The cycle of student and staff wellbeing: Emotional labour and extension requests in Higher Education. A Practice Report

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Abstract

This paper suggests that the sociological theory of emotional labour is a useful way to interpret how teaching practices in Higher Education often involve the simultaneous management of both staff and student wellbeing. This paper applies Berry and Cassidy's Higher Education Emotional Labour model (2013) to the management of extension requests. We put forward a case study of processing a significant number of extension requests in a short space of time in a large, first year Health Sciences topic. We consider the responsibilities and risks for staff and students in this scenario, and ponder the implications for future practice and pedagogy. We argue that student and staff wellbeing must always be considered as interrelated, and that academic administrative procedures need to be developed with this mind.

Emotional labour and Higher Education

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild developed the concept of emotional labour in her book, entitled *The Managed Heart* (1983, reprinted in 2012). The book built on the earlier work of Erving Goffman (1959) about the "presentation of self", and how we learn through social interaction and both explicit and implicit cues to present ourselves in specific ways in any given context. Hochschild's work went further in order to articulate how the management of emotions, both through outer appearance - "surface acting", and through the soul - "deep acting", are integral to the social expectations and commercial nature of professional roles (Hochschild, 2012, pp. 37-38). There is a growing acknowledgement within academic literature of the high levels of emotion work required in teaching (cf. Gallant, 2013; Hargreaves, 1998; O'Connor, 2008). This reflects a similar body of evidence that has demonstrated the role of emotional labour in health professional practice (cf. Smith, 2012; Theodosius, 2008; Williams, 2012). In a recent study Berry and Cassidy (2013) suggest that the levels of emotional labour encapsulated within the role of university teachers impacts on teachers' wellbeing by increasing levels of job related stress and further, evolving into a cyclic relationship with consequences that then impact on student wellbeing, reflected in "student satisfaction, student performance and student retention" (p. 33). They call this the Higher Education Emotional Labour (HEEL) model, which we argue can be applied to better understand the micro level decisions (and their impacts) that are made by staff and students in the day-to-day administrative negotiations about learning activities.

Despite an expanding area of scholarship that addresses emotional labour in Higher Education (HE) (Constanti & Gibbs, 2004; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2011; Woods, 2010), there is little that reflects on specific contexts and how procedural aspects of teaching might inherently involve emotional risks for both students and staff. This Practice Report looks at the administrative task of managing assignment extension requests as a call for more research into the ways that academics are engaged in the cycle of student and staff wellbeing in their teaching practices. This particular case study is used as a way to ponder whether administrative teaching tasks could be handled in different ways in order to address this cycle. We demonstrate how, as Hochschild (2012) suggested, within the HE institution, our emotion work is never autonomous as "[m]any people and objects, arranged according to institutional rule and custom, together accomplish the act" (p. 49).

Case study

As a team engaged in teaching critical reflective approaches to health, we seek to role model many of the skills we teach. Thus it is pertinent to note that we present this case study as an exercise in reflective practice in our teaching. It was not part of a research study, and is intended as a report on practice that points to the need for more research in this area. This paper is the result of a series of critically reflective discussions about the topic assessment and administration, which occurred as part of standard teaching review practices in the three months following topic completion at the end of 2014. After considering the practice of extension management to be a form of emotional labour, we decided to review all the extension requests made in relation to one piece of assessment in a large, first year topic which had been run in Semester 2 (August to November) 2014, in order to consider the relationship between the process in place for extension management and the emotional wellbeing of staff and students.

Background to topic and assessment

The topic that forms the basis of this case study is a core first year Bachelor of Health Sciences topic offered through Flinders University, a large metropolitan university in Adelaide, South Australia. At the time of writing, the topic had an enrolment of around 500 students. Students enrolled in the program are working towards a broad range of allied health and health-related degrees with degree majors. Further, the degree can be used as a pathway into a number of allied health professional programs. These pathways are popular and highly competitive, and require a high Grade Point Average (GPA). The aim of the topic is to provide students with:

(a) A framework for on-going development of their own philosophy of practice through examination of the lived experience of health, and

(b) An understanding of relevant concepts in health sociology.

