



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

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# **LEADING BY LISTENING: REFLECTIVE LEARNING**

## **Paper 4: Effectiveness**

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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

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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

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**33**

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

# HOW IT WORKS

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- 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

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## *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 four: Effectiveness**. 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](http://www.fetl.org.uk).

# VISCERAL IMAGES

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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 FOUR

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## Effectiveness

*"Forget about results, performance tables. The result for me is that they are employed."*

Colleges help students figure out what study method works for them, however inefficient it might be, so that they can deploy their talents to their best advantage. Staff likewise develop their own means of coping with the demands of work and adapting their approaches to the needs of students. Meanwhile, leaders have to be imaginative and flexible by working with the grain of the regulatory and funding regime in which they operate.

- Colleges making imaginative use of scant resources are tempted to take risks and then swiftly change course if it turns out badly. Greater stability may come from striving to be consistently good rather than intermittently excellent. FE does not compete on level funding terms with HE and will always suffer by comparison with it.
- Many students carry over a deep-rooted sense of rejection and failure from school; for colleges to help turn them around requires students to face up to their difficulties and the challenge of trying to surmount them. The longer they resist doing so, the less time they have left at college to begin their recovery.
- The starting point for teachers, as it is for management and students, is to work out how to play the hand they have been dealt. When working with non-traditional learners, this may involve departing from theory in order to discover what works in practice. This is a process that can be every bit as frustrating for teachers as it is for students until, together, they make a breakthrough.
- The main satisfaction for many teachers is in observing at first hand the distance travelled by students, with their help, in reaching beyond the constraints that have limited their progress to date. All measurement of

progress is meaningless unless it is understood in the context of those constraints.

- Teachers help students find new ways of working that enable them to absorb information and skills, often through trial and error. This process requires them to overcome a fear of failure induced by their school experience and develop their own benchmarks of success.
- Students often benefit from carefully structured courses in which topics are broken down, sequenced and repeated, providing both space and time for learning to be embedded rather than tackling multiple tasks at once.
- It may take students a while to recover from previous setbacks and find their motivation for learning. Helping them to reach this position may appear inefficient and unstructured when measured against crude performance criteria, yet the art of teaching is to do just this.
- For many students, education is as much a maturity test as it is an intelligence test. College presents students with adult role models they can relate to, which allows them to form a realistic and appealing idea of themselves as adults and, from that, appreciate the educational progress this would entail for them.



# EFFECTIVENESS ABOVE #1

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Colleges making imaginative use of scant resources are tempted to take risks and then swiftly change course if it turns out badly. Greater stability may come from striving to be consistently good rather than intermittently excellent. FE does not compete on level funding terms with HE and will always suffer by comparison with it.

**Key words above: learning, resilience, consistency, good**

**Leaders:**

*"Sometimes it's 'What you are actually doing is good'. 'Yes, but it's not outstanding, is it?'"*

*"People in FE are resilient, by and large, because we're dealing all the time with a pressured challenging environment."*

*"There are so many things that can't always go right but you can reflect and get it right next time."*

*"I had the knockbacks. I had to go 'OK, I need to regroup; I need to learn this because this is what let me down'."*

*"Because of the top down model – always saying 'we're not good enough yet', they have made staff feel not good enough too."*

*"I spoke to a principal recently – I won't say who or at what college – who said 'We aim for Good. I want all my staff to aim for good. That's good for mental health, for workload. We are happy with Good'."*

*"Sometimes you have to put yourself through it to, kind of, get a little bit of a self-assessment."*

*"That's the whole mission of this college overall. Whatever works for you, just do it."*

# EFFECTIVENESS ABOVE #2

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## Visceral Image #18

This image depicts how what works for successful colleges is finding course that work for their students.

**Leaders\*:**

**Starting topic:** changes in the classroom.

**Ending topic:** finding the right route for students.

Our *cohort disconnects* unless we ask *quick-fire* questions to *unpick* our courses and *pick up the pieces again* to *fill in gaps*. To *acclimatise* students, we add *milestones* to their *journey*. We *tailor* content to *pick up focus* and increase *ownership*. And we *check in* to *pockets* of uncertainty and *switch clicks* to *hand on* a better programme.

