



O C C A S I O N A L P A P E R S

LEADING BY LISTENING: REFLECTIVE LEARNING

Paper 3: Capacity

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O C C A S I O N A L P A P E R S

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LEADING BY LISTENING

This project was commissioned to assess the mood and wellbeing of the FE sector in England in 2019, using the 'Listening Post' methodology developed by the educational charity OPUS*.

Listening Post is a form of social enquiry, not unlike a focus group, that is used to take a 'snapshot' of society, or a section of society, at a particular time. It proceeds on the basis that the themes and patterns emerging from discussions by a small group will unconsciously express some of the characteristics of the wider system to which that group belongs.

Between June and November 2019, 33 Listening Posts were conducted in the FE sector:

10 The view above

- 7 groups of college leadership teams
- + 3 AoC Regional groups of CEOs, Principals, Deputy Principals and Assistant Principals

12 The view in-between

- 6 groups of support staff
- + 6 groups of teaching staff

11 The view below

- 11 groups of students
-

33

*OPUS – An Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society Regd. Charity No. 282415 (see p.26)

HOW IT WORKS

- A Listening Post is a 60-minute group discussion, with minimal facilitation*.
- Participants contribute anonymously as representatives of the FE sector, sharing experiences of their current roles within FE (what it feels like to be me, here, now).
- An anonymised transcript of the discussion is sent to participants to check for accuracy and anonymity†.
- All transcripts are analysed for connecting themes and patterns that speak for the whole sector.

*In cases where a group fell silent for an extended period, participants were asked a question, usually about the measures they took to look after their own or others' wellbeing. Some student groups required more concerted facilitation, involving questions about how college differed from school and what they had learnt about their own ways of learning or coping with pressure. Three discussions were reduced to 45 minutes due to time constraints affecting participants. In larger groups, except those involving students, participants were divided into two groups who took turns to discuss their preoccupations for 30 minutes each while the other group sat behind them and listened. Those in a listening role were invited to write down any personal associations they had to the issues being discussed. The associative data was also retained and used.

†Transcripts were not circulated to student groups owing to concerns about the propriety, from a data protection and safeguarding standpoint, of requesting their contact details.

SEVEN THEMES

Engagement with purpose

- 1. Priorities** – the primary ends set for or by the sector and people within it, as reflected in the choices made by or for them.
- 2. Compliance** – the means by which the sector and people within it seek to achieve the goals set by or for them.

Engagement with practicality

- 3. Capacity** – the extent to which the sector and people within it have a realistic grasp of what they and each other can and can't do.
- 4. Effectiveness** – the extent to which the sector and people within it manage to accomplish those things of which they are capable.

Engagement with people

- 5. Presentation** – the ostensible characteristics of an individual or group (the inside seen from the outside: how the group regards the individual).
- 6. Community** – the extent to which people take responsibility for each other (the outside world seen from the inside: how the individual regards the group).

Each of these themes contributes (positively or negatively) to:

- 7. Wellbeing** – both of the sector and people within it.

Each theme is explored in a separate paper. This paper explores **theme three: Capacity**. Excerpts from the transcripts are reproduced to show how each theme unfolds from above (for leaders), from in-between (for support staff and teachers) and from below (for students). Full transcripts are available at www.fetl.org.uk.

VISCERAL IMAGES

As well as noting the dominant themes arising in discussion among Listening Post groups, this report also explores evidence of subliminal concerns expressed by participants through their usage of idiom.

Idiomatic expressions convey imprecise meaning often not deducible from the literal sense of the words used. They are used subconsciously to add an emotional emphasis to speech by means of figurative language or analogy. Collectively, they represent the affective content of the discussion: a visceral image of the group's underlying preoccupations.

All idiomatic words and phrases have been extracted from the transcript of each Listening Post and put together to create 33 narrative descriptions each of which connects with the first and last topics discussed by the group. This process inevitably involves some editorial licence and represents a conjectural approach to the group's underlying preoccupations.

The visceral images produced provide a useful counterpoint to the content of the discussions from which they were drawn, with much overlap in subject-matter. They are organised to fit the themes identified.

THEME THREE

Capacity

"I am dealing with situations and pressures that are probably higher now than they have ever been."

