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NON -PARTICIPATION IN FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT: A STUDY OF POST-GRADUATE PROFESSIONAL STUDENTS

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Abstract: Formative assessment is used by proponents of student centred learning to facilitate summative attainment. This study uses a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of a number of students who were admitted to a post-graduate professional programme through recognition of prior learning (RPL) and who have not engaged with the formative process. Informal conversations were used to capture the essence of their experiences and findings were discussed against a framework provided by Cross's (1981) dispositional, institutional and situational barriers to learning. Implications for future research include exploring interventions to help RPL students overcome barriers and ease transition into higher education at post-graduate level.

Keywords: Barriers to participation and learning; formative assessment; adult learning

1. Background

The Bologna Declaration defines two distinct and consecutive cycles of studies; first cycle (undergraduate) and second cycle (postgraduate), where 'access to the second cycle shall require successful completion of first cycle studies, lasting a minimum of three years.' (European Higher Education Area, 1999 p.6). This paper concerns the experiences of a group of non-graduate students admitted to a post-graduate professional programme in Human Resource Management through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) where significant work experience is accepted as a proxy for first cycle attainment.

To ease the transition into the classroom, a student centred approach to learning (SCL) is employed as defined as a "broad teaching approach that encompasses replacing lectures with active learning, integrating self-paced learning

programs and/or cooperative group situations", (Turner 2006, p.6). Activities such as guided group work, case study analysis and discussion are used. Voluntary formative assessments (based on previous exam questions) are offered weekly with formative, constructive feedback provided by email. A voluntary mock exam is offered at the end of the programme prior to students sitting the summative examination. Feedback from official module evaluations and an additional, annual online survey undertaken by the module team suggests that non-graduate students who engage with these measures, consider them instrumental in enhancing performance at summative assessment. Data on exam performance confirms this, with non-graduate participants in the mock exam achieving average marks of 53% (across 3 consecutive cohorts surveyed) as opposed to 43% for non-graduate non-participants, (Daley and Nisa, 2015; Daley, 2015).

This paper examines the experiences of a small number of non-graduates on the programme who did not participate in the formative activities. The matter is significant because it is a recurring phenomenon. Module tutors and fellow students extoll the value of participation, yet every year there are students who fail to participate and subsequently and/or consequently fail the module. Given the positive effect of engaging in formative assessment, why then do some of the non-graduates not participate in the process? What is stopping them?

This question forms a preliminary study for a doctorate in education and it will be explored using a phenomenological approach as the methodology. Phenomenology will be used in the doctoral thesis to seek to understand the experiences of students undertaking a part-time, post-graduate, professional course without an undergraduate degree. This study offers the author an early opportunity to engage with elements of the phenomenological process.

2. Theoretical Framework

Phenomenological studies are inductive rather than theory driven. Initial literature reviews are short as the discussion stage is where the researcher engages with the literature. However, a framework for the study is provided by Cross (1981, p.97), who in her seminal work on adult learners states "it is just as important to know why adults do not participate as why they do". She identifies three main inhibitors to participation in formal learning as dispositional, institutional and situational barriers. Dispositional barriers relate to personality traits, relative attitudes, self–perceptions about oneself as a learner and expectations about what is required to succeed. Institutional barriers include institutional practices and unfamiliarity with the culture of the educational organization. They include individual perspectives formed out of previous educational experiences. Situational barriers relate to individual circumstances such as work pressures and family commitments.

3. Methodology

The methodology employed may broadly be described as phenomenological, in that 'a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences …describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon', (Cresswell, 2012, p.76). In this case, the phenomenon experienced was non-participation in learning activities directed at improving attainment.

A purposive sample of five participants were identified through admissions and attainment data with the dual inclusion criterion that they should have been admitted to the course through RPL and not participated in formative assessment activities. The focus on this group was important in order to 'describe a particular context in rich detail, to make sense of the interpretations and constructions that people in the context make and to analyse them in ways that promote insightful and deep understanding,' (Arthur et al., 2012, p. 51.).

All potential participants who were invited agreed to take part in the informal conversations. Conversations were utilised to put students at ease, capture the essence of their experience and avoid steering the discussion. This approach was important to help the author remain objective and 'bracket' out her own preconceptions and perceptions on the issues. Clearance for the study was obtained through the university's research ethics process.

4. Findings

Although not all participants were female, female pronouns have been adopted below to avoid identification of participants.

All participants were happy to be on the course and several considered themselves to be privileged to be offered the opportunity. All were employer funded and some had competed successfully against colleagues to secure funding. This lead to a sense of achievement and enhanced confidence. However for some this confidence had since been shaken, once they realised how demanding in terms of time and mental effort the programme would be. Several participants had last experienced formal education over twenty years ago having left school after Level 2 qualifications. Employment experience was considered invaluable in understanding context and practice of HR, but of little use in applying theory and achieving results.

