



FURTHER EDUCATION
TRUST FOR LEADERSHIP

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

LEADING BY LISTENING: REFLECTIVE LEARNING

Paper 5: Presentation

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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.24)

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 five: Presentation**. 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 FIVE

Presentation

"Most government ministers, most people in the civil service don't understand what colleges are still less have ever been there."

Colleges offer students a chance to correct perceptions formed at school and develop a more worthwhile image of themselves. Meanwhile, the sector is unable to shrug off preconceptions and reform its own reputation in the eyes of policy makers.

- Colleges feel misunderstood by politicians and policy makers, whose opinions and priorities are often shaped by their own successful academic experiences at school and university. The language of excellence and high-performance does not fully recognise the successes of FE in levelling-up achievement among the academically unsuccessful.
- The FE sector perceives itself to be disparaged by the educational establishment as inadequate and inferior, with every management mistake and imperfection gleefully seized upon as cementing that reputation. This reinforces a culture of rejection and unfairness which makes it more difficult to inspire and energise staff.
- Attempts by college leaders to put a brave or optimistic face on their own challenges – especially the lack of resources – are often viewed as synthetic and insincere by staff, and as denying the reality of the burdens they impose on staff to achieve more with less.
- College leaders are retreating behind email to cascade awkward messages to staff remotely and, by doing so outside of the standard working day, are modelling an always-on organisational culture that denies staff adequate time for rest and recuperation.
- As well as facing greater demands on their time from management, staff also face greater demands on their time from students, who seem more-than-usually-lacking in the basic living and social skills needed to become independent, employable adults.

- Staff must strike a delicate balance between rushing to students' aid (and thereby perpetuating their sense of helplessness, dependency and entitlement) and encouraging them to fend for themselves (and thereby slowly fostering self-belief, a can-do attitude and willingness to risk failure).
- Teachers are having to take on a quasi-parental role towards students to equip them with the invisible skills, as well as the technical skills, they need to become ready for work or further study. For this essential work there is no recognition, payment or room in the timetable.
- The requirement for students under 18 to pass Maths and English GCSE before leaving education has not only changed the role of FE colleges but also lowered the baseline competence of their student intake. Many students who enrol lack basic literacy, numeracy and social skills, for which they tend to place a greater reliance on staff than on their own internal resources.
- With better understanding of the psychological and neurological challenges facing students has come a greater willingness to medicalise and label these specific conditions. This has led to an increasing tendency to regard even moderate challenges as needs meriting special dispensation rather than special effort.
- As students increasingly communicate with each other via their phones, so they are failing to develop their social skills and manners. This makes them less equipped to communicate their needs to teachers and staff and to navigate the social aspects of employment.

PRESENTATION ABOVE #1

Colleges feel misunderstood by politicians and policy makers, whose opinions and priorities are often shaped by their own successful academic experiences at school and university. The language of excellence and high-performance does not fully recognise the successes of FE in levelling-up achievement among the academically unsuccessful.

Key words above: misunderstood, blame, pretence, communication

Leaders:

"There are so many things imposed by people in DfE who have no understanding of what's going on."

"If you talk to our local politicians and local councils, they think very, very highly of us: they rate what we do; they know what we do. But that's not mirrored as you go further up; it gets lost."

"Most government ministers, most people in the civil service don't understand what colleges are still less have ever been there."

"They just think we're a big school. A big sixth form. They have no concept of those challenges that we face every day with students."

"They've all studied PPE at Oxford: we may as well be speaking in Chinese; they just wouldn't understand."

"Sometimes we are our own worst enemies. We have a politician come in and it's all bells and whistles; we keep the place immaculately clean and clear out any students who might swear a little bit, because that's what we do and what everybody does."

PRESENTATION ABOVE #2

Visceral Image #24

This image depicts leadership as involving many unwanted and unpleasant tasks behind the apparent power and glamour of the role.

Leaders*:

Starting topic: principals having to do work they might not choose.

Ending topic: students having to do jobs they might not choose.

We may appear *suited and booted under the spotlight* but, *turning around* from a *different angle*, there is a *bit of a shift*. We *struggle* to *wave a magic wand* or sprinkle *unicorn dust* yet we cannot *walk away* or *pass the buck* from what *surfaces* when we *dig into* the *nightmare parked at the door*.

