
6 How to promote student self-confidence

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Introduction

It is impossible to overestimate the fear and lack of self-confidence of students, especially that of non-traditional students. All the students with whom we work express their lack of faith in themselves in some form or other in that they are not clever enough, that they have no potential, that they are out of place, that they are impostors soon to be discovered – generally that they are not good enough. These negative opinions are only reinforced by the way that the widening participation debate has been conducted in Britain in the early twenty-first century. There is constant talk of lowering standards and dumbing down – and ‘Mickey Mouse students for whom Mickey Mouse degrees are quite appropriate’. Margaret Hodge when Minister for Lifelong Learning (2002–03) underscored this with the reassurance that many of the new students would not be entering professions or industries requiring traditional degrees but would rather undertake vocational programmes (Hodge, 2002).

HE institutions can exacerbate student lack of self-esteem in the way that they implicitly view and explicitly treat their students. If lecturers do view the new students as a pollution of the ivory environment, this will very quickly communicate itself to the student and reinforce the negative self-perception already extant. Further, if the HE institution makes no attempt to bridge the gap between the student and the forms and practices of HE, or if the HE orientation bridge that the university builds is one that overtly or covertly defines the student as deficit, where perhaps:

Student language is made visible and problematised but the language of discourse and the pedagogical practices in which they are embedded . . . remain invisible, taken as 'given' (Lillis, 2001: 22)

this will help confirm a negative notion of the (non-traditional) student in both staff and students.

In this chapter we explore the affective position of the student entering higher education, with a special focus on the thoughts and feelings of the non-traditional student. We move on to consider how we in learning development attempt to build student self-confidence and promote self-esteem.

Caught on the cultural cusp

At our institution Anie (2001) in an employability study that explored the employment outcomes of our students and Leathwood (2003) drawing on a longitudinal study that followed a cohort of 600 students through their whole degree process both spoke of the lack of self-confidence experienced by non-traditional students and how this initial low self-esteem was exacerbated by the cumulative and interlocking struggles of HE – struggles with finance, struggles with the reality that their degree would be worth less in the job market (Archer, 2002), struggles with not being able to take up postgraduate study opportunities and struggles with the occult and mysterious practices of HE itself.

Leathwood (2003), citing Kuhn (1995) and Reay (1998), speaks of the pervasiveness of the 'shame' inherent in gender, race and class, where to be working class is to experience the constant fear of never getting it right. For Leathwood these feelings are not personal failings but rather she relates them to the pathologising of the 'other' within the 'systems of oppression' of an unequal society, exacerbated by the myths of meritocracy and classlessness that pervade all social systems, including our education system. As Tett, citing Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) describes it: 'Education could be the royal road to the democratization of culture if it did not consecrate the initial cultural inequalities by ignoring them' (Tett, 2000: 190).

The non-traditional student in HE

Those triumphalist celebrations of fluidity always overlook the fact that being unfixed, mobile, in-between, can distress as much as it liberates. So one's sense of class identity is uncertain, torn and oscillating – caught on a cultural cusp. (Medhurst, in Munt, 2000: 20)

The transition into HE is often a painful one for our students. And indeed the students that we have interviewed and with whom we speak always tell of their fear, anxiety and apprehension. There is the terror of walking into the building, of that first lecture where it seems like everybody is looking at 'me' (some lecture theatres hold 300 or more people – that is the size of some secondary schools, or it may be the year size of a student from a comprehensive). Students speak of 'words swimming before their eyes', of the terror in a seminar when they can't understand a word that is being said. Students break down when trying to read a complex academic article (Sinfield, 2003; Sinfield et al., 2004).

We detail this not to confirm tutors in negative impressions of non-traditional students, but to argue that widening participation represents an opportunity for all our institutions to evolve. As we argue elsewhere in this text, adapting to mass higher education need not involve any lowering or levelling down of standards, but that in positively recognising difference and devising empowering curricula, or spaces within curricula and within our institutions, we will be facilitating the success of all our students (Warren, 2002). For, yes, student self-confidence does change if the student is welcomed into the academic environment – and the forms and processes of education itself are demystified. Given opportunities to learn, rehearse and refine academic skills and practices – without stigma – the success of all students is promoted.

Arguably all the work that is undertaken under the aegis of study and academic skills or learning development operates to improve student understanding of and performance within the academic environment – and thus promotes the building of a self-confidence and self-esteem based on perceived improvements in performance. Further, our students have also indicated that they have valued the opportunity to directly discuss issues of self-confidence, self-esteem and positive thinking. While this latter does draw on some elements of pop psychology and may be dismissed as psycho-babble, we can only say that after such sessions students report back that they not only feel better in college/university but they have also felt enabled to speak up at work, change jobs, pass driving tests, actually do that presentation and so forth.