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\* Leaders Group 8

# EFFECTIVENESS IN-BETWEEN #1

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Many students carry over a deep-rooted sense of rejection and failure from school; for colleges to help turn them around requires students to face up to their difficulties and the challenge of trying to surmount them. The longer they resist doing so, the less time they have left at college to begin their recovery.

**Key words in-between:** mistakes, achievement, recognition, ambition

**Support staff:**

*"If you can't leave school without Maths and English, a lot of people with learning difficulties are going to end up here."*

*"They are in FE because the schools don't want to keep them."*

*"It's the lower levels where the schools just don't want to know."*

*"Like on Tinder, if they like the student, [Schools] swipe 'Tick'. If not, they swipe 'Cross'."*

*"By the time they come to us, any joy in Maths or English or most other academic subjects has been completely drummed out of them by nasty experiences in secondary school."*

*"No-one can learn without making some mistakes."*

*"For some learners, newness is inspiring. Especially for those that need to reinvent themselves, it's nice to have something new to go for. Others need stability, so we try and give them stability."*

*"It provides that pathway, a way of escaping from being written off."*

# EFFECTIVENESS IN-BETWEEN #2

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## Visceral Image #19

*Support staff\*:*

**Starting topic:** work that is unseen and taken for granted.

**Ending topic:** the recurrent nature of social problems.

Students are like a *bubble pumped full* of *blankness* in a *nursery of rebellion*; college is *built up* as their *big ticket to Nirvana* but, when they don't show up *hot off the press*, our *wrists are tied*, *barriers* are *slammed* down and we feel *jilted*. All we can do is *start off from scratch*, *flip the coin over* and *go round in a circle*.

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\*Support staff Group 1

# EFFECTIVENESS IN-BETWEEN #3

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The starting point for teachers, as it is for management and students, is to work out how to play the hand they have been dealt. When working with non-traditional learners, this may involve departing from theory in order to discover what works in practice. This is a process that can be every bit as frustrating for teachers as it is for students until, together, they make a breakthrough.

## **Teachers:**

*"We don't focus on what we haven't got but on what we have got and how we are going to use it really well. This leads to the questions we raise with our students: 'What are you going to do with what you've got?'"*

*"We've all done our Cert. Eds and our PGCEs and we've all come and done the job and quickly abandoned them. We haven't abandoned them and become a void; we have developed our own strategies and theories."*

*"We have recruited some inexperienced teachers who say 'This is the only job I've had where I have gone home at the end of the day thinking I've done a rubbish job.'"*

*"Sometimes we forget how well we are doing because of all the other things going on."*

*"The achievement of students is the one saving grace."*

*"Even a lesson that worked particularly well last year, you are still tweaking to make it right for the group in front of you."*

*"Imagine trying to house people who are practical people and making them sit through theory classes all day every day all week. It's crazy."*

*"You can't live off theory, you need that practical element."*

# EFFECTIVENESS IN-BETWEEN #4

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## Visceral Image #20

This image depicts how teachers embed Maths and English into vocational courses to give them a practical context for students.

*Teachers\*:*

**Starting topic: embedding functional skills into vocational skills.**

**Ending topic: embedding functional skills into vocational skills.**

Instead of *reinventing the wheel*, we *tap up* student *buy-in* by *picking holes* in lessons to *liberate resources* that can be *tied in along the line* of their interest. Once *picked apart* the lessons can be *woven into* material that will help students *switch on* and get a *head start*. Then you can *crack on* and they will *comeback*.

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\*Teachers Group 6

# EFFECTIVENESS IN-BETWEEN #5

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The main satisfaction for many teachers is in observing at first hand the distance travelled by students, with their help, in reaching beyond the constraints that have limited their progress to date. All measurement of progress is meaningless unless it is understood in the context of those constraints.