Pain will *shoot in the foot* for anyone *riding the waves* when they *dip* onto a *hidden shallow* with *rocks up* on the *pathway*. Once the *unicorn effect* is *written off*, the only *get-out clause* is to *hang on* and inch *back to the centre*.

*Leaders Group 4

PRESENTATION ABOVE #3

The FE sector perceives itself to be disparaged by the educational establishment as inadequate and inferior, with every management mistake and imperfection gleefully seized upon as cementing that reputation. This reinforces a culture of rejection and unfairness which makes it more difficult to inspire and energise staff.

Leaders:

"Sometimes we are very good at beating each other up, perhaps to make ourselves feel better."

"It's really disappointing to see publications like FE Week with something awful on the front page every week. It seems almost to revel in disappointment."

"I do worry quite a lot about how people are vilified for not getting it right."

"When I look at what principals do, I look up and think 'do I really want that?'"

"I wouldn't want to be a person with a young child doing my job or any of these senior leadership type roles."

"I don't want us to be seen as the poor relations. We should be the last element that puts learners into employment."

"I see some really good people on the shop floor and think 'how can we get you there, because you've got all the skills and tools? Am I promoting myself or my job in a manner that makes it look appealing?'"

"The more we can celebrate leadership in the sector as being something that is not going to kill you, the better."

PRESENTATION ABOVE #4

Visceral Image #25

This image depicts leaders as shouldering the burden of responsibility for their college while being blamed and criticised by those below.

Leaders*:

Starting topic: being stretched.

Ending topic: needing to decide priorities.

Our job is to resemble a *swan on the surface, flying ahead* to seek a *safe haven on the ground* when we *get a fog* and need to *become grounded* when in a *grey area*.

To get a *truer picture*, we *drill back* to look *behind the scenes* and discover we are in a *dumping ground*. Faced with *all that rubbish*, we have to *step up* and *pick things up* just to get *back to square one*. This leaves us *stretched* and *skeletal* as we seek *headspace* to *act outside the box* and *wrap things up* for others.

We reach *saturation point*, like an *absorbed sponge*; yet *things are skewed round* since, as we *battle* on, *under the cosh*, we *get it in the neck, beaten up* by others who *cry out*, wanting to be *spoon-fed*.

*Leaders Group 1

PRESENTATION ABOVE #5

Attempts by college leaders to put a brave or optimistic face on their own challenges – especially the lack of resources – are often viewed as synthetic and insincere by staff, and as denying the reality of the burdens they impose on staff to achieve more with less.

Leaders:

"I think it is fascinating that we never talk about it. We all sit there and generally put a rosy face on how it's going."

"Sometimes I don't believe in some of the things we're asked to do but we've got to do them."

"You put on a smile and you go out and do whatever you have to do, even if you don't feel like it."

"On the one hand, I'm very empathetic to people who are feeling under stress but, on the other hand, you've still got this institution to run and you feel like saying 'for God's sake, get back to work'."

"You've got to be upbeat on the outside and look like you got a lot of those things under control even if there are plates spinning in the background."

"That is how it is in FE – management is in its own virtual reality, quite disconnected from those on the ground."

"Some of the worst senior management talk about values and it's total emperor's new clothes."

"Management like to solve problems on paper so it looks like it's all sorted."

PRESENTATION ABOVE #6

College leaders are retreating behind email to cascade awkward messages to staff remotely and, by doing so outside of the standard working day, are modelling an always-on organisational culture that denies staff adequate time for rest and recuperation.

Leaders:

"We can lose those things that actually help staff and students' wellbeing in our crisis moments and not think in the bigger picture."

"If you listen to management, they will say 'you shouldn't be doing anything at home'."

"Sometimes we spend an hour doing emails when, actually, a 5-minute conversation would clear up the mess."

"The other thing is not to use email so much for communication, and actually get out of your office and go and speak to someone."

"People start to get scared about how big the job is and how big the issues are and how big the solutions need to be."

"It's not about coming in and making big changes. This is about little things such as communication – saying good morning to staff, and touching in and stuff. That goes a long way with staff."

"Because that person who comes to you is not resilient enough or doesn't know what to do, sometimes you want to tell them to have a go, try it and then come to me. In your head, you are saying 'please let me get on with my job because, unless you do that, I won't be able to train you or tell you what to do or what the process is'."

PRESENTATION IN-BETWEEN #1

As well as facing greater demands on their time from management, staff also face greater demands on their time from students, who seem more-than-usually-lacking in the basic living and social skills needed to become independent, employable adults.