In addition, students are required to develop skills in searching for and evaluating quality literature that supports evidence-based practice.

Assignments are a mix of reflective assessment linking to sociological themes, and formal academic writing. Assessment pieces consist of a group presentation, an artistic and reflective piece (Evocative Production) and the writing of a systematic literature review (SLR). As stated above, for many students, achieving and maintaining a high GPA is imperative in their attempt to progress into their desired professional degree and for this reason, many are grade driven (Willis, Abery & Leiman, 2013). In addition, many students have difficulty perceiving the relevance of undertaking an SLR to future practice (Kift, 2009; Wilson & Fowler, 2005). However, within the domain of health professional practice, evidence-based practice is recognised as imperative to clinical and policy decision-making to support individual accountability and positive patient/client outcomes. Therefore, the ability to search for and critically appraise research literature and evidence is vital for all health professionals (Hoffman, Bennett & Del Mar, 2013). As the writing of the SLR requires a systematic and scaffolded approach, a timeline was produced for students with significant supporting resources. The timeline and resources were available on the university online learning portal and also discussed in the tutorials in the weeks leading up to the assignment submission date. Despite significant support and resources being in place, the SLR attracted a significant number of student extension requests in the days leading up to the assignment due date.

Extension request process

Flinders University has a policy in place that allows students to request extensions on assignment due dates where health or other extenuating circumstances impact on completion and submission of the assignment. Extension requests can be made up until three days prior to the designated submission date but must be accompanied by appropriate documentation such as a medical certificate or support from a counsellor. Students who have a university sanctioned Disability Access Plan (DAP) do not need to provide further documentation. Extension requests are submitted online with students able to select from a drop-down menu: illness, injury, personal or family tragedy or other as the motive for the extension request. There is also the opportunity to include up to 200 words of text. The topic co-ordinator is notified immediately by email that a request has been submitted. It is the responsibility of the topic co-ordinator to determine whether the request is approved or rejected. Comment for consideration can be added, and the online system then notifies the outcome to the student by email and automatically adjusts the assignment submission date.

Extension request outcomes

In total, 72 extension requests were submitted with the majority of these (57) being submitted within the four days leading up to the submission date. Table 1 provides an overview of the reasons offered for the extension request and where supporting documentation was provided.

through either the university Health and Counselling Service or Student Learning Centre. The task of processing a large number of extension requests in a short time frame, contemplating the emotive content of some of the requests, and responding in a timely but supportive manner, creates a workload and potential wellbeing liability for academic staff (Cassidy & Berry, 2013).

Table 1: *Overview of extension request details*

Reason	Number of requests	Documentation provided	Extended reasons
Other	24	4	- Elite Athlete status or sporting commitments - Excessive work load (paid employment) - Family commitments - Competing study load (other assignments due) - Lack of understanding of the assignment criteria
Illness	20	19	
DAP	6	4	
Personal or family tragedy	19	3	- Death of family member or friend - Need to support family or friend due to illness or accident - Unspecified
Injury	3	3	
TOTAL	**72**	**33**	

DAP: Disability Action Plan

As can be seen, although university policy requires supporting documentation, this was only provided in 33 of the 72 requests. In most cases the requests without documentation fell within the "personal or family tragedy" or "other" selection. This intensified the decision making process for the topic co-ordinator as further comment provided by students often indicated that they were experiencing levels of emotional stress or that life events were impacting on their wellbeing. Acknowledging the need to request an extension is likely to be difficult for the student - therefore a timely response was imperative. In many cases the topic co-ordinator felt the need to add comment rather than merely approve/reject, to encourage the student to seek further support

Implications for staff and student wellbeing

The reasons given for extension requests summarised in Table 1 show that, in the majority of cases, students are going through traumatic or stressful experiences that are not easily supported by documentation. Nevertheless, at the time of writing, the current university assessment policy states that extension requests need to be supported by appropriate documentation such as a medical certificate or Disability Access Plan in order to be granted. Subsequently, in this case study, staff felt torn between ensuring students meet their responsibilities according to university

policy and the risk to student wellbeing if an extension request was denied because the student could not meet those requirements. This first year topic has undergone significant curriculum-based, pedagogical development in recent years in response to important scholarship that has called for a focus on student transitions into university (Kift, 2009; Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010). In support of this existing literature, we argue that this case study demonstrates the need to go beyond topic-based curriculum change in order to instigate more significant improvements in student success, retention and engagement. The example presented is evidence that more discussion is needed about the impact of assessment policies and procedures and how these contribute to the cycle of student and staff wellbeing.

