I’m bored, get me out of here!

John Sharp and Brian Hemmings consider advances in the study of academic boredom, the implications for students in higher education, and what might be done to support them

An emerging field

Students attending university and college get bored. Who would have guessed? It’s meant to be the most personally, socially and intellectually rewarding time of their lives, yet lecturers know full well what boredom looks like, of course — they see it every day — perhaps more often than they might care to admit. Warning signs, though by no means conclusive, include drowsiness and yawning, heads in hands, slouching, avoiding eye contact, vacant stares, repeated finger or foot tapping, mobile phone or laptop distractions, task avoidance and persistent clock watching. Overheard statements like ‘watching paint dry’, ‘as dull as dishwater’ and ‘bored to tears’ are more overt. But what do we know about ‘academic boredom’, the term now used to describe the boredom experienced by students in higher education? If the research literature is anything to go by, not much at all, it would seem, at least not in the UK, where the field is worryingly underdeveloped but emerging. According to some reports, members of the general public get bored on average about six hours a week; 25 per cent of office workers are thought to be bored at any one time of the day; and up to 50 per cent of pupils are regularly bored at school, and in some subjects more than others. Why should it be any different for students? In a recent survey undertaken by Sandi Mann and Andrew Robinson at the University of Central Lancashire, 68 per cent of student participants found their lectures boring at least some if not half of the time, and a staggering 30 per cent more often than that. Academic boredom is a disabling, achievement-related emotion which contributes, usually adversely, towards student engagement and overall academic performance. As a lived experience worthy of investigation, academic boredom is far from trivial.

Matters of state and trait

In the 50 years or so leading up to and throughout the 1980s, psychologists, psychiatrists and psychotherapists demonstrated that work-related boredom occurred as a reaction to familiarity and repetition, that the actual experience reported by different individuals undertaking the same repetitive tasks varied considerably, and that boredom could come and go within minutes or feel like an eternity. Boredom was seen as a state of subjective monotony. As a state, interest was directed towards the actual experience of boredom in the moment. The 1980s also witnessed some of the first attempts to model boredom in detail and to locate it theoretically. A breakthrough for the study of boredom in general came with publication of Richard Farmer and Norman Sundberg’s Boredom Proneness Scale (BPS) in 1986, an easy-to-administer, 28-item, self-report questionnaire with a true-false scale. The BPS measured boredom as a trait: the recurring propensity or habitual disposition of individuals toward becoming bored. As witnessed by the proliferation of studies published throughout the 1990s, the impact of the BPS was considerable. Due in no small measure to the work of Stephen Vodanovich at the University of West Florida, and others, boredom became associated with a range of human conditions and pathologies, including loneliness and withdrawal, depression, disruptive or aggressive behaviours, drug and alcohol abuse, smoking, gambling, sexual promiscuity and risk taking. Definitions also became more refined,
with boredom widely considered an unpleasant but potentially productive or creative situation.

Contemporary developments
As a complex, achievement-related emotion, academic boredom is now defined as ‘an intense and often brief psychophysiological change in response to a supposedly meaningful educational event’ and located within control-value theory. Academic boredom’s complexity arises both because of its cognitive, affective, motivational and behavioural dimensions as well as its highly situated and transient nature, all of which renders it difficult to isolate and study. Control-value theory acknowledges academic boredom’s ‘hybridity’ in ‘real-life’ educational settings, while offering valuable predictions of success or failure in connection with academic life. In essence, negative and disabling emotions like boredom interfere with how students exercise influence or control over their circumstances, reducing any benefits or rewards to be derived. Drawing on our own contribution to the field as educators, and from research undertaken by Reinhard Pekrun, Thomas Goetz, Taylor Acee and Virginia Tze, psychologists working with students in Germany, the United States, Canada and China, not only has it been possible to identify those students more prone to academic boredom than others, but the types of academic boredom they experience have been identified with more precision. While the exact relationships between academic trait and academic state boredom remain somewhat speculative (see figure opposite), this combined body of work offers considerable diagnostic potential in an applied sense.

What we now know with more certainty is that academic boredom occurs as a result of how courses are designed, delivered and assessed as well as how individual take to being a student. In other words, academic boredom arises when students are required to do the same things, in the same ways, over and over or can’t find anything of interest or sufficiently stimulating or motivating to do for themselves. Having time on their hands at university or college also means having to fill it, and what students fill it with can also become boring. While most students can snap out of their academic boredom with ease, others, it would seem, are far less fortunate. For a few, the effects can be chronic. Why some students are more prone to academic boredom than others and respond to it in different ways remains a mystery. Neuroscientists know that emotional experiences are generated and distributed across different parts of the brain, with boredom thought to have a particular consequence on the insular cortex. Similarly, boredom has become associated with low levels of the neurotransmitter dopamine and dopamine activity. While it is tempting to draw inferences and conclusions, the problem we have here is that while neuroscientists, psychologists and educators often ask the same sorts of questions, they approach them in completely different ways and at different levels of abstraction. What is discovered in the laboratory doesn’t always transfer readily into the lecture theatre.

Engagement and performance
The impact of academic boredom on engagement and performance hit home in our work with 235 final year Education Studies students at a single UK higher education institution. In accordance with control-value theory, almost three-quarters of respondents identified three critical variables: the freedom given over what to do. Taken together, and on balance, those more engaged with assignments were also determined by the type of assignment set and the freedom given over what to do. Taken together, and on balance, those more engaged with assignments were also determined by the type of assignment set and the freedom given over what to do.

The level of boredom experienced with assignments was also determined by the type of assignment set and the freedom given over what to do. Taken together, and on balance, those more engaged with assignments were also determined by the type of assignment set and the freedom given over what to do.
involved in any of the above, counsellors and psychotherapists have a particular role to play in emotional conditioning and attribution retraining, motivation and goal setting, improving resiliency and building confidence, while helping students work through situations which may damage self-esteem or self-worth. Students for whom it proves particularly troublesome or who find themselves identified as ‘at risk’ of failing behind or terminating studies as a result of academic boredom certainly need the highly specialised help that lecturers are unqualified to provide. As Professor Guy Claxton, writing in education over 25 years ago, suggested: ‘Cognition doesn’t matter if you’re scared, depressed or bored.’

How right he was.

### Conclusion

Academic boredom may also be an as either of these two more commonly diagnosed conditions not immediately apparent. If not already