Key words in-between: support, communication, needs

Support staff:

"You can see the difference in the students generally. They need more support in all sorts of areas of life."

"A lot of what we do as well as developing career skills is actually developing softer skills such as resilience and problem-solving and how to communicate face-to-face."

"What are the invisible skills we are teaching? Is it taking their hand and leading them everywhere, wiping their arse all the time?"

"We used to send letters. I got fed up of kids coming in with this letter, saying 'what does this letter say?'"

"We have 50% of students who need remedial English so how do we communicate with them? In writing."

"Some of them are spoon-fed in school and not taught to be resilient. They are latch-key kids with working parents putting them in childcare from 7am to 6.30pm."

PRESENTATION IN-BETWEEN #2

Visceral Image #26

This image depicts how support staff maintain a clear work-life separation in order to retain a professional outlook when dealing with problematic cases and, as far as possible, not bring work home emotionally.

Support staff*:

Starting topic: role boundaries.

Ending topic: freedom in role.

I have *half a job* that is *front facing* and half that is *closeted away*. When *on the ground*, I keep a *finger on the pulse* to *pick up* when *pushy* people have *meltdowns*, look *a bit lost* or act *off the wall*.

I *know my limits* so I don't get *fleece*d or become *stagnant* when others are *flagged up* for *shouting*. This *string to my bow* means I don't let it *get on my nerves* or *bottle it up* and *dilute* my feelings. When I *cross over* the *boundaries* of work, I *switch off* with a *cup of tea* and *leave it at the door*.

*Support staff Group 3

PRESENTATION IN-BETWEEN #3

Staff must strike a delicate balance between rushing to students' aid (and thereby perpetuating their sense of helplessness, dependency and entitlement) and encouraging them to fend for themselves (and thereby slowly fostering self-belief, a can-do attitude and willingness to risk failure).

Support staff:

"If we support them too much, they don't get educated."

"We have a huge pastoral support network in the college but they are not there to take the student out and chat to them for hours on end; they are there to get them back into the classroom."

"We get people who don't ask as nicely as they should."

"We've got students with mental health issues who can't come into college. Threats of suicide, self-harm and it's like we are setting our students up for a fall. I don't know where the blame lies for that. Can we cater for the students that are coming in with more and more high level of need?"

"In supported learning, you never know – what they may present when they come at interview or Welcome Day tends to not be anything like they are when they come."

"We get students coming to us, saying 'I haven't got any money for dinner'. We should have lessons about money management. They walk round and they have got their phones topped up, they have got a packet of fags but they've got no money for food because they know they can come to us and get money."

PRESENTATION IN-BETWEEN #4

Visceral Image #27

This image depicts the career dilemma for teachers: whether to persist with a job that involves less and less teaching, move upwards into management, or forestall the risk of redundancy by seeking a new career.

Teachers*:

Starting topic: teaching staff leaving.

Ending topic: the replaceability of teaching staff.

Teachers *starting from scratch* may *turn up* expecting an *ivory tower* but, after *clocking up* some years, *plateau* and face *split pathways*. We may be *plucked* out for a *route upwards* that *leads on* into management – a *get-out-of-jail-free card* watching *downtrodden* colleagues *staggering* when *hit with a big stick*.

If that *route through the door* is *blocked*, we may *go backwards to go forwards* by *cherry picking* our duties as a *covering* for our *fumbling spots*. We can *pick up the tools on the ground* and *build up* a new career. Or we can *grasp* that we are *lumbered in a corner* and *missing a trick* by not joining the *outflow* seeking a new *outlet*.

Even if we are not *looking to step off down that road*, we are not *stuck with* a *fixed* destiny to *build around* and may be *moved over* through the *gateway*, so some of us have *stood up*, *walked up there* and *walked out that door*, to *the world*.

*Teachers Group 4

PRESENTATION IN-BETWEEN #5

Teachers are having to take on a quasi-parental role towards students to equip them with the invisible skills, as well as the technical skills, they need to become ready for work or further study. For this essential work there is no recognition, payment or room in the timetable.

Teachers:

"Sometimes we feel more like social workers. It's getting more and more like this."

"Teachers want to teach; actually, we are also administrators, organisers, carers, counsellors, parents, naggers – all that sort of stuff."