One participant had enrolled on the programme along with a younger, more junior colleague from the same organization. The fact that she had utilised occupational experience to make regular contributions to class discussion had enhanced her self-confidence and sense of status within the cohort. However the younger student had been educated to degree level and had achieved a considerably higher mark at summative assessment. This had led to a feeling of 'loss of face' on the part of the participant.

Fear of failure was cited by two participants for their unwillingness to participate in the formative activities. One remarked 'I was scared to get it wrong'. It emerged that

she had struggled with and abandoned previous attempts at post-compulsory education. Negative experiences at school many years ago, including repeated attempts at passing GCSE (Level 2) examinations had left deep psychological scars. Acknowledging that having satisfied the rigorous RPL admissions process, the university authorities were confident in her ability, she herself remained unconvinced and intimidated by the prospect of undertaking summative assessment.

The second 'frightened' participant suggested that she was 'too scared to try'. She found tutors supportive but felt they failed to appreciate how 'Uni' could be an overwhelming experience. She had left full-time education over twenty-five years ago and this was so different to school. She would not have enrolled on the course were it not for the fact that her lack of professional qualification had stymied her career prospects within the organization in which she had been employed for over fifteen years. She wanted to make the most of her time in higher education, but her family and friendship group included no graduates and therefore she had no peers to consult for informal information and advice. She had been convinced that she needed to spend her time 'learning the theories by heart' before she started applying them. Now, well into her second semester, she was starting to feel less alienated; she could now understand how formative assessment helped summative performance and she appreciated the friendly, supportive approach of her tutors. She regretted the time it had taken for her to reach this conclusion; it had cost her highly, having failed the examination at first attempt and being forced to undertake the reassessment.

Another participant explained that she lacked confidence and admitted her response to challenges in life had been to shy away from them. Her line manager had convinced her to apply for the course; without the qualification, more junior colleagues would continue to be promoted over her. She was fortunate to be granted time off for the course plus study leave, so she conceded that time was not a constraint but that time was used for displacement activity. 'I thought it would be easier than this. When it came to studying, I didn't know where to start and although you kept telling us you have a go and you would help us, I could always find something else to do rather than studying – my house has never been so clean!'

A busy job and family responsibilities were cited as reasons for not spending more time on the course in general and not participating in formative activity in particular by several participants (see below), but one actually resented the intrusion on her time. Although she enjoyed coming to university, the pleasure was derived from the camaraderie of fellow students and the chance to get out of the office for half a day a week! Her objective was to do enough to get by, gain the qualification and move on with her career and her life in general.

A majority of participants had family responsibilities with children and/or elderly dependents. One respondent suggested that lack of practical spousal and parental support and pressure to spend time with the family at weekends had stopped her spending more time studying. Although family members offered encouragement and even boasted of her student status, lack of exposure to academia on their own part meant that they failed to appreciate and thus sanction the time she needed. Whilst doubting her ability to attain the highest grades, she felt that had she had she been free of this psychological burden, she would have taken time to herself to study and would have achieved higher grades.

5. Discussion

In phenomenology, the intention is to describe rather than analyse the data. Early sifting suggests that most responses can be categorised under the headings of dispositional, institutional and situational barriers. Therefore Cross's (1981) work provides an appropriate framework or set of themes for the presentation of the findings of the study. However, these categories were not found to be mutually exclusive. In particular, there was inter-relationship detected between institutional and situational barriers, warranting the sub-heading below.

5.1. Dispositional Barriers

A fear of failure originating in past experience was cited by several participants as a reason for not engaging in formative activity. This concurs with the findings of a study examining the experiences of non-graduates admitted onto a professional Disability Studies Masters programme on the basis of RPL, where students' social and learning histories were noted as instrumental in facilitating or inhibiting learning. Bourdieu's (1990) concept of "habitus" was deemed significant as "a durable unconscious and embodied set of transposable dispositions" (Mutch, 2003, p.384, cited in Cooper, 2011, p.42) formed out of past experiences and socialisation processes.

The feeling of loss of face experienced by another participant may be attributed to 'social comparison concern' (Micari and Pazoz, 2014, p.251). Alluding to Festinger (1954) it is suggested that 'in the learning realm' when faced with others who appear more competent, the threat of feeling inferior hinders cognitive engagement and the ability to process information. For this participant, the concern is complicated and exacerbated by her work place position as line manager to a fellow, more academically qualified and higher performing student.