## **Teachers:**

*"It's all based on results. If you don't teach them to pass the exam, then you'll lose your job."*

*"We take non-traditional learners and we get them through those programmes and, for me, that's what makes us special."*

*"We do an awful lot as a sector. But, in the end, they have to go into the exam and do it, for themselves."*

*"If you think about what proves we are good at our job. From my point of view, it's that kid that goes from level one to level six. That's what proves you've done a good job."*

*"There is no recognition of the distance travelled."*

*"Sometimes the achievement for them is to attend."*

*"For some learners, it is just coming in 50% of the time. They would never have been to school at all. So, it's having that complete differentiation and being brave enough to allow our professionals and our colleagues to judge it."*

*"Forget about results, performance tables. The result for me is that they are employed."*

# EFFECTIVENESS IN-BETWEEN #6

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Teachers help students find new ways of working that enable them to absorb information and skills, often through trial and error. This process requires them to overcome a fear of failure induced by their school experience and develop their own benchmarks of success.

## **Teachers:**

*"If you can't learn and make some mistakes, you can't develop."*

*"We encourage students to give it their best shot, to try as well as they can."*

*"Making mistakes is really important. That's the importance of self-reflection.. If they think they have done fantastic, that's where we use 'Even Better If'."*

*"If there is one thing with my learners is that they are too afraid to get things wrong."*

*"It's key to the success of the organisation not to dwell on their mental health issues or their problems. It's all about saying 'yes, you've got that problem but you've always had it. These are the techniques and strategies we are going to use to move you forward but the whole point is that, if you get educated, you can change your life. Again, that's what FE is, isn't it?"*

*"[We say] 'OK, you may have had a knock-back and failed but how did you deal with that?' So that builds resilience and so you can apply that to the wider world."*

*"Rather than just listing things off, they'll go 'here's how you do this, have a go yourself and, if you have any issues with it, I'll come over and help you'."*

*"We try to help learners have ambition; it's just measured ambitions."*



# EFFECTIVENESS BELOW #1

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Students often benefit from carefully structured courses in which topics are broken down, sequenced and repeated, providing both space and time for learning to be embedded rather than tackling multiple tasks at once.

Key words below: reset, chances, maturity

## **Students:**

*"I have heard that the common phrase at school is 'That's so BTEC' as if that's a negative thing to do."*

*"[School] tell you that college is for drop-outs."*

*"In school, they don't teach you how to teach yourself. In college, they do."*

*"The value in learning is about those small goals, those small wins, that sense of achievement, that sense of belonging – all those sorts of things. That helps people's mental health."*

*"You get the constant 'achieve-reset'."*

*"The biggest thing is 'don't move onto Task 2 until we've finished Task 1 and we know what mistakes we are making.'"*

*"Even if it is a longer way round, I would prefer to do it my way."*

*"At the end of the day, we are doing it for ourselves so, if you're not willing to come in and do the work, then what's the point of being here?"*

# EFFECTIVENESS BELOW #2

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## Visceral Image #21

This depicts the way in which many students rebel against the rigid uniformity of school whereas, at college, they have space to get to grips with their individual limitations and start to make progress.

**Students\*:**

**Starting topic:** being busy and struggling to deliver what is asked of them.

**Ending topic:** learning to do things themselves with less support.

We show up *on board* bundled together like *guinea pigs* in a *mixed bag*, a *tight-knit* unit *in the same boat* who, if we *get closer*, will *touch on* each other and *merge together*. Our *hands are tied*, and so we *fight, being a pain* and *doing my head in*.

We can *fall behind, get behind* and *throw away* our chance or we can *start from scratch*, turn the bag *inside-out* and get to *action-stations*. *Coming from* this to *get a jump* and be *one-up* means we must *push ourselves*, be *hands on*, have our *head screwed* on and take *a leap* into *space* if we are to *grasp on* to the chance *knocking on the door*.

