How do I manage my role yet still maintain my values as a lecturer? A personal reflection.

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Abstract

In this paper the author examines the implications experienced when inadvertently faced with student’s personal problems. Believing in providing constructive feedback and a fair grade on their work, the author questions whether he was providing his true honest opinion to certain students due to his unfortunate awareness of their personal circumstances. Spending countless hours dealing with issues surrounding divorce, bullying, family loss, immigration, racism, hate crime, addictions, disabilities and mental illnesses, the author found himself in uncomfortable situations where he was unable to hold a professional distance with his students. Wishing to maintain his values as a lecturer, he searches for a solution to this problem with the aim of discovering an approach where he is capable of managing his role and not being shadowed by issues or swayed in his judgement by personal information when assessing their work.

Before starting my lecturing post I had a very clear idea what my responsibilities would be. Weekly meetings, preparing and delivering lectures and assessing student work I anticipated, and was clearly informed by the university before starting the position. However, I did not expect what became a very common and extremely difficult occurrence to manage – emotionally supporting students. As many of us are aware, entering student life can be a very daunting and difficult experience. Harrison (2001) collated a series of surveys and statistics dating back to 1997. The newspaper reported a study that claimed sixty one percent of first year university students experienced depression, twelve regularly considered suicide while one student attempted suicide. Another investigation stated that between 10 and 20% of students required psychiatric help before graduating. The Mental Health Foundation discovered that 50% of university students showed signs of clinical anxiety and more than one in ten suffered from clinical depression. The Times, in 2000, disclosed that more than 17% of students entering university felt lonely, suffering from self-doubt and isolation. In fact, feeling isolated was reported by the majority of students, where around one third of all students said their main problem was linked to loneliness, a common reason for leaving university without graduating. According to The Times, the most likely students to suffer from isolation whilst at university are:

- overseas students;
- mature students;
- students living in single-sex halls;
- first year students living off campus;
- joint Honours students who felt they did not belong in either of their home departments.

Caring for students is one of a university’s highest priorities. The university has a very strong policy in keeping its retention figures high. As lecturers we are expected to listen to
student needs. If students were to leave due to lack of support it would have repercussions on staff members. Although the university offers student support, seeking advice from a tutor seems to be the most common and comfortable solution for many, regardless of what the issue may be. Since becoming a lecturer, I have inadvertently found myself heavily involved in the personal and pastoral care of students, listening to issues surrounding divorce, family loss, immigration, racism, hate crime, addictions, disabilities and mental illnesses. Despite knowing deep down I was unable to help with these issues, I ended up spending countless hours talking or writing e-mails outside of my contracted hours, counselling students on matters I had very little knowledge or experience with myself. The British Association of Counselling (1991, p. 1) claims that:

‘counselling is the skilled and principled use of a relationship to facilitate self-knowledge, emotional acceptance and growth, and the optimal development of personal resources. The overall aim is to provide an opportunity to work towards living more satisfyingly and resourcefully.’

As I am not a trained counsellor, my involvement with certain student issues was a constant concern of mine. The cohort of students that I have experienced, unexpectedly revealing personal issues, not only made managing my role very difficult in terms of hours and inexperience, but also caused a serious implication on one of my important values as a lecturer, which is providing constructive criticism and a fair grade for their work. When students were coming to me on a regular basis regarding personal issues of theirs, I sometimes questioned whether I was giving them my true honest opinion due to my personal awareness of the individual:

‘If you are ultimately responsible for assessing your learners by determining their grades, then that limits the extent to which an open relationship is possible’ (Mortiboys, 2005, p. 16).

What is interesting, before I became a permanent lecturer my grades and feedback were far more critical as a visiting tutor. I recall being told by a member of staff how ‘harsh’ I was. Yet my reason for being so judgmental of their work was that I purely assessed it for what it was, without any knowledge of the individual who had produced it. Now as an employed lecturer and being with the students on a more regular basis, I found I was being frequently approached by students with issues unrelated to their studies. From intense conversations to difficult e-mails, I found myself in uncomfortable situations beyond my control at the time, spending a considerable amount of time with each scenario. To highlight my experiences, in December 2006, I received an e-mail from a student who was lacking confidence. Surrounding this issue were mentions of depression, divorce, loneliness and wanting to open a bottle of wine to drown her sorrows. What started as a manageable issue cumulated into a very difficult and uncomfortable read. Despite not being contracted to work on this particular day, I was unable to ignore it, mainly because I was concerned about the individual and did not want to leave it until I was back in work in case the student was waiting for a reply. Spending hours writing and rewriting my response, taking careful consideration of my wording, I concluded suggesting seeing a university counsellor. I quickly received a reply from the individual thanking me for my words of encouragement. The individual mentioned not ‘been overly impressed’ with councillors and preferred not to see one. The e-mail finished on mentioning a recent family loss. Two weeks later whilst assessing, I passed that particular student giving the lowest possible grade, despite feeling the grade should possibly have been lower.