Colleges help students not to become overwhelmed as a result of learning and assessment by simplifying, spacing and sequencing the processes. Meanwhile, leaders and staff are overwhelmed by a requirement to juggle a variety of tasks simultaneously under extreme time and resource constraints.

- Colleges have to navigate an increasingly complex funding and policy landscape, which dominates management attention and forces decisions upon them with detrimental implications for teachers and support staff.
- Leaders whose decisions impose significant extra demands on staff either turn a blind eye to the impact in order to insulate themselves from responsibility or suffer a sense of failure and guilt which is not absolved however hard and long they toil themselves.
- Leaders unintentionally contribute to an unhealthy working culture by working from home at weekends and evenings. This seems to normalise the assumption that teachers will also be working out of hours, planning lessons and marking coursework.
- Support staff face a sharp increase in demand for support from students, exacerbated by an increasing reliance on them by external services such as GPs, the police and social services.
- Funding cuts have led to reductions in staff numbers and imposed a significant additional burden on the staff who remain. In addition, teachers now have increased responsibilities to provide performance data on attendance, punctuality, retention and performance, which leaves no (paid) time for lesson planning, marking or providing additional student support.

- Teaching staff find their admin time is allocated to 15-minute intervals between lessons rather than useful periods; while their lunchtimes and rest breaks are filled up with meetings and other ad hoc requests. In aggregate, these additional demands seem unreasonable but it is hard for them to draw a line and decline individual requests.
- Students whose academic performance deteriorates under the pressure of exam conditions often make explicit choices in favour of assessment-based courses offered by colleges. Like teachers, they become overwhelmed by too many simultaneous demands, including their own internal desire to please.
- Students prefer the drip-feed of coursework assessment throughout the year to the concentrated pressures of exams. They believe that it more closely matches the pressures they will face at work and better enables them to make progress at their own pace and in their own way.
- Exams are experienced as episodes akin to panic attacks, where students freeze under pressure and temporarily lose their abilities to recall and martial information. Many students do not recognise their exam results as reflective of their learning or ability.

CAPACITY ABOVE #1

Colleges have to navigate an increasingly complex funding and policy landscape, which dominates management attention and forces decisions upon them with detrimental implications for teachers and support staff.

Key words above: overload, demands, culture, overtime

Leaders:

"You are given a job you can't accomplish, that's the true definition of stress."

"I have been in the sector for just over 4 years and, in that time, there have been increases in pressure and complexity, reductions in funding, new pots of funding adding to bureaucracy, additional skills needed by staff to respond to all these changes, and there is no funding to back it up."

"People feel stressed because they care and can't do the job as well as they want to. This comes out as stress but it is because they care."

"We are asking a lot of our staff when, dare I say it, in the back of our minds, we know they are not going to achieve it, however hard they work."

"The old days of heroic leaders are gone. You're going to burn out, actually."

"There are stresses that are put on me and stresses that I put on myself. And I know that I put more on myself than other people put on me."

"I don't feel I'm good at any part of my job because I am not given time to excel at it."

CAPACITY ABOVE #2

Leaders whose decisions impose significant extra demands on staff either turn a blind eye to the impact in order to insulate themselves from responsibility or suffer a sense of failure and guilt which is not absolved however hard and long they toil themselves.

Leaders:

"It feels like you're only one thing away from something tipping you over the edge."

"I am dealing with situations and pressures that are probably higher now than they have ever been."

"Those pressures are often felt in that middle-management tier, as they are the jam in the sandwich. They absorb heat from both ways, trying to keep the momentum and morale and, as everyone says, having more things put into their pot and having no extra time to do those things."

"You are semi-in-a-daze but you are still doing your job."

"Two weeks ago, I was being stopped in the corridor every 30 seconds to tell me I didn't have staff or to be told I've got rooms of 40. I didn't have headspace. I was an absorbed sponge."

"It goes from being a very nice job that enables you to do things that you like to do and you end up struggling with bits that have been added on."

"On occasions, of course, we just go too far."

CAPACITY ABOVE #3

Visceral Image #12

This image depicts the bureaucratic burden imposed on teachers that compromises their effectiveness in the classroom.

Leaders*:

Starting topic: the increase in issues for staff to deal with.

Ending topic: the lack of staff to meet demand.

