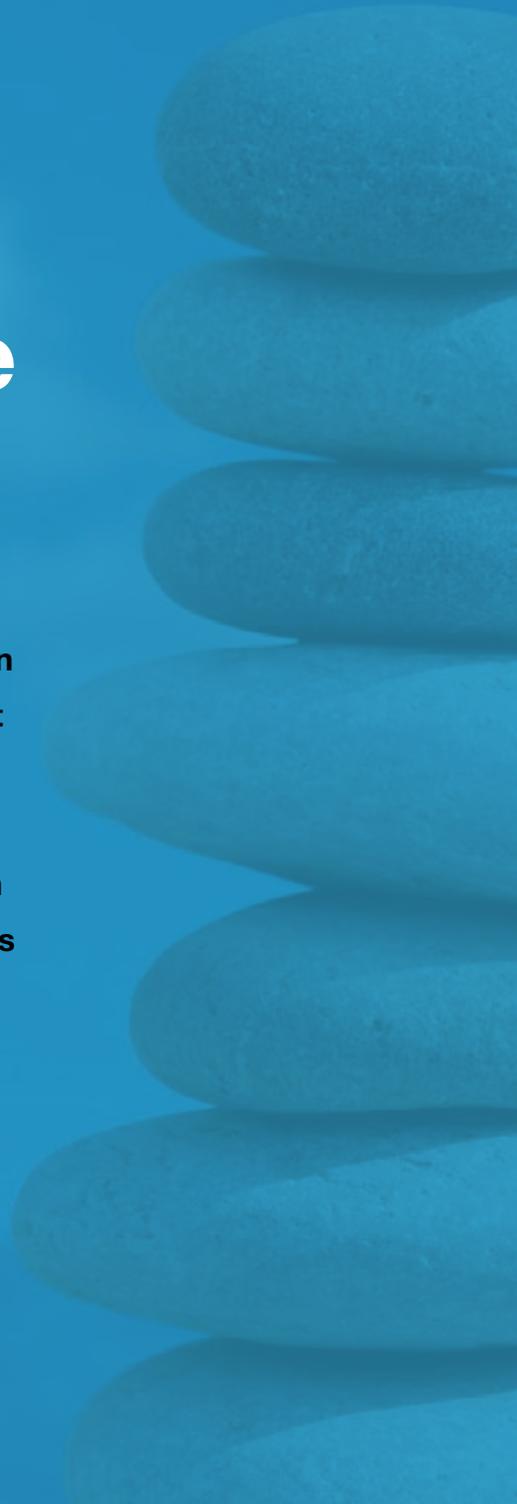

Wellbeing in academic culture and research student learning

This section attends to the vital area of wellbeing in academic culture and research student learning. It includes a paper from special guest contributors Dr Olav Muurlink and Dr Cristina Poyatos Matas, which considers ways of approaching wellbeing in academia, and reports on innovative developments at Griffith University, Australia. Following on from reflections on factors which impact on research student wellbeing, a personal reflective piece provides a research student's perspective.



Wobbling: personal reflections on self-doubt, identity and emotional resilience

CURTIS TAPPENDEN

End of year (2009) journal reflection

Quoting films isn't me. Nerdy friends, who quote every line of every film verbatim and have seemingly endless amounts of time to do so, have switched me off watching most films, especially Hollywood. But Vinnie Jones's classic line from *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* has entered the vernacular and furthermore it seems an apt phrase to add gravitas to the following considerations. 'It's emotional', encapsulates a range of personal feelings and prompts deeper thought, as contextualised in my specific current position. Take this past year, culminating in a frantic four month struggle for academic, professional recognition and funding, the pathway forward; it's emotional. The untimely death of my sister. It's emotional. The demands of outworking a portfolio of different linked vocations – illustrator, painter, author, performer and teacher. Exhilarating, but at times like juggling precariously while being balanced on a large rolling ball. It's emotional. The acquisition of new research skills through reading and then having a go – feeling isolated with little help or support from colleagues, then the panic of trying to satisfactorily write up findings that will bite with toothy rigour. It's emotional. Demands of one's own children's school transitions into higher years and new schools. It's emotional.