"You're not just teaching the subject, you are teaching morals, how to behave, life skills, resilience, how to interact with other people and, particularly the last 10 years, just how to have conversations with each other."

"The types of student we get now are more needy and have been spoon-fed in school so, when they come to us, they don't have all those abilities. We have to teach them that as well as their subjects."

"The kids come in; they can't come on time; they have no basic communication skills. That's why we are social workers."

"We have to be social worker, counsellor, surrogate, parent – all of these roles – but there is absolutely no thought around training teaching staff to do that."

"The level of need that students have is beyond what people are used to."

"The amount of students I have that are requiring support can be 60% of my classroom population."

PRESENTATION BELOW #1

The requirement for students under 18 to pass Maths and English GCSE before leaving education has not only changed the role of FE colleges but also lowered the baseline competence of their student intake. Many students who enrol lack basic literacy, numeracy and social skills, for which they tend to place a greater reliance on staff than on their own internal resources.

Key words below: life skills, support, communication

Students:

"A lot of children going in to school now get a book and start trying to swipe across it, to scan it because their parents don't read books with them."

"Most of the GCSE English students are non-readers; they can read but they are non-readers. What is now coined as cultural capital is now very limited for them."

"Often the reason why the learners can't do the Maths exams is because they can't understand the English in the question. They can't extract the Maths from the question."

"Even though everything is laid out for them, they can't do it. I think a lot of that is their confidence."

"We are being told to do homework, but then we don't have like a format or a structure. We aren't being taught how to do it."

"On our course, we've just been told 'make sure you don't get anything on your hands.' There are wash stations but we haven't been told exactly what to do."

PRESENTATION BELOW #2

With better understanding of the psychological and neurological challenges facing students has come a greater willingness to medicalise and label these specific conditions. This has led to an increasing tendency to regard even moderate challenges as needs meriting special dispensation rather than special effort.

Students:

"I don't know what's happened but something has happened where the doctors are diagnosing ADHD, KDHD, YDHD... there is so much of it."

"There is a name or abbreviation for everything. When I was at school, you got told that you were shit. You weren't given leeway for anything."

"It's not new, this mental health thing; we are just better at identifying it now, and I agree it is ratcheted up by social media too."

"Most people here are just ordinary, normal kids having normal stuff. They have normal lives; they do the course and then they move on to wherever and they don't have any big problems or dramas or crises. And we never see them. So, 5% of your team who are not like that is going to absorb about 90% of your time, and the rest just have to get on with it."

"There is no expectation that they will work for anything; the parent will give it to them or they think they will just get it somehow. The drive to get a job to get the things you want isn't there for a lot of people."

"You've got some students coming in that is pointless – I'm sorry to say it, but it is. It is pointless them being here because they are not learning."

"We are dealing with students coming from specialist provision and we are throwing them from the frying pan into the fire and not supporting their needs."

"We are becoming a special school now."

PRESENTATION BELOW #3

As students increasingly communicate with each other via their phones, so they are failing to develop their social skills and manners. This makes them less equipped to communicate their needs to teachers and staff and to navigate the social aspects of employment.

Students:

"I also think students should have a section of a lesson on how to speak to people."

"I've been teaching for about 5 or 6 years, and each year I've noticed there's been a drop, a lack of common sense – and you can't really teach common sense – but a lack of general understanding about things like telling the time."

"Students come in with so many needs; they are partly disabled in terms of their social skills."

"They need life experience going to places, learning how to be around people, saying 'please' and 'thank you'."

"They grunt. There's no 'please', there's no 'thank you'."

"They don't know how to speak because of their phones."

"I don't think it's necessarily the phones that are the issue. It's whether or not the student respects the teacher enough to listen to them."

PRESENTATION BELOW #4

Visceral Image #28

This image depicts the student experience of freezing under pressure, notably during exams but also when talking to adults.

Students*:

Starting topic: not wishing to repeat an earlier conversation.

Ending topic: not being able to recall what they know under pressure.

We are *dragged on* to campus to *make that step* to *open new doors*, drawn into *the spotlight* by a *college broadcast* that is *hyped up* and a *bit fishy*.

Our search for *filler* conversation is *hit and miss*. We *go blank* and have *no brain*. We are *knocked off* guard and *lost for something to say*. When *put on the spot*, we go *up the walls*.

Words are *draining* away and then it *went dark*.

*Students Group 1



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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