Staff are *all-singing-and-all-dancing* performers *wrapped up* in a *sugarcoat* with *rose-tinted glasses*, but the *frozen* ice is *cracking* beneath their feet. We have been *side-tracked* into *number crunching* but what we are *feeding into* makes a *rod for their back*.

They *signpost* to *stop the bus* and *switch off* the engine because they are *knackered*, at *breaking point and stretched so thin* they can't keep their *head above water*. Our *bean counting* is now *off the scale* but it is a *bugbear* for them and creates a *dog's dinner*.

We make a *massive push* to *throw one on the top* and *move forward* with this *direction of travel* but it oversteps *boundaries*, *racks up* time and *wipes* their schedule. They are so *squeezed* and *frazzled* that, instead of *tailoring materials* to *light a fire* in students, they *are firefighting* and teaching *on the fly*. When reality *kicks in* that they are *sinking*, they *kick and scream* and *dig their heels in*, but are *turned away* and cut no *slack*.

*Leaders Group 10

CAPACITY ABOVE #4

Leaders unintentionally contribute to an unhealthy working culture by working from home at weekends and evenings. This seems to normalise the assumption that teachers will also be working out of hours, planning lessons and marking coursework.

Leaders:

"So, yeah, we are all guilty, when the kids go to bed at 9pm, of the laptop going on."

"What they play on with people like us is our level of professionalism and our own self-evaluation of our performance."

"As you take on more responsibility and there are more demands and you want to get good results, it's going to impact on your time and your wellbeing."

"As soon as senior managers start not doing emails past 5pm on Friday until 8am on Monday, then other people will see that that's OK to do that. If I don't answer my email on a Sunday, I get a text."

"Why set a culture where it is OK to send emails in the evening and weekends?"

"In my team, we make a conscious effort not to email each other at night because that's how we manage things, because all you need to do is look at that one email at nine at night and then it stresses you out and you don't sleep at night. Then you come in next morning and it's not that big a deal."

CAPACITY IN-BETWEEN #1

Support staff face a sharp increase in demand for support from students, exacerbated by an increasing reliance on them by external services such as GPs, the police and social services.

Key words in-between: demands, overtime, overload

Support staff:

"Staff are under huge pressure. They are at breaking point, seriously."

"I probably deal with about three cases of self-harm a week. Since I've been here, I've dealt with at least one suicide a week. That's just in one area."

"The issues at play are more risky than in previous years. I find as a mentor we aren't working with outside agencies any more. That social provision isn't there."

"We can't do it all for everybody. Our local authority isn't where it needs to be. Social services are inadequate. We work closely with them but they just can't deal with it."

"We've got GPs referring students back to us for counselling or support because the external service doesn't exist."

"It's the police services having a word with us over the weekend and saying 'can you pick misdemeanours over the weekend up with students when they come back on Monday morning?'. They can't deal with it."

"The stress that we deal with on the ground; that level of stress is very different. We are good as an organisation at recognising that but I don't think, externally, people realise that that is a lot of what we do."

"Our mentor is that busy we don't get to speak to them. Chasing students up all the time. Throughout the lessons."

CAPACITY IN-BETWEEN #2

Visceral Image #13

This image depicts leaders as detached from reality, acting out a fantasy of power but in fact merely passing their burden onto staff without acknowledging its impact upon them.

Support staff*:

Starting topic: the cyclical nature of education policy.

Ending topic: failure to appreciate achievement.

We are *Minions* doing the *groundwork* to *mop up* for those in *emperor's new clothes* who *play a role* as *kings of the castle* but lack a *personal touch*. They *eye* new *routes* as a *stepping stone* to a new *destination* but make us carry *all the baggage ratcheted up* in *double decker* formation *on our backs*.

Like *an injection of shockwaves* that *cascade* through the *body*, they *backtrack* and our *destination* is *thrown out* and *spun on its head*. *Snowed under*, we *lose the plot* and *go round in circles*. It is a *nightmare* with no one to *pick up the slack*.

More is *squeezed into* our *Mary Poppins Bag* until it goes *through the roof*, our *balance* reaches *teetering point* and it *bounces* in a *deep dive* down *the chalk face*.

