Authenticity in Teaching and Learning: How Far Do We Need to Go?

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Abstract.

Meaningful engagement with students in teaching and learning requires the interpersonal skills to develop trust and rapport, and the emotional intelligence and courage to be reciprocal in our interactions. In teaching contexts which seek to facilitate students' wellbeing and lifelong personal and professional development skills, these requirements become personal – demanding honesty and vulnerability from the educator. We propose the value of reciprocal authenticity in these spaces and present the challenges this poses for the educator and team teacher. The context for this reflection is the development and delivery of a credit-bearing, discipline-agnostic student wellbeing and personal development module in an Irish university, wherein we describe our experience of the reflective process and use of the third space in co-creating a learning environment with students. As efforts to embed wellbeing in the curriculum gain traction, we ask whether we as educators are prepared to display this authenticity and consider how we can be supported to cultivate authentic spaces.

Keywords: Authenticity; Collaborative reflection; Vulnerability; Wellbeing.

1. Authenticity in learning and teaching.

Developing meaningful engagement and partnerships with students through collaborative teaching and learning practices require – amongst other values – authenticity, honesty, trust, reciprocity and courage (HEA, 2015). In the context of personal development education, expecting these values from students requires instructors to demonstrate vulnerability in reciprocity; their introspection, emotion, knowledge and experiences expressed as evidence of holding up their side of the bargain. This reflection offers our experiences of developing and

delivering a discipline-agnostic student wellbeing and personal development module at an Irish university. It is our position that student success in higher education requires support for the management and cultivation of holistic wellbeing and the skills that underpin this. The importance of student engagement in co-creating this learning environment was a priority.

Teaching is an interpersonal and relational endeavour—who the teacher is, matters (Kelchtermans, 2009), and as argued by Russell, '*how I teach is the message*' (Russell, 1997, p. 45). Trust between students and teachers has been shown to facilitate engagement and influence important learning behaviours and outcomes (Romney & Holland, 2020) and vulnerability as a medium for trust-building can be demonstrated through the emotional, cognitive, and organisational aspects of teaching (Kelchtermans, 1996). Barriers to teacher vulnerability include perception of ineptitude, lack of knowledge, use of anecdotal rather than scientific inquiry, and stigmas of emotional display such as 'weakness' (Romney & Holland, 2020). The impact of these barriers are further nuanced in the context of team teaching in wellbeing and personal development education because a teacher is not only revealing themselves to a group of students, but also to a colleague or colleagues where contestation and judgement is more likely and more challenging.

This reflection centres around the development and delivery of a new student wellbeing and personal development module in which cultivation and expression of the "*authentic self*" was a central tenet. Leveraging the steps to partnership by starting with the student voice (NStEP 2021), we developed the module in response to student needs, elicited through engaged research conducted for a wider project. The module was delivered through live online classes and small group workshops covering physical, psychosocial, emotional and digital health and wellbeing. A larger team of contributors were engaged where specific expertise was required. As individuals, we are reflective practitioners and lecturers in health sciences subjects; we had not previously collaborated together in a teaching and learning context, we were both passionate about wellbeing but we had never formally taught it in the higher education setting.

Why was authenticity an important element of the wellbeing curriculum we designed? Subjective feelings of authenticity and inauthenticity impact on a person's wellbeing; people often strive to be authentic and experience negative emotions when they believe that they have acted inauthentically (Lenton *et al.*, 2013). Rogers (1959, 1961) reported positive changes in his clients when they responded authentically, distancing themselves from societal expectations, recognising and relinquishing their pursuit of externally motivated goals that on inspection were

not meaningful to them, and revealing their true selves to close others.

Similarly, Maslow (1971) suggested that, to be authentic, people must discover their true identity, allow their behaviour to be congruent with their feelings, and live in a way that expresses their genuine characteristics and desires. The more that people are aware of their inner experiences and then behave in ways that align with those experiences, the more authentic they are. In close relationships, authenticity demonstrated through honest self-disclosure is related to behaviour that promotes trust, increases intimacy, and lowers conflict (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2019).

Delivering a new, multidisciplinary, student-centred module on wellbeing required continuous reflection with respect to meeting the students, meeting ourselves, and meeting each other in this intimate "*third space*"[1] (Bhabha, 1994). We were at times adrift somewhere between the formal structures and normative working relationships and expectations of academia, and the less boundaried, personal and value-driven space where we were supposedly leading students towards a greater sense of self. We endeavoured to co-create with students a safe haven for honest self-disclosures and peer learning–through leading by example–while also feeling the discomfort and exposure of taking risks and trying new things. As a teaching team, there was a deepened and enhanced process of reflection compared to the level we would normally engage in individually. Sometimes this was purposeful reflection, and sometimes it was not, revealing the uncertainty and novelty (for us) of navigating the third space.

Our evaluation of the student experience hinted at the students' appreciation of our candid approach to sharing our personal experiences, thoughts and emotions. We thus created a learning environment with students through reciprocal sharing of personal insights, listening and deepening awareness of self and other. Given the opportunity, they were willing and able to express themselves authentically, which in turn enabled powerful peer learning. As efforts to embed student wellbeing into the curriculum gain momentum (Byrne & Surdey, 2021; O'Farrell, 2019), we need to ask if the personnel who deliver these types of programmes are ready for the level of reciprocal reflection and intimacy that may underpin their effectiveness – and to question how best they can be resourced. More and more, faculty are exploring roles and identities that

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[1] Bhabha's (1994) analysis of cultural identity and colonisation introduced Third Space theory in order to open up the possibilities of hybrid cultures that integrate conflicting discourses in less hierarchical ways. The Third Space in education is understood to be a transformative bridging space that integrates formal academic learning with a person's home, community, peer identity and experiences - where the potential for an expanded form of shared learning for all participants is enhanced.

align with non-academic goals such as student life and welfare, widening participation, community partnerships and business partnerships. Understanding and supporting this phenomenon through the lens of the "*third space*" may be a worthwhile approach, particularly in terms of engaging students as co-creators of these spaces.

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