

## CHAPTER C6

# Helping Learners Develop the Means to Deal with Challenging Relationships in Work Placements: The importance of creativity

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Following a 25 year career as a manager in the hospitality industry I joined Exeter College in 1986 as a lecturer in Food Production. I came to Surrey in 1992 as a mature entry student and graduated in July 1994. Three days after graduation I joined the staff at Surrey as a tutor and developed a new career from there. In addition to my normal teaching duties I was senior tutor for Professional Training where with the help of a SCEPTRe Fellowship I researched and developed being an educator in the workplace as a way of providing better support for my placement students. This Chapter summarises some of this work.

### **Synopsis**

There can be few situations on a work placement more stressful, demotivating and difficult to manage than a difficult relationship. This chapter describes an approach that has been developed at the University of Surrey to help students in such situations, examine the situation from different perspectives and develop a range of strategies for dealing with the situation.

### **Introduction**

Creativity is generally undervalued in academic programmes but a difficult problem or relationship in a challenging work placement, requires learners to draw up on all their capacities and resources including their creativity – although they may not recognise what they do as being creative at the time. In a recent study undertaken as part of a Fellowship given by the Surrey Centre for Excellence in Professional Training and Education fellowship (SCEPTRe) some insights into this phenomenon were revealed. The study looked at a group of second year undergraduates on a Hospitality Management degree about to embark on their Professional Training Year. Initial discussions with the group indicated that they were very confident, appeared to exhibit a high level of self esteem, and had all written positive and challenging personal development aims and objectives, but this study suggests they were all perhaps living in a false reality and had little real idea of what entry into an organisation may require of them. Within the space of six weeks each had been confronted with what was to him or her un-resolvable work related problems. The following is a partial glimpse into a student's personal development log and suggests the beginnings of a breakdown in a workplace relationship,

“Every morning I wake up with the dread of going to work. I am generally a very positive person, the problem is our director, I can only really describe her as a dictator”.

A key aspect of the support provided was to identify strategies that would enable students to take ownership of the challenge of resolving the issue. What appeared to be missing was their ability to translate reactive feelings into creative solutions. This chapter will consider what being creative might mean in resolving such dilemmas and how such creativities might be fostered prior to or within the work placement experience.

### **Institutional context**

The University of Surrey is well known for the undergraduate education it provides which seeks to provide opportunities for learners to develop their professional capabilities through either year long work placements or through a curriculum that integrates theory and practice throughout the period of study (Willis 2010). The local term used to describe this form of education is Professional Training (PT) and the study described in this chapter is part of the never ending search for improving this approach to education.

The initial idea for the study came from the chance overhearing of a conversation between groups of students waiting to enter a lecture. The conversation was interesting because the students were discussing a module taught in the previous semester.

What appeared remarkable was the amount of reflection being used to maintain the discussion. The module, Hospitality Events Management (HEM), required students working in groups to create, develop, plan and execute an event of their choosing through an approach based on enquiry/problem based learning. It required them to agree team roles and responsibilities and create their own time-plan to meet the requirements set in the module. It was expected that the event would produce a cash surplus and that this would be donated to a charity. Broad terms of reference were set during the initial lecture; these included the various venues available and their capacities, the names of people responsible for the venues and contact details for health and safety, security and licensing.

As the module tutor, listening to the conversation it became very evident that there had been a considerable amount of emotional investment in the organising and execution of the event, that some issues within the groups remained unresolved despite a detailed feedback and evaluation process and that the behaviour of some third parties had both surprised and shocked many of the groups. In conversations with the groups later it was apparent that apart from learning the theories and practices of event management needed to pass the module they had in fact learnt more about themselves, their peers and the wider university community than they had first realised. So deep, and in some cases so upsetting had these experiences been that the method of analysing how they felt led naturally to a reflective process.