*Support staff Group 6

CAPACITY IN-BETWEEN #3

Funding cuts have led to reductions in staff numbers and imposed a significant additional burden on the staff who remain. In addition, teachers now have increased responsibilities to provide performance data on attendance, punctuality, retention and performance, which leaves no (paid) time for lesson planning, marking or providing additional student support.

Teachers:

"I don't have time to be the best teacher I can be because of all the other stuff."

"There is one resource that they can continuously tap into until they reach breaking point which is your time. That is what they will do until people start to break."

"My previous job was training troops to deploy to Afghanistan and Iraq. I'm under more pressure in teaching, being checked and regulated."

"If you're not careful, you will quickly end up doing 50, 60, 70 plus hours a week and weekends and evenings."

"We have contracted staff year by year by year, and we are at the bare bones of our staff."

"The biggest problem is going to be time."

"There's not enough time to do stuff to a good level, is there."

"A lot of staff live from day to day because anything else is impossible. They just don't have the resources to do more."

CAPACITY IN-BETWEEN #4

Visceral Image #14

This image depicts teacher unhappiness at the onerous administrative responsibilities imposed upon them without any additional time, pay or resources to discharge them.

Teachers*:

Starting topic: excessive admin.

Ending topic: excessive admin.

We live in the *shadow* of *a million things* to do. We are *stripped to the bone* until what are *stripped back* or *stripped away* become *bones of contention*. This is a *nightmare* of a long *distance travelled*, *breaking the heart* of those *longer in the tooth* as the *fruits of their labours* are *squashed* and *skewed*.

Gaps in our time *disappear* as we *pop back* from our *cubby hole* on *command* to be *pushed* or *pulled into* providing *cover across the board*. Work *flows* are *played around with* and what we would *put across* to students as the *building blocks* are *shut down* or put *on the back burner*. *Hanging on* through our *bond* with students, we *pull together* to try to *turn it round*.

*Teachers Group 2

CAPACITY IN-BETWEEN #5

Teaching staff find their admin time is allocated to 15-minute intervals between lessons rather than useful periods; while their lunchtimes and rest breaks are filled up with meetings and other ad hoc requests. In aggregate, these additional demands seem unreasonable but it is hard for them to draw a line and decline individual requests.

Teachers:

"They say 'this is a really important thing. Can we do it in lunchtime?'"

"We don't really keep a work-life balance, unless you actually say no. That's what you try to do and then you get told 'no, you've got to do it'."

"We do unpaid lunch and unpaid tea breaks. That is the only time you get to talk to them, but we are not paid for that time."

"People see me at my desk and think I am available. They sit down and they've got this massive list and I am thinking 'I've got all my stuff to do' but am too polite to say 'please go away'."

"Admin time is fifteen minutes at the start of the day, fifteen minutes in the breaks, all classed as admin time. It's not."

"In that time, I have booked off as admin time, I'm also line managing people and lesson planning and making resources all on my own and I can't ask for that support from other people because everyone else has the same issue."

"My over-19 adult learners, I've now been told I've got to write parent reports for. They have weekly tutorials; they have just had their six-week reviews; they have all been set targets; and we give very detailed feedback on their work, which is consistently praised by exam boards and management. So now I have got to write the same thing again for what will be the third time. Why?"

CAPACITY BELOW #1

Students whose academic performance deteriorates under the pressure of exam conditions often make explicit choices in favour of assessment-based courses offered by colleges. Like teachers, they become overwhelmed by too many simultaneous demands, including their own internal desire to please.

Key words below: pressure, overload, going blank

Students:

"That's why I chose College over sixth form, because I didn't want to do exams."

"Half the parents are not aware of what the students have got to cope with because of all the pressures they're under."

"Most people know the pressure on them. I don't need someone to say to me 'you've got to work harder', as my mum used to say to me."

"If I am taking it serious and I want to pass, I don't sleep."

"I get very stressed giving in my essays because I feel like I've done them all wrong but, when I receive them back, the criticism you get from the tutors, especially the ones we have, is positive – it just makes you feel better about what you've done."

"What's making everything stressful is how jumbled up everything is."

"I used to feel I was being a nuisance when I felt under pressure at school."

"I feel the work is too easy. The free time is stupid."

CAPACITY BELOW #2

Visceral Image #15

This image depicts students' experience of feeling overwhelmed by the high-pressure approach to GCSEs at school.

