



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 6: Community**

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

FETL Occasional Papers are short, authoritative treatments of issues key to the leadership of thinking in further education and skills. Written by expert commentators, they are intended to inform and encourage new thinking about important topics.

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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.23)

# 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 six: Community**. 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 SIX

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## Community

*"It's the stuff you can't measure and which doesn't get measured."*

Colleges aim to provide students with an environment in which they feel safe and welcome to be themselves and, through investment of time, attention and support, to help them progress. Colleges are less good at providing these conditions for their own staff.

- The requirement for colleges to be run like businesses compromises their ability to operate like families. Businesses privilege competition over collaboration and activities delivering measurable rather than unmeasurable sources of value. Families tend to prioritise wellbeing over well-doing.
- The college business model forces the interests of financial performance to take precedence over those of staff and students. It also reduces the ability of colleges to work together in their collective interests.
- Demand from students has increased the pressure on support staff and reduced their availability to help each other out while making it ever more important that they do so when others are struggling.
- Funding restrictions make support staff positions vulnerable to changes in student numbers. This creates insecurity and anxiety and discourages staff from taking risks or innovating in their roles.
- Contact time in the classroom is the most rewarding part of teachers' jobs yet the time to prepare for lessons and help students make progress seems to be accorded a lower priority by management than their administration and other non-teaching duties, forcing teachers into a choice to sacrifice their free time or be less well prepared in class.
- The ability of teachers to give students personal attention and assistance is the key to their success in engaging students. Many teachers are choosing to invest



their own personal time and resources in ensuring that student needs are not compromised.

- The value of college as a family is most acute for the students whose own family lives are unstable and unhappy. For all students, college provides a sense of community and welcome where they can safely fit in and build their confidence, maturity and social skills.
- The focus of colleges is increasingly on meeting the basic physiological, safety and social needs of students because, until these are met, they will not be ready to face the challenge of learning.

# COMMUNITY ABOVE #1

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The requirement for colleges to be run like businesses compromises their ability to operate like families. Businesses privilege competition over collaboration and activities delivering measurable rather than unmeasurable sources of value. Families tend to prioritise wellbeing over well-doing.

**Key words above: goodwill, teamwork, collaboration**

**Leaders:**

*"That community bit is important, isn't it?"*

*"The whole sector is run on goodwill. Because you don't go in it for the money or for anything else."*

*"It is so critical for your organisation that we look after each other."*

*"If we lost goodwill in FE, we'd be in serious trouble."*

*"It doesn't matter what level you are: you'll still pick up a piece of litter if someone has dropped it. Whatever level you are working, you will chat to the students, help somebody up to the lift or up the stairs."*

*"If we don't look after our people, our brand doesn't exist any more."*

*"You need that humility to put people first and, if you do, you will muddle your way through because they will put up with things for you."*

*"What I've noticed here is that it's a team effort and everyone is involved in the decision."*

*"That is the downside that we have our courses and we don't mix at all unless you know people from out of college."*

# COMMUNITY ABOVE #2

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## Visceral Image #29

This image depicts leadership as requiring constant vigilance in all directions and a willingness to step in and troubleshoot whatever situations emerge.

**Leaders\*:**

**Starting topic:** dealing with external pressures.

**Ending topic:** dealing with internal pressures.

With a *birds-eye view*, we *rule the world* by *looking through my lens* to *have a handle on* everything. We can see what is *on an even keel* and where there are *cracks beginning to show*. If someone is *finding his feet*, we can *keep an eye on them* to ensure they are *bedding down*.

If you are *stretched* or starting *to crack*, we can *dive in* and do some *troubleshooting* before you *break apart* or go into a *downward spiral*. *With my hat on* for *firefighting*, we can enter *the battle* to *absorb heat* away from your *bare bones* so you can *step back*. If you *flag up pinchpoints*, we can *draw a line* and *juggle* resources so you *have space* to reach *a comfort zone*.

We are a *filter* who can *pick up bags of rubbish*. If work becomes *a beast*, we will *embrace that* signal to put *jam in the sandwich* and win your *hearts and minds*. Staying *on the bus* means we may *swerve* but must be *geared towards hanging on*.

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\* Leaders Group 6

# COMMUNITY ABOVE #3

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The college business model forces the interests of financial performance to take precedence over those of staff and students. It also reduces the ability of colleges to work together in their collective interests.

**Leaders:**

*"It's interesting to say that the college is a business. It used to be a family."*

*"Being dynamic and being flexible is part of the sector."*

*"Colleges work best by just being in touch with the local needs."*

*"We welcome everybody but we offer them different solutions to what they need. That's one of our great strengths."*

*"It really doesn't matter the size of the college, the grade of the college, the finance of the college. It doesn't matter the make-up of the college; everybody seems to have the same worries. Everyone has the same concerns. Everyone feels the same."*

*"As a sector, we need to be brave enough not to start fighting each other."*

*"It's the stuff you can't measure and which doesn't get measured."*

*"I see people starting in new roles and saying 'I didn't realise how big the role was' and this is from teachers, trainer assessors, administrative staff right the way through to senior management – you used to have two people doing a role where now you have only one."*

# COMMUNITY ABOVE #4

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## Visceral Image #30

This image depicts leadership as an extreme 'winner takes all' rollercoaster which requires extreme resilience and single-mindedness to survive and pits colleges against each other in the race for student numbers, courses and funding.