On the day the unconditional offer to take up PhD study at the University of Brighton arrived I felt part dread and part elation. But why? Being welcomed aboard was fantastic, the huge pack of rules and regulations was less enamouring. But I pass such packs to younger students every year. Why not me? What is the problem here? I recall being flummoxed by the piles of paper growing in pastel shades on my desk in the classroom at Mayfield House at the start of my PGCE. Waste of paper, for sure, waste of time too? As it happened,

no was my final concluding word. The meaning of the paper piles was not explained, did not link up and seemed full of strange unattainable tasks. All that nine busy professional teachers did not need for the sake of the piece of paper at the end of the year! Within a few months, and as the words were practically and theoretically contextualised, the mist cleared and the lush educational landscape revealed its beauty—well, to me anyway, but then I've always been a willing receptor! But the creation of new knowledge, the journey into the unknown, the fear of not being able to connect deeper lines of research bother me, because for the first time in many years I feel inadequate in my ability to construct robust methodological frameworks; wondering how the relationship with supervisors and guidance into and around them will develop. Will I be supplied the necessary tools for the job, or will it just be a hacking through the academic jungle. If so, I'd like to meet the explorer who did just that and lived. I wanted those answers from an academic advisor at my previous university, but received answers like, 'mmm, the dark, murky waters of the social sciences, eh? ...' No further explanation to support this comment was offered and as such, it was not affirming, not helpful.

Everyone at our institution talks about research, but few seem to talk within it, around it, into it and out of it. So bothered was I, that I immediately set up a practical workshop focused around the definition of the word in relation to making connections for our FE learners, so that their journeys would be curious, meaningful and fruitful in harvesting a new crop of knowledge. I needed to prove a point, and where I could not grasp it for my own life I was determined to strategise it in the lives of others, at a manageable level, a level I could cope being manager at. With good supervision and applying this sense of purpose and urgency to my own pursuits, I believe that my doubts will be dispelled.

Counting the cost has caused a huge wobble too. I have always been sensible enough to count the cost. With age and increase in responsibility the cost has got higher. I have sought wisdom and guidance for anything that stands to purposefully and powerfully affect personal change or change in others, reap greater benefit, or reward by way of singular or mutual outcome. My critics are friends, colleagues, observers and students. They are positives and negatives. The students have been positive, possibly accounted for by their ignorance of what it all entails. Friends were quick to ask 'why?', and replied with negatives such as, 'That's a lot of work, why do you want to do that?', 'It will wreck your marriage and family'. Colleagues were less than congratulatory. One replied, 'well if anyone here is going to waste that kind of money then it ought to be on someone like you'. I am usually unbothered by these types of comments, but each was a giddy blow. I sought my justification in a rational response. The perception of the indulgence of research with no regard for the umbrella of positive influence that could be raised over our profession, especially where this research might be outworked in action with creativity of thought and deed through the sharing of ideas and outcomes, was clear. As for the wrecking of family and marriage: my marriage is strong; my family devoted. I value them highly and would deal with the

situation sensibly if the doom they monger, and its threat ever loomed. Because the cost is so high and because it matters so much, the wobbling has a reason. Negativity has hit the emotional core at its most vulnerable, where residual effect of such a huge undertaking is personally enormous. My personal is no longer easily detached from my professional, especially in the academy. It led me to think about HE professionals and their emotional stability.

Cursory glances through journals to find a breadth of papers studying this aspect were sparse. Much is written on the support of NQTs and starter teachers but little on those with experience. An internal mail envelope delivered to my pigeonhole containing an article on a research paper which addresses the conflicts experienced by academics who are also heads of department – ‘A fine balance – but not all can manage it’ (Newman 2010), was timely and most welcome. Heads of Departments’ struggles between professional and personal identities has been studied by Dr Floyd at Oxford Brookes University, from a range of heads who manage a variety of different disciplines at a selection of post 1992 universities. Respondents were put into three categories. Jugglers were comfortable balancing multiple identities, copers just about managed and strugglers had real difficulty with the balancing and managing of identities to the point that they were on the verge of leaving their jobs. It would seem that there exists a disparity between their perception and expectation of their own career trajectories and their employers’ expectations of performance in the role of head. My case is different on the one hand but bears similarities. My own role has been challenged by this potential undertaking where with unknown expectations I have been trying to forecast the potential cost and realise that something in my multiple identity must give. Maybe the pervading attitudes discussed in Floyd’s paper have added to the wobble, and the affirmation that I am working in difficult times.