How we do it

Welcoming practice

As indicated above, we start this process by valuing the non-traditional student and the qualities that they do bring to the HE environment. We make our learning development space as friendly and welcoming as we can, for you cannot downplay the impact of a friendly face! We remember that while our students may have experienced the world in powerful ways before they have entered college or university, typically they will have had unsuccessful or traumatising previous educational experience. We work to demonstrate that we value our students, and attempt to help them to value the skills, aptitudes and experiences that they bring with them. We stress that there is no shame in not automatically knowing how to study, learn and communicate effectively but that these things can be learned. We stress how we really like working with such motivated and keen students.

Tackling positive thinking

Our interactions with students take place one-to-one in workshops, in small group work and with a whole class in our study and academic skills programme. When directly addressing positive thinking in our study and academic skills programme, we typically do so when we tackle presentation theory and practice for often that is the academic practice that students fear the most. When lecturing on positive thinking, we explore fear and where it originates, the impact of fear and low self-esteem on study, and then suggest steps to take to build self-confidence. Below is the gist of our session upon ‘Fear, self-esteem and positive thinking’, including a summary of the contents of the ‘lecture’ that we normally give preceded by the preliminary activities that may be undertaken. Please feel free to use something similar with your students.

- **Tutor tip:** You may not initially feel comfortable giving a lecture on this topic – we certainly did not. It does not feel academic perhaps or it feels like something that only certain sections of an audience might appreciate. We can only report that this has worked for us – even in mixed groups of students: male and female, young and old, home and international, first-year and postgraduate.

Fear, self-esteem and positive thinking – preliminary discussion and activities

We often start by asking students whether or not low self-esteem affects student performance. To illustrate we ask the class to consider the sportsperson, asking who will win the race, the runner who believes in

him- or herself or the one that is loping along thinking that they can't possibly win? When looking at sport it is obvious that the mind can have a strong impact on how the body will perform – we argue that this is also true for academic study. We illustrate how low self-esteem has force in education, not least because it can lead to stress – and the release of the stress hormones cortisol and adrenalin (see also Chapter 10 on presentations) which reduce short-term memory and bring about the tunnel vision and focus necessary for safety – but which is counter-productive in education. For example, if a building is burning, you do not want to stop and wonder from whence the fire originated and whether or not there is an arsonist at work – you just need to flee the building. However, in academic study the 'from whence' and 'I wonder if' questions are essential.

Activity tip

Utilise an illustrative activity (Jeffers, 1987): ask for a volunteer and get them to extend their stronger arm. Tell the student that they must think negative thoughts such as 'I am a failure' and 'I am weak' as they resist you pushing down their arm. Typically the arm is very easy to push down. Now try again, but this time the student must think, 'I am powerful' and 'I am strong'. Typically the second time it really is more difficult to push down the student's arm.

Student activity: The difficult sentence

Find for yourself a typically obscure academic sentence from your discipline, or use the one below. Write it on an overhead or on the board. Ask students to read the sentence and then write down their *reaction* to it.

Go round the room asking students for their reactions. Take a few moments to discuss these, possibly indicating that while there are no necessarily right or wrong reactions, there were different ones. Further, say that noting that different reactions are possible should make students realise that their own reactions are neither necessary nor inevitable – they are learned. Once learned, they may be unlearned – or at least reflected upon.

Sample sentence:

'It is in order to return at this point to Jameson's "loss of referent" theme, because it is precisely this phenomenology of the everyday that Jameson's work both lacks and consciously relegates to the ethnographic sidelines' (Feather, H.,

2000, *Inter-subjectivity and Contemporary Social Theory*. Aldershot/Avebury – a really useful book by the way!).

Here are some responses gathered from our students (see *ESS*, pp. 146–7):

- I got really angry! Why on earth do they have to write like that? It's stupid.
- This is strange and scary, but it's where I've got to get to.
- I read it several times to try to make sense of it.
- I used my dictionary of literary terms and tried to make sense of it piece by piece.
- It made me feel like giving up, it's obvious that I'm not welcome here.
- Well I just laughed and laughed. They've got to be joking haven't they?

Ask students: What did you make of the different reactions to that sentence? Were you surprised? What effect will this have on you?