Although I had tried to change by becoming less approachable, unavailable or simply ignoring e-mails, I found myself not living in the direction of my values (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006, p. 46). In March 2007 I was approached in my office, unexpectedly again, by a student who was clearly distressed about something. This student was, I felt, one of the
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most talented students we had and showed a great flair for his work. Despite trying my best to get to the bottom of what the problem was, I failed to find what I could do to help him. I was now in the middle of a Postgraduate Certificate in Developing Professional Practice in Higher Education and had started working on an action research cycle report, that forms the basis of this paper. I knew I had to put methods into practice and think of new approaches. When I realised he was not going to tell me what his concerns were, I decided to let him leave the office and not worry about him. A week later he sent an e-mail apologising for his behaviour and said ‘I’m fine now … don’t worry about me.’ I felt I should have responded to the e-mail, but actually I did not. The following month, before graduating, the student thanked me for my help and support during his time at university. This reminded me of why I enjoy the work that I do. I was not proud of the way I had dealt with this situation and it made me feel very uncomfortable. Although it ended happily, I regret not being supportive enough with the student when he clearly needed it. I was concerned that my insensitive approach was giving the wrong impression to students. Carson (1996) collected, over a period of twenty six years, responses from past students who had graduated from Rollins College in Orlando. In 1996, she published her findings and discovered that the most effective teachers were the ones who demonstrated a ‘love of subject and even more often than enthusiasm in the classroom – was a special attitude toward and relationship with students’ (Carson, 1996, p.14). In my experience, teachers/lecturers who have a passion for what they and their students are doing always were the most effective teachers and managed to get the best work out of everyone. Now as a lecturer myself, my aim has always been to follow their example. However, I needed to find a way of dealing with these matters that were affecting my values as a lecturer, enabling me to judge the situation for myself and deciding on what action I should take.

Alan Mortiboys, lecturer and author of ‘Teaching with Emotional Intelligence’ (2005), believes handling your own emotions as well as your students is central to your success as a lecturer (2005, p. 1). This means having the ability to identify mine and students feelings in order to motivate and manage each other (Goleman, 1998, p. 317). Nevertheless, what Mortiboys (2005) and so many others fail to realise, or at least develop, is the consequences of this. To describe someone who is demonstrating his emotional intelligence, Mortiboys uses words such as ‘approachable,’ ‘positive,’ ‘good listener’ ‘attentive’ and ‘respectful,’ which are all common traits I identify with myself. However, the problem with presenting these qualities to your students is that they can sometimes see you more as a close friend who they can approach at anytime to discuss personal issues. As Mortiboys (2005, p. 80) says:

‘I certainly would not suggest that you become a counsellor, ready to deal with the range of feelings an individual has and to assist them with their personal problems. That is not your job and would be inappropriate and damaging behaviour, so be sure to have a clear understanding of your limits in this respect.’

For Mortiboys to state this clearly brings to light his understanding of the potential circumstances that may occur through engaging your emotional intelligence in dealing with students. Unfortunately, he does not delve into this area any further. Therefore, I decided to contact him and query his quote, asking if he had any advice on how I should manage this problem. His reply was extremely useful as it made me question what I was doing. My main problem is that I do not want to come across as being heartless to my students if I decide to not help them in any way. Mortiboys (2005) believes that advising students on issues I have very little knowledge or experience with is ‘irresponsible’ and that I needed to change my approach immediately to benefit the student as well as myself. He felt I needed to identify what my boundaries were so that I can immediately respond to how far I want to listen when these situations occurred. My overall feeling from Mortiboys’s (2007) response to my query was that I needed to be clearer with my
students regarding what support I am prepared to offer.