**Leaders\*:**

**Starting topic: the pleasures of the job.**

**Ending topic: matching supply to demand.**

Staying *ahead of the game* requires you to *get out of bed*, *scrabble over* the competitive *landscape* and *run as fast as you can* through the *entrance doors*. The ones with the *drive* to *scrap* will be a *tough nut to crack*.

Don't let your *balance shift* when you *turn left*, *jump up and down* or get *turned around* on this *rollercoaster*. Those who *stand still* will *fall down* and get their *heads lopped off*. Anyone whose *baggage* causes them *distress* will come *off the rails* and *implode* in a *mind-blowing whirlwind* of *muddle* and *mess*.

The *proof of the pudding* is in the *single voice shooting* for *extra plates on the table*. *Imposters* may *shout* with *louder voices* but will have their *forked tongue ripped out* and any *horns growing* will *fracture* and *fall off*.

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\*Leaders Group 5

# COMMUNITY IN-BETWEEN #1

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Demand from students has increased the pressure on support staff and reduced their availability to help each other out while making it ever more important that they do so when others are struggling.

**Key words in-between: impact, investment, caring, effort**

***Support staff:***

*"All the people at the bottom are keeping this place together."*

*"Somebody just said to me the other day 'well, it's only business' and I thought 'that's where you're wrong'."*

*"That's how it should be – everyone supporting everyone."*

*"That's why we are good at the wellbeing and turning people's lives around. Because we do form a community. I've had students - and I'm sure you have – where they write to you and say 'this is the first time I felt really at home in a school education and I felt valued'."*

*"You don't see people saying 'that's not part of my role'. That helps us hand on a 'can-do' attitude to the students."*

*"Other people function differently to you and you get more out of your staff if you value that."*

*"In some areas you get 'well that's your problem'."*

# COMMUNITY IN-BETWEEN #2

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Funding restrictions make support staff positions vulnerable to changes in student numbers. This creates insecurity and anxiety and discourages staff from taking risks or innovating in their roles.

## **Support staff:**

*"It's not as happy as it was when I first started here."*

*"So much still depends upon personal relationships: who you know; who you trust; who you think is reliable; who you recognise is not; who will actually do something; who thinks that saying something is the equivalent of doing it."*

*"People are very edgy; people are thinking that their jobs are going to change, being much more fearful around the future, and that's translating in their role."*

*"Every Easter, we are waiting for redundancies as legally they have to give 3 months' notice so we are always wondering subconsciously 'how we have done this year?'."*

*"Morale plummets because staff feel threatened or feel insecure."*

*"The people who are getting up and retiring or leaving, are women, ethnic minorities. So, it's leaving a very white, male workforce again."*

*"Peer support and things like that – I just think that's getting written off."*

*"We work in silos now."*

# COMMUNITY IN-BETWEEN #3

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## Visceral Image #31

This image depicts the variety of issues that students bring with them to college, and the versatility required of support staff to deal with them all.

**Support Staff\*:**

**Starting topic: the excellence of internal support.**

**Ending topic: the excellence of external support.**

Like actors *treading the boards*, we *mirror mainstream* society: *in tune* with those who *play up*; a *sounding board* to those who *sound off*; *hanging on* to those who *stretch out the window*; *talking round* those *in their own world*; creating a *level playing field* for those who find it *tipped* at *different angles*; *lifting out* anyone who *falls into* the *gaps*; and *popping on* a *fresh blanket* if someone's life *cycle* goes *stale*.

We won't *sit on our hands* or *second guess* where habits have *hardened* or *hit a point* that could *go both ways*. We offer *the full shebang* to make a problem *disappear*, *putting it in a box* and *locking it off* confidentially. We are *tied to* our students, working *seamlessly* to never *miss a trick*.

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\*Support staff Group 4



# COMMUNITY IN-BETWEEN #4

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Contact time in the classroom is the most rewarding part of teachers' jobs yet the time to prepare for lessons and help students make progress seems to be accorded a lower priority by management than their administration and other non-teaching duties, forcing teachers into a choice to sacrifice their free time or be less well prepared for class.

## **Teachers:**

*"It's not the kind of job you can just do and go home and forget about. We are all here for a reason."*

*"Our work changes lives. It's a real opportunity to connect with people and say 'give us a go and promise me you'll do your best and you're on'."*

*"When it's all awful, you can go into the classroom and remember why you put up with all that rubbish."*

*"You can see the impact you have: the difference that either you can have personally or that the organisation can make to people's lives."*

*"That's why we come here: we want to teach what we know to students."*

*"They will think that, if they've got your lesson plan, they can get someone else to do your lesson."*

*"She doesn't teach – she will look through a PowerPoint and then, that's it. You're done. Get on with it."*

*"The lessons aren't very planned out. It's like 'let's find something from this pile'."*

*"We just have a real inconsistency with our tutors."*

# COMMUNITY IN-BETWEEN #5

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## Visceral Image #32

This image depicts the way lack of time has made teachers' classes resemble their experience of training: a sham process of going through the motions to tick a box rather than achieve actual learning.