Potential discussion: It can help to reassure students about their personal responses to the sentence. Negative responses typically reveal how unconfident the student is feeling, but this situation can change. Further, remind them that as there are different responses recorded from the group, no one response is inevitable, it has been learned. Students can work to learn a different response to academic language and situations.

Fear and positive thinking – lecture notes

Study impacts upon the whole person for the human being is made up of mind and body, of effect and affect. Often 'affect' feels inappropriate in the academic, primarily cognitive, context and thus students feel that they ought to ignore or repress their feelings, especially negative ones. Obviously in terms of affect, we hope that students will feel excited, stimulated and challenged – but we must be aware that they might be horrified, terrified and demotivated. Ironically, the push for the repression of negative feelings can lead to an increase in their power rather than a decrease, in students becoming more subject to the occult practices of education rather than in mastering them. In this discussion we are going to cover fear and what we fear, why we experience low self-esteem and fear and what can be done to overcome our fears.

Fear and what we fear

● **Tutor tip:** You can ask students for fears (not phobias) before speaking on the topic if you wish.

We are frightened of many things. We are frightened of ageing, disease and death, typically we are all frightened of change, of the new. Change makes us uncomfortable – and it is not just major change that discomferts. Students are often frightened of entering the library, of reading an academic text, of giving that first presentation. We can be frightened of anything and everything, and while fear may be perfectly natural and normal, it can make life – especially student life – really difficult. For while there might be some things in life that you can choose to avoid – you really do not have to bungee jump if you are frightened of heights – the majority of things that we fear as students **do** have to be engaged with.

Why we experience fear and low self-esteem

It can be argued that the fear response is the body's way of telling us that something is not for us, that there are too many risks involved – after all, it is rather silly to bungee jump. But if people avoided everything that they feared they would undertake nothing at all. Remember, to become a student is actually to embrace change, and change does involve risk – risk to one's sense of self, to one's identity – as well as fear of failure, of looking, sounding and feeling like a fool. While nobody actually enjoys these feelings, in an educational context if you avoid what you fear as a student, then you definitely will not succeed. It can help if we try to understand how low self-esteem and fear originate or operate in our society.

Sociologists might argue that in an unequal society members of underprivileged groups suffer low self-esteem as part of social conditioning; it is an internalisation of the views that society holds of them. Further, fear and low self-esteem can have an inhibiting effect on the 'lower orders' that serves the interests of the ruling class, for it is easier to oppress people with low aspiration and who you can despise for their own sense of inferiority (Leathwood, 2003).

Evolutionary psychologists (such as Baron-Cohen, 1997) argue that fear, anxiety and even depression are a legacy of evolution. When an animal is on unfamiliar territory it is in danger of its life, hence a fear response is a survival mechanism. Unfortunately, as human beings we also have consciousness and consequently an awareness of our own fear that can inhibit us in ways that would never be true of an animal.

Popular psychologists (Jeffers, 1987) argue that fear and low self-esteem are taught to us by our primary caregivers – 'mind how you go', 'be careful', 'don't do that, it's dangerous'. When people say these things to us they are often just expressing their fears ('I don't want anything bad to happen to you') but what we hear and internalise is that they do not have faith in us, that they think we are inadequate. Once internalised

this negative self-perception can be extremely inhibiting preventing us from undertaking challenges or embracing risk.

Even economists have a say in this area – the non-stop pushing of pensions and insurance policies implies that there are ways of eliminating risk and making the world a totally safe and controllable space. But to be human is to constantly move into unfamiliar territory, to embrace risk. The more we focus on avoiding risk the more we are dehumanising ourselves. And the more we listen to our fears, the more we will focus on our inadequacies – and the less we are likely to do. This can be especially negative for the student who has so many new things to face, so many new challenges to embrace. If these changes are only viewed as problems and opportunities to fail then it becomes even more difficult to positively embrace education. This has a further consequence when studying if we consider the role of ‘mistakes’ in the learning process.

The learning environment may also play a part in the fear factor. Human beings do learn by trial and error. If the learning environment feels over-threatening, the student will not want to make mistakes and open themselves up to criticism: they may give up rather than reveal their mistakes to hostile scrutiny. The lesson we can learn as academics is to make the learning environment a safe one for **all** our students: a space for trial and error, for learning from mistakes – and we must reassure students that we have done so. The students have to realise that they will get things wrong – quite often – but if they work to learn from these experiences they will learn more.

What can be done to overcome fear and build self-confidence?