Students*:

Starting topic: the transition from school.

Ending topic: the transition to employment.

The *old school* approach put *a lot on our plate*: we were *chucked in*, *plunged in* or *pushed aside* and given a *slap on the wrist* if we made a *mess* of it. Teachers *bombarded* us with an intense *hammering in* of information, then *bugged* us and *chased us up*.

Both sides of the spectrum were *in the same boat*, which would *flip on its head* if the water got *bouncy*. Some would *keep an ear out* so they could *go with the flow* and *get* their *head around* the lesson. Others would *call out* for help to keep our *heads up* as water *brushed over* us, leaving only *bubbles*.

*Students Group 2

CAPACITY BELOW #3

Students prefer the drip-feed of coursework assessment throughout the year to the concentrated pressures of exams. They believe that it more closely matches the pressures they will face at work and better enables them to make progress at their own pace and in their own way.

Students:

"They get the better results because they are not putting the pressure on us."

"With assignments, the stress is spread out over the entire year whereas with exams it is all dumped on you at the end of the year."

"It is not so much about giving them the knowledge to do the exam, it's learning to take the exam itself."

"We have people who can't sit a test but are excellent practitioners – they can't work under that pressure."

"Everyone gets overwhelmed at some point by system overload. To learn, you have to be able to calm yourself down and then go back and have another go."

"It's not overwhelming, it's broken down into smaller chunks."

"You get to go at your own pace."

"I struggle to keep up with the pace, with the way I learn, pretty much."

CAPACITY BELOW #4

Visceral Image #16

This image depicts college as an inclusive experience that engages students and helps them to progress at their own pace.

Students*:

Starting topic: being treated like an adult.

Ending topic: becoming more grown up.

Our *customer experience* is that teachers *cater to everyone* and *give us pointers*. If we *fall back* and *fall behind* the *grade boundaries*, they won't *turn a blind eye* and let us *zone out under their noses* or *label you* as having *screwed up*. They help me *get over myself* so I can *get to grips with* the course. It is like *being a baby*: the teacher *breaks it down* so it is *spread out* and I can *connect with* it and start *running with it*.

*Students Group 11

CAPACITY BELOW #5

Exams are experienced as episodes akin to panic attacks, where students freeze under pressure and temporarily lose their abilities to recall and martial information. Many students do not recognise their exam results as reflective of their learning or ability.

Students:

"When you are on the spot, your mind goes blank but, as soon as you are off that spotlight, you think that's what you meant to say."

"When you do GCSEs, it's in your head and then, when you do it, you think 'what is the answer?' and leave out stuff. You get the questions and you know the answer but you answer it wrong. When you are put on the spot, you don't know what to say."

"When it comes to yes/no questions, I know what the answer is but my brain is telling me to do something else. Like you know the answer is 'Yes', but you are looking at 'No'. You know it's 'Yes' but you tick 'No'. I do that every time."

"Every time a test comes, all the information goes out the window and it won't come back until the exam's done, and I've written gibberish on the paper."

"There is a disconnect for students between what they show on testing and what they actually know."

"I get why they have exams, but it's just that they don't completely show your true colours. Someone can have an off-day any day."

"You overthink stuff and too many ideas come in. You try and put them down and it just looks like a bunch of words not put together. Then, when you try to put them together, you don't have enough time."

CAPACITY BELOW #6

Visceral Image #17

This image depicts students' experience of going blank during exams and not doing themselves justice.

Students*:

Starting topic: problems with the timetable.

Ending topic: overcoming disadvantages.

You are *screwed* if you get *mad* or *bang your head* when exam questions are *compressed* or *messed up*. Don't *open your mouth* to *put yourself down*. The way to *pass go* is to *chase* the *dead silence* away and not to be put *off*.

*Students Group 7



An Organisation for Promoting
Understanding of Society

OPUS - An Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society is an educational charity (no. 282415) founded in 1975 to promote understanding of society. It encourages reflective citizenship as a way for people to take more personal and collective responsibility for the common good – through active involvement in society and its institutions, rather than self-interested behaviour.

OPUS provides a combination of education, training, academic research, publication, public events and organisational consultancy. Its Listening Post methodology is now in regular use in over 30 countries around the world.

www.opus.org.uk

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