**Teachers\*:**

**Starting topic:** the inadequacy of teaching.

**Ending topic:** the inadequacy of training.

We *click through* a presentation to *tick a box* and *hand it* in rather than *doubling up* to *jump back and forward* between the *needy* and those who are *flying*. If students *moan* or are *fussed about* something, we *weigh up* whether to *wing it*.

*Playing it safe* avoids *hassle*: it *falls on* us to *ram it home across the board* using a *blanket* approach, *bringing in front-loaded* information allowing no *leeway* to *drop back* to *pick up* the *mixed up* and put them *on the same foot*.

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\*Teachers Group 3

# COMMUNITY IN-BETWEEN #6

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The ability of teachers to give students personal attention and assistance is the key to their success in engaging students. Many teachers are choosing to invest their own personal time and resources in ensuring that student needs are not compromised.

## **Teachers:**

*"You can tell when a teacher doesn't care. They don't put no effort into you; they will just give you the work and tell you 'do that; do this' and just leave you."*

*"The way I notice if a teacher cares or not is the way they talk to you."*

*"The head of the course came in and told us 'this is a very difficult course but, if you lads are serious and I see after ten weeks you are taking it serious, I will take off time from myself to open the classroom for you to come in and do extra work'. And he actually did that throughout the whole year."*

*"He even gave us books that we needed for exams that he paid for from his own pocket and made sure we got them. This is the kind of teachers that education needs: teachers who care about their students and want to see a better future for others in life."*

*"If you are not putting the effort in, the teachers say 'why should we put the effort into you?'. That's how I see it. 'There are people on the waiting list to get into the college, and you are just wasting my time not going to lessons.' That gets through."*

*"If they have put more effort in, so I do I. If they are trying to make me pass – they want me to pass and are trying to push me, I am going to have to put more effort into what I am doing."*

*"We used to see the students outside of the course in the lunchtimes and in the breaks but there is not the same slack in the system any more. Even then, there was only 55% retention but we were proud of that."*

# COMMUNITY BELOW #1

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The value of college as a family is most acute for the students whose own family lives are unstable or unhappy. For all students, college provides a sense of community and welcome where they can safely fit in and build their confidence, maturity and social skills.

**Key words below: safety, personalised, listening**

**Students:**

*"It's somewhere where they are wanted every day and they know what is coming. It's safe."*

*"There are a lot of students here who are very frightened to not be here anymore. That's why they are still here. And we've got to inspire them to get a job but actually the workplace can be even better than this. But this is all they know. It's a blanket."*

*"We are always focusing on the negative, not the bigger picture of what you are trying to do and how you are making a difference. Even if it's just keeping a kid out of going back to his home, that's a good thing."*

*"Sometimes we keep people here because it's the only safe place for them. Friday afternoon and they all go into crisis because they've got nowhere to go and this is their home; this is their safe space; this is their community."*

*"Most people don't go out now because they are afraid of how society is. You've got gang violence, getting robbed, people carrying knives."*

*"There's a lot of gang violence. I know a lot of kids from this college live in places where they are literally afraid to go home."*

*"That is the downside that we have our courses and we don't mix at all unless you know people from out of college."*

# COMMUNITY BELOW #2

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The focus of colleges is increasingly on meeting the basic physiological, safety and social needs of students because, until these are met, they will not be ready to face the challenge of learning.

## **Students:**

*"Every aspect of college is personal, be it now or your future."*

*"And they have got someone to talk to every day. They have got the relationships. And they get something to eat and drink. It's back to the basics again. It's a community."*

*"It's a smaller community and it's more personalised to how you learn."*

*"The other class has got a WhatsApp group for assignments and stuff and it's become a kind of counselling group for everyone who's struggling a little bit."*

*"To students, it's really important that they're known by somebody."*

*"Yes, it's nice to feel that you are actually being listened to."*

*"More people to speak to is never a bad thing."*

*"If you are having a bad day at college, the teacher would listen to you more. At sixth form, you have to be that perfect little student every day."*

# COMMUNITY BELOW #3

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## Visceral Image #33

This image depicts student difficulties staying focused in class, and the help they need to recover from setbacks and re-engage with lessons.

**Students\*:**

**Starting topic:** benefiting from learning enrichment support.

**Ending topic:** benefiting from behaviour support.

Learning has *ups and downs*. Teachers can *get on to you* and *push you* with *rubbish about* staying *on this path* until you *mess up*. Then, we become a *class of zombies* staring *out the window* because a *bunch of words* won't *stick in my brain* and it is *downhill from there*: we *sink into* despair or *have a blow-up* and get *kicked out*.

Others give us *deep help*: they *don't sugar-coat it*, offer *no rainbows and sunshine, no plate of gold*. They *pull me in* and help me *click onto* the lesson so I can *step up* and *figure out* how to *pull it together*.

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\*Students Group 8



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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