We have argued that fear, while often uncomfortable, is a perfectly natural and normal response to life and to new and unfamiliar experiences. We are now going to take a leaf out of the self-help book in order to argue that it is possible to reframe fear and thus change our response to it. We will move on to discuss how to take responsibility for our lives, change a negative vocabulary, make positive friends and utilise affirmations.

Reframing fear

Kipling said that the only thing to fear was fear itself. We argue that fear is unavoidable – what we can change is our response to fear. Here are some new ways to look at fear – see if they help (**you and**) your students.

- **Fear is good:** Fear is a wonderful indicator that we are doing new things, moving into new areas and undertaking new challenges. In this way fear is a good thing, it means that we are still growing, we are still alive. Arguably, if we are not experiencing some element of fear it means that we are stagnating – we are dying inside. Try to see

fear as an indicator of growth and welcome it – celebrate the fact that life still holds opportunity for you.

- **Fear affects everyone:** One problem for students is that they tend to think that everyone else is OK, that they are the only ones feeling frightened and looking foolish. Obviously this is not true: if Cohen is to be believed, everyone feels fear when embracing the new. Sometimes just realising that everyone else is also frightened can take the stigma out of our fear. Instead of a fear response proving once and for all that we are either inadequate or a coward we can relax in the realisation that it just means that we are as human as everybody else.
- **The only way to get rid of the fear of something is to do it – quickly:** Most people know this cliché to be true. The only way to overcome a fear is to do that which we fear – and the quicker the better. Students can spend months worrying about that presentation – and then it is over in five minutes. The months of worry have just served to make the task harder.
- **It's easier to face fear than to live with fear:** It really is easier to deal with fear rather than to live with it. Every time we allow fear to prevent us from undertaking something it is as if we are conspiring against ourselves to make the world a worse place. So if engaging in something that you fear, tell yourself you have actually chosen the easier option.
- **It takes practice:** Reframing fear in the ways detailed above may not come naturally to your students. However, they will find that with practice they will be able to face fear differently, and this will help them embrace the challenges of being a student.

Taking responsibility for our lives

We have argued above that students can experience lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem as a result of an unequal society and the social pressures under which they operate. While this is true, this can be read as a way of disempowering students and confirming them in a victim status. This is not a helpful place for anyone to be. While neither nature nor society are fair, it is not enough for the student to sit back and say well it's not my fault. To be able to move forward the student must be able to look at any situation in which they find themselves and work out just how they can take control of it – or how they can move forward. For if they just think 'it's not my fault' they stay trapped – if it is their responsibility then they can make things happen.

As a student, it may not be their fault that they are not as academically inducted as the Oxbridge undergraduate, it may not be their fault that

their professor thinks of them as a Mickey Mouse student . . . but there will be something that they can do to improve their own chances within the situation in which they find themselves if they get used to thinking of themselves as in charge of:

- their decisions
- their actions
- their state of mind
- the amount of effort that they put in
- getting work in on time
- getting good grades . . . etc.

If those things matter, students can take steps to make them happen. Of course we as academics can facilitate this by making our forms, processes and criteria clear. We can operate successful and empowering induction and HE orientation programmes, we can scaffold student learning in our seminars and we can operate and work with learning development facilities.

A positive vocabulary can help

The difficult sentence exercise above can reveal to people just how they normally respond to (academic) challenges. When first responses to situations tend to the negative this will often be reflected in the language typically used. Work is always hard, tough and difficult – metaphors of struggle, tunnelling, searching and suffering might all be used. If such a student thinks about an assignment it will be in terms of the amount of effort they will have to put in and the unending struggle that they will have to endure rather than in terms of the excitement, the challenge – the glorious frisson of fear.

It can help if we suggest that students start using language differently:

- A problem becomes an opportunity. (To solve a problem we must make something different happen – this is an opportunity for change.)
- A disaster becomes a learning experience. (Well, if a problem is an opportunity, a disaster must be a real opportunity – if we can reflect upon it.)
- ‘If only’ becomes ‘next time’. (We will make mistakes – and instead of lamenting them we can learn from them and note what could be done differently next time.)
- Should becomes choice. (So it’s not ‘I should do that essay’ but ‘I choose to do it’ or not.)

● **Tip:** Remind students that each choice they make – to do or not to do something – will have a price attached. This is another part of being human, our choices have prices – it is best to accept this joyfully and move on.

Each of these vocabulary shifts is easy to mock but they all embrace a shift in consciousness that will help the student face academic life more positively. Obviously no one can make people shift their perspective – but if the student does want to change, practising using this different language will make a difference.