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\*Students Group 5

# EFFECTIVENESS BELOW #3

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It may take students a while to recover from previous setbacks and find their motivation for learning. Helping them to reach this position may appear inefficient and unstructured when measured against crude performance criteria, yet the art of teaching is to do just this.

## **Students:**

*"There's only one thing stopping you. It's not everyone else, it's yourself. You can stop yourself."*

*"What I do to stop myself is sit there and think for a minute 'Do I really want this course? Do I really want to pass?' Whatever I was going to do, I stop and pay attention."*

*"It's not just 'if you get an education, you can be out there' – that's part of it, but it's also about those achievements and wins and learning to deal with failure in a safe place."*

*"When I get to college, I am learning mainly what not to do another day."*

*"By failing, you can learn. Failing is not always a bad thing. At some point when you bang your head, it's finished."*

*"It's not really a linear path – we've all come to it in weird ways and by doing other stuff."*

*"He's given me second chances because last year my attendance was really bad. He wasn't going to let me on this year, and then he did. And now I'm sitting here with 100% attendance and 100% punctuality."*

*"At college, it's more subjective. It's not ticking boxes. You have to have development in your work and that gets you the marks."*

# EFFECTIVENESS BELOW #4

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## Visceral Image #22

This image depicts how some students fail to thrive in their school's intensive, battery-farming approach and start to do better when the pressure is off them.

**Students\*:**

**Starting topic:** being treated like an adult.

**Ending topic:** becoming an adult learner.

We *freak out* at *military* teachers who are *intense* and *overbearing*. We want to *change tack* from the *nightmare* of *ticking boxes* where facts are *crammed in* until they *build up* and you *drop* what you are *juggling* just to get it *off your plate* and end up *a write-off to society*.

We need a *chilled environment* to *take the space* and *recharge*, with some *leeway* to *step away* and get *space to breathe*. Just *step down* the pace and *long out* the lesson by *breaking it into chunks* and *pinpointing* facts. They *mesh* better when *broken up* for us, building a *strong foundation* so we can show our *true colours*.

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\*Students Group 9

# EFFECTIVENESS BELOW #5

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For many students, education is as much a maturity test as it is an intelligence test. College presents students with adult role models they can relate to, which allows them to form a realistic and appealing idea of themselves as adults and, from that, appreciate the educational progress this would entail for them.

## **Students:**

*"If college has taught me anything, it's that adults really aren't that different."*

*"Going to college, you look up to people and then you start becoming one of them. You realise 'actually, we're in the same boat; I'm late and you're late'. That's a bit funny, isn't it."*

*"It's a maturity thing. People aren't actually looking at you. They are worried about themselves and whether people are looking at them."*

*"Some people can't find themselves until they hit a certain age."*

*"When you were younger, you think 'I can't wait to be an adult but, as you get older, you think 'why?'"*

*"When you are young you can't wait to grow up and then as soon as you hit 18 or 19, you're like 'oh crap'."*

*"You think 'when I'm an adult, I'm going to be this person and do that'. And then that doesn't happen; life takes you in weird directions. I'm all these different types of person."*

*"Part of being an adult is realising you don't have to be just this person. You can be professional and childish in different situations. What you think of as 'being an adult' changes over time."*

*"It's about relaxing – finding yourself comfortable. That might be growing up."*

# EFFECTIVENESS BELOW #6

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## Visceral Image #23

This image depicts the dawning reality for students that, with independence comes the responsibility to decide what they are going to do with their lives.

**Students\*:**

**Starting topic:** being treated like a grown-up.

**Ending topic:** being a grown-up.

College is a *mini advert in life* for us. If we *slack off*, a *grumpy old troll* will *clock* us, *hound* us and *pile on* the work. If we *put it on*, we *go forward* as *someone's puppet*. If we *bottle* it *up*, we stay *cooped up* and *pushed to* our *limits* until we *crack* into *bits and pieces*. If we *hit a certain age*, we might *buckle up*, *switch it around* and *knuckle down*.

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\*Students Group 3



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](http://www.opus.org.uk)

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