As colleagues, we frequently engaged in corridor conversations about the time and emotional energy involved in managing large numbers of requests for extensions in the week leading up to assignment deadlines. The emotional labour involved in considering student requests that cite "personal or family tragedy" without supporting documentation is significant as we often have to shift emotions of frustration and suspicion and replace them with empathy and trust. This is essential in order to ensure that genuine cases of need are not denied simply because evidence has not been provided. Hochschild (2012) explains that emotion work can generally be defined as either "surface acting" or "deep acting", where surface acting is a pretence of emotion on the outside, and "the body, not the soul, is the main tool of the trade" (p. 37). This is not so relevant in our context where the administrative process of submitting requests physically separates the student from the topic co-ordinator when the decision is made. Thus, it is deep acting that is required on our part as we attempt to actually shift our own feelings of doubt, in order to assess the extension request rationally with the student's wellbeing as the central concern.

Berry and Cassidy's HEEL model (2013, p. 33) provides a framework for understanding how the emotional wellbeing of HE staff, student wellbeing, and retention are deeply connected in a cyclic chain. Other significant studies have shown the paradox that exists for academic staff who seek to engage in quality scholarship of teaching, which has, at its core, a well-placed emphasis on student wellbeing (Hemer, 2013; Houston, 2010; Houston, Meyer & Paewai, 2006). Academics committed to innovation in learning and teaching experience increases to their workload and such commitment to student success is rarely rewarded in performance measures (Hemer, 2013). This creates a tension and potential for significant stress and emotional conflict as staff strive to engage in high quality education. It is therefore important to acknowledge this and to consider staff wellbeing as the "missing link" in understanding the student experience. While we acknowledge the literature around benefits of self-paced/directed learning that value and purport flexibility (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008), in this instance as future professionals within the fields of health and allied health, we are hesitant to remove an emphasis in assessment on the importance of structure and meeting expected due dates. Reflecting on the influences of Berry and Cassidy's cycle of emotional labour, the concept of mutual responsibilities and interconnected personal and professional risks cannot be ignored. Further research is needed to determine the relative value in enforcing due dates and whether it is possible for such practices to be carried out in a way that supports teacher and student wellbeing as well as resulting in positive student outcomes.

Conclusion

There is a call in the health care sector for a more holistic understanding of the interconnectedness of the experiences and lives of health care workers and local/global health outcomes (Connell & Walton-Roberts, 2015). Given that in our specific context we are

engaged in the learning and teaching of future health care workers, we can see there are parallels with this approach and our own professional practice and educational outcomes. We would like to make a similar call for further research that will assist in understanding the emotional labour of educators as central to issues of student success. As university teachers, we have the responsibility to teach professional practice while at the same time supporting student wellbeing, but indeed students, as future professional practitioners, have the responsibility to accept a level of accountability for their actions. Where extension requests fit into that accountability is an area of contestability. However, our case study provides evidence that improving the student experience needs to go far beyond curriculum development. As Nelson, Smith and Clarke (2011) have argued, enhancing student transitions into and through university needs an institution-wide approach. We see such an approach as one that acknowledges the cyclical integration of all elements of macro level policies, micro level technological procedures, and the emotional labour of both staff and students.

Note: The focus of this practice report was first presented at the 2015 STARS Conference in Melbourne, Australia in July 2015 as a *New Idea and Emerging Initiative.* This practice report extends the original work presented at the Conference and considers further institutional responses related to both student and staff wellbeing in tertiary education

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