For some participants, past experiences of formal learning appeared incompatible with or inadequate preparation for post-graduate study, because of their singular conviction about the nature of learning. For Falasca, (2011, p.586) features of this internal (or dispositional) barrier include "Adhering to pervasive myths or mindsets'"such as the need for rote learning; a binary perspective believing answers to be right or wrong and relying on old categories of 'learnt' learning such as the memorisation rather than the understanding of facts

One participant suggested studying was not a priority in life. The qualification was important for career development but there was no need for the learning experience to be particularly fulfilling, although it was good to make friends. This perspective is well represented in the literature. Rothes, Lemos, and Gonçalves (2013) used Carré's (2001) model of motivation for adult education to determine that adult learners enrolled in an educational programme showed mainly extrinsic (job related) motives for participation. Intrinsic epistemic (learning for its own sake) motives were deemed less important, but socio-affective (search for interpersonal relationships) were still of significance. Shepherd and Mullins Nelson (2012, p. 10) described the adult learner as having "transitioned…to a life inclusive of family,

career and other duties such as civic or volunteer services". Such students might, therefore, be described as "employees who study" rather than "students who work. King, Saraswat, and Widdowson (2014) found that for adults studying part-time whilst in employment, their prime identity was not that of "student". Over half were employer funded and some expressed dissatisfaction with the volumes of work and degree of self-directed learning expected leading to the perception that they were teaching themselves rather than being guided by skilled practitioners.

5.2. Institutional-Situational Barriers

Several participants enjoyed the student centred approach to learning and the use of the classroom as a forum for sharing professional experiences, but still struggled to understand the relationship between practice and theory, in particular how a knowledge of theory might serve to explain, justify and/or enhance understanding of practice. In Cooper's (2011,p.40)) study of non-graduates admitted to a post-graduate professional programme through RPL, the question "can adult learners prior experiential knowledge act as a resource for the successful acquisition of postgraduate academic literacy practices", was explored?. Would adult learners' previous professional and life experience act as a resource for writing and research or a barrier to acquisition of the academic literacies needed to complete a Master's level programme? Findings indicated experience would act as an affordance if the operational knowledge of students on the programme was seen by lecturers as complementing and enriching formal academic knowledge. Also of significance was the nature of the programme's curriculum and pedagogy; the interventions of lecturers in curriculum design and pedagogy were found to be instrumental in either facilitating or inhibiting learning.

5.3. Situational Barriers

One participant admitted she had not appreciated the vast differences between school and university. She had left full-time education over twenty-five years ago and had initially felt overwhelmed. It had taken her a while to adapt to the learning approach and in the mean time, she had failed the exam. Catterall, Davis and Yang (2014) found that some students from non-traditional academic backgrounds (no previous exposure to higher education) underestimated both the volume and difficulty of the studies they had to do on their courses. Some struggled to see the relevance of subject matter not directly related to their profession and were unclear of the role of theory as opposed to practice. Many students struggled to "reposition themselves as critical learners, particularly in the absence of direct instruction." (p.252).

Lack of prior exposure to higher education not just on her part, but on that of her immediate or wider circle was considered as an inhibitor by another participant. With little understanding of her situation and the demands of it, this participant's friends and family were unable to offer anything other than moral support. She had often felt pressurised to spend time with them rather than on her studies. 'Role

characteristics and their impact on adult learning such as changes in nuclear family roles' for example marrying and having children or the death of a parent are cited by Falasca (2011, p.586) as key external (situational) barriers to learning. Longworth and Davies (1996) record specific categories of barriers including Intellectual-spiritual which relate to the lack of educational culture in the family or social environment and the fear of failure. Limits on time and ability to access learning spaces are noted as limiting factors.

6. Future Research

Phenomenological research requires repeated re-visitations of the data and sometimes a return to the participants in order to truly capture the 'essence' of the lived experience, (Moustakas, 1994). This is the beginning of a much deeper and wider study and therefore it may be inappropriate to draw conclusions at this stage, although further questions may be posed.

For some students, it appears that a student-centred learning approach helps to bridge that gap (Daley and Nisa, 2015). For others, it is insufficient. Perhaps the most significant barrier is one of communication: they do not speak the language of academia. If this is the case, what if anything should be done? Catterall, Davis and Yang (2014) suggest that interventions should be undertaken to close the gap between expectations of students from non-academic backgrounds and the reality of academic life. They question whether such students should be helped to change to fit into the university culture or if the university should create a new institutional habitus (Bordieu, 1990) more inclusive to students from non-academic backgrounds. Giannoukos et al. (2015, p. 49) suggest the responsibility of the tutor is to secure an environment that both facilitates student learning and counters low self-esteem, 'taking initiatives, fighting the fear of rejection'. If this is the case, then implications for such interventions stretch beyond pedagogy (or andragogy) into questions of resourcing with issues of tutor expertise and funding to the fore.

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