This evidence, gathered partly anecdotally from discussions with the students' experience of the HEM module and more substantively from the module evaluation feedback, suggested that the 'increased maturity' displayed in their discussions could be related to their exposure to the realities of the workplace environment, a sort of snapshot of what they might expect to find in the commercial world. If this were true it could perhaps go some way towards our understanding the phenomenon of increased maturity displayed by students when they return from a Professional Training (PT) year, linking this to experiences of inter-personal relationships with other staff, customers, and their peer group, encountered as part of the normal process of employment. In the researchers view this was really important learning that was not formally given much recognition and for the most part was going unrecorded by the academic community. Considering that in essence 'bridging the gap' between education and work was what the PT process was all about, students for the most part remained firmly focussed on completing the PT report, which at the time provided little scope for reflection of their PT experiences.

It is perhaps necessary to clarify what the PT report at the University of Surrey entails prior to the findings of the SCEPTRe Fellowship; it provides 60% of the academic credits for the PT year (employers and tutors making up the remaining 30% and 10% respectively) and requires the completion of three sections; a business analysis of the placement provider, this business section carries the highest proportion of marks, a special project and a section on self development.

Many students have considerable difficulty in obtaining the material needed to complete the report in an accurate or meaningful way, employers are concerned at letting students see and evaluate financial data and there are often issues of confidentiality in many aspects of the work. For a number of students' the net result of this was the

business section of the report became the central focus as it was perceived to be so important to the grade and as a result they lost sight of, and had little time for reflection on their enormous personal development achievements.

### **Personal development linked to managing workplace relationships**

A key attraction of the work environment for student development, is the extent to which it provides opportunities for experiences that are more likely to enable learners to develop the 'epistemological, intrapersonal and interpersonal complexity' (Baxter Magolda 2004:41) necessary for effective performance and wellbeing in a complex modern world.

The focus of this fellowship study examined personal development aspects and human relationships experienced by students during the professional training year. Michael Eraut's (2007 and 2009) visualisation of an epistemology of professional practice (based on empirical evidence of how professionals actually work), focuses on how they deal with situations. He notes that the basic epistemology of practice involves the professional actions of:

- *Assessing situations* (sometimes briefly, sometimes involving a long process of *investigation and enquiry*) and continuing to monitor the situation;
- *Deciding what, if any, action to take*, both immediately and over a longer period (either on one's own or as a leader or member of a team);
- *Pursuing an agreed course of action*, performing professional actions - modifying, consulting, evaluating and reassessing as and when necessary;
- *Metacognitive monitoring of oneself*, people needing attention and the general progress of the case, problem, project or situation; and sometimes also learning through reflection on the experience.

This process is fundamental to being effective in any context and students on placement have to get good at this routine. But while it is easy to define the process the reality of engaging in the process may not be straightforward if the relationships of people involved in this process are such that action is made very difficult. The study focused on helping learners to develop the analytical and creative thinking processes that enabled them to explore options for analysing the situations they were in with a view to making difficult relationships better.

Two main aspects of this development were examined using an adaptation of the repertory grid process developed by George Kelly; learning about the company its processes and culture and learning about people, dealing with relationships in the workplace environment. It is the latter of these that appears to have the most significant impact on the student, has the potential to create the greatest demands on them but also has the possibility of generating the most lasting learning experiences. The fellowship intervention was designed to change the students' perception of taking a placement year from; 'being a chance to gain work experience' to; 'learning about themselves and understanding the employment relationship'. How to seek information, and use it, develop creative approaches to human interaction issues and how to learn core work place skills and square these with their personal aspirations and individual characteristics that can often be at odds with their workplace colleagues, particularly when they have such high expectations of themselves.

The development of the Template for inducing creativity in problem resolution Table 1 uses the same theoretical approach as Kelly's personal construction theory. Although not aware of Kelly's approach at the time the template takes cognisance of the students' freedom to choose how to interpret the signals received as part of workplace human interaction and intervenes in the reflection process of the message and suggests some alternative interpretations in order to provide an opportunity for a deeper alternative reflection. "According to personal construct psychology, the world does not reveal itself to us, rather, we construe it, Kelly 1955 cited in Fournier, (1996; p 88)". The world of work does not reveal itself willingly to the student. This creates a need to bridge the gap between the educational experience and the experience of working as both are complex and have a highly

individualistic component. In Kelly's clinical approach he encouraged the person to develop alternative constructs through which to construe life events via constructive alternatives' in much the same way.