I began looking into ways I could communicate how I wished to be perceived by my students. In the 1960’s, Eric Berne developed a method of understanding human behaviour through a model which he called Transactional Analysis (Berne, 1961). By analysing the interactions between people when communicating, he identified three ego states to our personality – parent, adult and child. His model enables us to become aware of these components in our individual personality and to understand which ego states we are operating our interactions with, hence explaining our various relationships with different people. The goal is to identify and change our ego states if we wish to achieve a better outcome when communicating with certain people in our lives. My feeling from reading his three ego states was that I possibly behave as a ‘nurturing parent’ constantly encouraging and guiding students. Berne (1961) sees a ‘nurturing parent’ as someone who is caring and concerned, calming people when they are troubled. Words, I admit, that I identify myself with when faced with distressed students. This is again mainly down to me as a person and my experiences in life with teachers and lecturers. When I was a student, I myself felt more comfortable approaching my tutor regarding a personal issue of mine as it felt to be the safest and most comfortable option from talking to anyone else. We see our lecturers on a weekly basis and connections easily develop without one being aware. Now as a lecturer myself, I have quickly realised how extremely difficult this can be. Berne’s (1961) description of the adult ego state includes someone who is rational and talks reasonably and assertively, yet neither tries to control or react. Although an adult to adult approach with all my students seemed the most obvious approach in resolving this issue, there was no general rule as to the effectiveness of any ego state in any given situation. My general feeling was that I need to achieve a balanced approach between the adult and parent ego states, yet be fully aware of where I drew the line in terms of my involvement in the personal and pastoral care of each individual.

Obviously, I did not want to immediately abandon a student if a personal issue was brought to my attention. Therefore, I decided to identify the most common personal problems I have experienced from students, and others that I am likely to experience in the future, and researched what services and support groups were available, including visiting student support and researching organisations outside the university. This allowed me to signpost the student in the right direction if the issue was unrelated to their studies. Since my research, I have experienced several situations where students have unexpectedly emerged with private information. For example, a student was falling behind with her studies for several reasons which she brought to my attention, including a recent family loss, financial difficulties and her current mental health. Her mother was unaware she had failed the previous year, which was causing huge stress for the student. A month later, I was approached by a student who was clearly distressed and anxious about her choice of study. This eventually led to more personal information being revealed explaining her behaviour, including family loss, feeling isolated, and ill health within the family and herself. She told me she had not made many friends since starting the course and was finding it very difficult to settle in. Her confidence and self-esteem was very low and pressure from the family to achieve a degree was causing immense strain to her. Another situation at the same time, involved a mature student breaking down during a one to one discussion on her work. Unwilling to tell me what the problem was, she admitted that the issue was personal. Overall, these experiences were not enjoyable. Clearly I do not wish for anyone to feel alone or unable to talk to anyone. I approached each situation with careful thought and consideration. I made it clear that I was unable to help with their private circumstances, but offered my full support and time in helping them with their work. Personally, I did not feel cold or heartless by not delving into their issues. I
actually felt a better person and possibly more responsible by responding in this way. I informed them of the services that were available but left it in their hands to decide if they were going to make use of what the university has to offer.

How do we manage our role as lecturers?

Figure 1. “How do we manage our role as lecturers?” (cartoon by author).
Although this account has been very personal, I feel what I have achieved as a result has been a step in the right direction. As one can never predict when these difficult situations will occur, I feel this research has really helped me decide on an appropriate action to take. Whether it is a knock on the door, e-mail or approached in a corridor, the information I have collated has made me more aware of the support that is available and has helped build my confidence by being better prepared when I am faced with these situations. I feel far more equipped to deal with student concerns and direct them to the appropriate person or agency if I am unable to help. I can now decide if a brief conversation with myself will help the student, or if their need requires more specialist support (locally or nationally). I always ensure that students are aware that I can offer my support in achieving their degree, however, I now feel I am able to ‘stand back’ from personal situations when they arise and look at the issue from a lecturer’s angle, holding a professional distance. This has enabled me to deliver constructive criticism during assessment time, evaluating students work simply for what it is and not being shadowed by issues or being swayed in my judgement by personal information, and I hope my journey will be of use to others.

REFERENCES