My new role at University of Creative Arts this year, primarily as an artist, whose job it is to promote writing, thinking and study skills in relation to the visual arts (which I have taught for 18 years) caused an early crisis of identity. Especially knowing that young art and design learners’ preconceptions of a literacy tutor as dull and trying to teach a subject that they do not want to study, I had to reassert my identity as artist through my use of words and pictures. In a recent email conversation with a supervisor, I learned that part of my identity in the context of the educational research department I will shortly be joining, has been identified as that of a ‘creative’ who is embarking on the PhD journey. My questioning response has been to ask what of others? Are they not creative or perceived as such in that they are piecing together disparate strands of research, shaping them and framing them within argument and drawing conclusion, creative surely? If all are creative is it then that the expectation of my role as a creative suggests that responses and approaches ought to be in some way different from the norm approached from a different premise or delivered ‘outside of the box’ in some way. This in no way fazes me - taking risks to enable new discoveries serves as a major part of my practice as artist and teacher, and is undertaken on a daily basis. The major part of my wobbling draws parallels with Floyd’s

research, in that it is in part due to the conflict and balance of personal and professional identities, albeit not within the role of departmental head, although a change in perceived identities will bring about a change. In deciding to undertake the PhD study commitment I have already realised that something will almost certainly have to give. I have evaluated each part of my life and the most vulnerable facet is that of visual artist. It has been interesting to note the natural change in my working pattern from illustrator to writer. For the first time in 19 years of teaching I was this year offered a new teaching position as creative writing and writing skills tutor to FE. It severely challenged an identity rooted in the 2-D practical visual arts, and the possibility that students might dismiss the 'literacy tutor' as uninteresting and irrelevant to their study. My love for the visual arts is in no way diminished so will the dedication to new practices – socially scientific, keenly methodological and mostly written – rob me of a much loved part of my identity? The rational mind says no. Extended projects do not remove skills, they are merely latent until the next time they are taken up. But it is part of my identity, perceived by the public at large, in my own home city as a practising, exhibiting artist, that is at stake, and once again it is the perception of others who lie at the root of the problem. Eisner (2002) seems clear about the creative's multi-faceted role, regardless of artistic specialism. Considering the attitudes of Herbert Read, he concurs that

'...by the term artist... we mean individuals who have developed the ideas, the sensibilities, the skills and the imagination to create work that is well proportioned, skilfully executed, and imaginative, regardless of the domain in which the individual works... the distinctive forms of thinking needed to create artistically crafted work are relevant to virtually all aspects of what we do, from the design of curricula, to the practice of teaching, to the features of the environment in which students and teachers live'

The science of education can be crushing. Attitudes to testing and the creation of manufactured education serving the business model to the detriment of all else, is tiring. I feel tired of it in the small way it affects my practice. How it has driven the ethos of creative education to believe that we primarily exist to enhance the economy and not the person. Paperwork overload and the accountability of absolutely everything have taken their toll. Education is more than a measured means to an end. Ethically, for those to whom it is a life force, they must stand their ground. In this challenge I wobble less. Having a challenge, a reason and a goal to explain and proclaim, is encouraging, re-assertive and purposeful. A personal life history contextualised within the perceived attitudes to rational thinking, theory as outlined in this reflection, and the reward of positive outcomes resulting from the ongoing practices of the artist as practitioner and educator have offered a greater hope and thereby readdresses the balance. The result, an emotional resilience which sort of ironed me out, for now anyway. We tell our stories and they become meaningful when spoken back. I teach this to my students, tell them that it is do-able, work-able, yet until now I have not dared to even try it out on myself. I shall continue to think as an artist, be informed as an

artist, inform as an artist, and take risks on the journey. In the light of what has gone before I press on, having thought and tested the ground on which I currently stand.

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