Levinson et al, (1978) suggests that early adult transition (17 – 22 years) represents the developmental bridge between the adolescence and adult worlds, one key of which is separation, in particular from the family home and where a differentiation process begins between self and parents in terms of less emotional dependence and support.

All the students in this study were placed in the United States of America (USA) except one who was located in central Scotland. Initial discussions with the group indicated that they were very confident, appeared to know themselves, and had all written positive and challenging personal development aims and objectives, but this study suggests they were all living in a false reality.

In Rogers (1961) Self Theory, our self-image is the kind of person we think we are and it therefore follows that our ideal-self is the kind of person we would like to be. A student's belief that they are for example good communicators, perhaps encouraged and supported in this belief following two years of academic presentations hits a new reality when in the workplace. Rogers argues that we may want to be different in some aspects of our personality or even to be a totally different character because we are very dissatisfied with what we are like.

The inference one may take from this is that the greater the gap between our self-image and what we believe our self-image to be, the lower our self-esteem. This is important because students enter the work placement with a high level of self-esteem derived from their academic achievements, particularly at Surrey University where entrance requirements are very demanding, where a culture of being the best is encouraged; additionally their family background tends to be a caring middleclass.

It is evident from the study that a high level of tutor engagement is required in order that adequate coaching and support levels, in particular, open and sincere lines of communication are available. Even with this enhanced level of support there are still concerns with things about which students are unsure, for example cases where there is very poor communication between supervisor and student, where they experience very poor mentoring, bad work practices, personality clashes or when heavy demands are made upon them when they feel they have had insufficient or inadequate training or support. Conversely similar attitudes are displayed where the demands of the job appear menial or are perceived as less than expected for an undergraduate of their calibre.

At the start of their journey the students are preoccupied by expectation, the anticipation of the experience before them, what they are going to learn and excitement about embarking on the actual professional training experience. Work processes, meeting new people and living in a new environment, often many miles from home they are often ill prepared or naive in their expectations despite being forewarned during the pre-placement orientation lectures.

Seventy five percent of students in the study encountered difficulties with their work colleagues on more than one occasion and finding appropriate support for what many of them believed to be insurmountable conflicts proved challenging not least because the objective was to get the student to resolve the issues for themselves.

Getting the student to talk about the problem aroused high levels of emotion, anger, tears or general malaise. Lazarus, (1982) proposes that cognitive appraisal mostly precedes any affective reaction and underlines, and is an integral feature, of all emotional states. This seemed to be the case where, most of the students that displayed the most explicit reactions had been storing up thoughts without discussion with anyone, although they had recorded this information on their personal progress logs.

### ***Translating the problem***

Levels of stress in these situations vary, some students seem better able to control or perhaps conceal their stress than others. Cox (1975) presents a useful model of stress that he calls the transactional model. The model sees stress as arising from an interaction between people and their environment particularly if there is an imbalance between the perceptions of the demand being made or their ability to meet the demand and the resultant failure to cope. Environment in this case includes the influences of other people. It is this perception, the failure to correctly translate the demand accurately that tends to cause students the most difficulty. Because it is the students' perception of this failure between demand and ability that causes the stress, Cox's model allows for important individual differences in what might be causing the stress and at what level it is being experienced. In these circumstances the tutor mentoring process has first to actively listen to the students' account, their perception of what the problem is. This can be a very emotional exercise and it is important that the tutor is able to both empathise but remain objective. Developing objectivity is the first stage in helping a student to create a coping strategy that they can follow. Separating out feelings from thoughts and one thought from another so that a better understanding of the situation can be achieved. Typically a student will rationalise the problem and bury it deeply as part of a defence mechanism but it is essential that the student is able to analyse the problem systematically based on the reality of the situation, which helps to get things in proportion.

### ***Using creativity***

The goal of this SCEPTRe study is to change the students' perception of what taking a placement year is about – moving from a work experience model towards a personal development one and to understand the complexity of human relationships in a workplace context and deal with these effectively in the work situations that arise.

Introducing the student to the concept of creativity as an approach to resolving problems has been useful in providing them with a method that they can adapt and use once the tutor has left. During the study it was found that the first stage requires the student to step out of the situation and analyse the facts as one might, for example, when considering a case study.