Positive friends

One thing that may occur for the ‘changing’ student is that they will encounter derision or resistance from peers and family members. Young students may find that they do not enjoy people viewing them as a swot – and that a studious mien is neither ‘buff’ nor ‘cool’. Older students may find that when inputting effort into their studies they will be expecting family members to help more with chores – this does not always meet with approval. Young and old students may find that they no longer have time for everybody else’s woes and they will not always be at the end of a telephone or ready to stop everything for a chat.

If the student wants to retain contact with friends and family throughout their time as a student they will have to negotiate this change as diplomatically as possible. It is not usually a good thing just to confront everyone around you with the new, positive, in-your-face and self-interested person! Gently does it.

Further, it may be useful for students to start making new, positive friends to help them maintain their positive outlook and their energy levels. Negative people drain energy – positive people can excite and stimulate. Encourage students to make positive study partners and to form a positive study group. When encouraging group work in students yourself, you might let them choose their own groups so that they can work with people with whom they feel compatible – suggest that when making this choice they choose someone as positive and motivated as themselves – that is suitably ambiguous.

Affirmations

Typically we find that this is the topic with which the average academic has the most difficulty. Affirmations are short positive statements that students can use to overcome stress, to build their self-confidence and to generally help themselves.

The initial idea behind the affirmation is to drown out the internalised negative voice that we have grown up with. The ‘you’ll be sorry – you’re too old, too stupid, too fat, too lumpy . . .’ voice that lives in the heart,

head and ear of many of us – and the majority of our students. This voice has to be replaced with a positive one of which the most basic is the ‘I can handle it’ (Jeffers, 1987). If students say ‘I can handle it’ whenever they face a difficult situation or when they feel a wave of insecurity or self-doubt flood over them, they will calm down and be able to face things.

From the basic ‘I can cope’ statement, students can move on to develop their own set of affirmations, ones that address the other functions of the affirmation, to energise and boost the self-confidence of the individual. Remind students that affirmations should always be in the present tense and always in the positive, the present tense so that the goal of the affirmation becomes rooted in the now rather than remaining distant and unobtainable, in the positive to emphasise that which is desired rather than that which is being left behind. For example, it would be ‘I am brave’ rather than ‘I will not be afraid.’

It is useful if people write out their affirmations and stick them up around their homes so that the first thing they see in the morning could be ‘it’s a great day’. When brushing their teeth it could be ‘I am wonderful’ and so forth. If encouraging students to use this technique do warn them that it is one that requires maintenance. People find that they use this technique, feel great, decide they don’t need it anymore – and sink back into negative thinking and behaviour. Remind them that they will have had many, many years of practising their bad habits – they need to give the new, positive ones the same chance.

● **Tip:** As a light-hearted follow-up to a session like this, ask students to bring in their affirmations to share and discuss with the group.

Of course students will have to put in the academic work and effort as well – they cannot just sit confidently chanting affirmations in a corner and expect an essay to write itself. But thinking positively about their ability to write that essay can lead them to discover the steps that need to be taken to research and write an essay – and they may be able to give themselves the time that they need to do the work required. Thus a better essay will be written.

Conclusion

When concluding this session with your students as well as the reiteration of the lecture as a whole: ‘We have looked at fear and the effect that this has on the student, we have considered from where fear has arisen and some things that we can do to overcome our fears . . .’ **do** reassure them that if they are currently feeling more frightened – all that power and responsibility can be quite intimidating – they just need to feel the fear and do it anyway.

Also: If you deliver a lecture based on the above with conviction and enthusiasm, do not be surprised if you get a round of applause! Students really do enjoy this one.

Practising it

- When using 'learning logs' with your students do stress the value of the 'reaction' section (see also Chapter 14 on reflective practice). Honest personal reactions (especially when not penalised by the tutor) can help students discover aspects of the education process that affect them positively or negatively.
- Have a session where students bring in affirmations to share with the seminar group – risk sharing some of your own.

Extension

- Arguably all the activities that you use with students to help them become more aware of the forms and processes of education will extend their self-confidence.

Overall conclusion

In this chapter we have considered the factors that tend to promote a lack of self-confidence and self-esteem in the non-traditional student. We have argued that academia has an affective as well as an effective dimension – and that it is important to point this out to students and to acknowledge it for ourselves. Finally we looked at how we cover this topic in learning development, typically in a lecture on positive thinking looking at self-esteem and fear, and what we can do to overcome fear and build self-confidence. We do hope that you have found this an interesting chapter and that you find it easy to use this 'lecture' with your students.

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