This of course is easier said than done so a template was designed to provide a series of prompts around which the student could plan their strategy (see Table 1).

| <b>WHAT?</b>                  | <b>HOW?</b>               | <b>WHY?</b>  |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Have a dose of reality        | Take a look in the mirror | You have shortcomings too                            |
| Do you need to grieve         | Have a good rant          | Better out than in                                   |
| Define a difficult person     | List pros and cons        | You might be one                                     |
| Deal with strong feelings     | Talk to someone you trust | Strong feelings have no place in conflict resolution |
| What roles are people playing | Examine their agenda      | May reveal hidden truths                             |
| Can you both win              | Examine what each needs   | Easier to resolve                                    |
| Can you attain Catharsis      | Disentangle your emotion  | For liberation and peace                             |

**Table 1** Template to facilitate students' creative and critical thinking about a difficult relational situation. Source: Peter Alcott SCEPTRe Fellowship paper 2008



The emphasis is very much on the student being able to resolve the issues for themselves using mentored reflection to visualise a creative way to deal with a difficult situation involving people. The template attempts to get the student to examine what they bring to the problem and how they might be able to take control to achieve a win – win outcome. The deep reflective approach is not to resolve the issue for the student but to enable the student to resolve the issue for themselves. Experience suggests that you can't dress this up – you have to analyse the problem as openly as possible – the student themselves maybe their own worst enemy.

### **Case study 1**

The following is a transcript from a student's personal progress log received 12 weeks into the placement. "Over the last week I have finally decided that I have had enough of my current job (and the company itself). This conclusion has been a gradual one over the past few months – a number of incidences have contributed to this decision. Every morning I wake up with the dread of going to work. I have no motivation and no respect for the workplace. The underlying problem is our director (\*\*\*\*\*). I can only really describe her like a dictator, like Hitler or Stalin. She is very unpredictable, short, stubborn, superficial, uncooperative, defensive, irrational, unprofessional, and temperamental; the list goes on. She regularly belittles managers in front of their employees, which is very unprofessional of her (and is highly embarrassing). She has an extremely sharp tongue, she will do things out of spite, she is never wrong, she likes being hated – she seems to get a kick out of it".

### **Tutor visit (intervention)**

The following is a transcript from the student's personal log received 1 week following the visit. "My tutor made his first visit to see the Managers in Development (MID) at the xxxx xxxx resort and club. It was good to see him, and to let him know the current situation and incidents that had gone on over the past few months. My tutor spent the majority of his time having meetings and luncheons with MIDs and other important people, such as Sandra (HR Director), to see how we were getting along. My tutor and I had a long meeting one day after work to discuss my progress: I felt as if this was my last opportunity to try and solve my current state of affairs. He made me feel more positive and inspired me to stay at the resort and to carry on pursuing a new job role with more responsibility. A couple of days after my tutor had left Yulia (MID) and I decided that we would write an email to Josie (director), Sandra (HR director) and Jennifer (HR manager) to make them aware of our concerns. A couple of days later Josie replied and we had a meeting with her and her assistant Silvia later that week. Yulia and I were both promoted to new positions within the spa – Yulia – Manager of the Salon, and myself – Assistant Guest Services Manager. We were both very happy indeed to hear of the good news, I am very glad that we persisted with our goal. Josie also told Yulia and I that she was very impressed with both of us, and that we were very professional".

### **Thoughts**

If we consider the style and likely content of the email that this student may have sent before the intervention it is most probable that the result subsequently achieved would not have happened. As Levinson comments this is a transitional period of development and hitherto most students that have reached this level of a degree programme have primarily been focused on the attainment of qualifications and academic learning. Bridging the gap between academe and employment is complex because many, soon to be graduates, believe they have won a right of passage to be taken seriously; and finding a creative approach in dealing with people, bridging the gap and securing solutions for work based problems is an essential skill for them to acquire.

### **Case study 2**

The following is a transcript from a student's personal progress log received 12 weeks into the placement. "Trying to fit in is the most challenging part. This place will be my home for a year so I have to fit in some way. I have to find a way to create bridges with everyone in the retail division and prove to them that they did not make a mistake bringing me here. Also I need to make friends because I am here on my own and at times it's lonely. Entering the workforce is not as easy as expected. You have responsibilities; people depend on you and expect you to act in a professional way because whatever you do does not only reflect on you but also on them. It seems

that they are not interested in my ideas, I don't think they respect me or are willing to discuss my ideas or believe I can take my responsibilities seriously”.

### ***Tutor visit (intervention)***

The following is a transcript from the student's personal log received 1 week after the visit.

“The visit by my tutor has been invaluable. His support and presence was incredibly useful as he helped me identify and recognise the different stages of development, through the initial objectives, strengths and weaknesses I had identified prior to starting my placement year. He further provided encouragement through bad times and rejoiced with me when specific goals were achieved. It was good to know that support could be graciously provided and that links still existed with the university in case something did not go to plan. Listening attentively and cooperating are the main approaches, in order to get good training I have to pay attention and cooperate with Lauren in order to learn the processes. My managers seem to trust me quite a lot and are eager to teach me. They treat me as a normal employee and not as an intern. Because of this I try to please them and do my work properly. I have to admit that their approach to me motivates me to do better and I am more eager to learn”.

### **Concluding remarks**

Much has been written on personality, those unique characteristics of people that make them different and yet allow comparison. Student A and student B have very different personalities and yet the same approach of inducing a mindset that could visualise a more creative thought process beyond the symptoms of the problem provided the impetus to finding resolution. Many eminent authors on personality traits would argue from their own perspective, “within the general definition of personality there are several different theoretical approaches, including the trait and type approach (Eysenck and Cattell), the psychodynamic (Freud, Jung, Adler), the humanistic (Maslow, Rogers), the social learning approach (Mischell), and the cognitive”, (Kelly), cited in Gross, (1992, p11).

Given a level of trust it seems possible to open the minds of students with widely different personalities to the possibility that creativity is not just the domain of the artist, but that translating the symptoms of a difficult situation by analysis into components a beneficial resolution can be achieved.

A key feature of the Professional Training (PT) year is the PT report and students taking part in the SCEPTRe study were required to produce a report with a different focus to the norm. This change in report focus had a significant impact on the student's perception of what they had learned during the year. As a tutor supervising the completion of these reports it was very noticeable that the emphasis had shifted from one being preoccupied with facts, figures and the overall grade they would achieve towards one of reflection and self-evaluation of their achievements, development and relationships with others.

The overall grade and the span of grades for the reports under the SCEPTRe study are slightly higher than those where a regular P/T report has been produced. However, the student development section is very much improved and in most cases it is this that has had the effect of increasing the overall mark. Students like to talk about themselves and see their development unfold – using the personal progress logs as a support in writing up this section appears to show some better engagement.

Helping to develop management students into becoming better managers may be more than a worthy cause, “Most of the literature on strategy and firm performance has implicitly assumed that firm and management quality influences a firm's future financial performance (e.g., Leiberson and O'Conner, 1972; Weiner and Mahoney, 1981). First, relatively skilled managers may make better decisions. Second, firms perceived as excellent along an array of dimensions may have easier access to the financial capital necessary to facilitate future firm growth.

In fact, Louis Harris and Associates (1975) found that the major institutional investors considered the quality of management to be the single most important criterion in the selection of stocks”, McGuire et al (1990, p167). This paper argues that to get the most from their work placement experiences students need to harness their creativity as well as other capabilities. Experience has shown that human interactions are an important site for creativity in the work placement environment although many placement students and tutors might not see this as being creative. To help students appreciate that to be successful they need to create productive relationships and deal effectively with difficult relationship problems. The simple observational, planning and reflective thinking tool developed as part of this study helps students appreciate the complexity of their decisions and actions when dealing with complex relationships and therefore helps them understand better the role of creativity in interpersonal communication and relationships and gently reminds them that they are fallible too. Student feedback suggests that overall the students have gained from taking part in this SCEPTRe study, in particular the element of personal mentoring at regular intervals that has facilitated their understanding the dynamics of people relationships both in the workplace and perhaps beyond.

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