

**EMAIL MESSAGES:
TOWARDS A PEDAGOGY OF CARING**

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ABSTRACT

A lecturer in mathematics undertook a study of his students' perceptions of the various new technologies he was embedding in their extended curriculum programme. This paper is not about that study; this paper is about something seemingly simple and yet profound that happened along the way. The lecturer, aware of the alienation students may feel in their new university environment, used emails to encourage his students to invest time in their university studies. Unexpectedly, the impact of this personal correspondence, which was initially just seen to be a means to an end, turned out to be something worthy of consideration in its own right. This paper examines what that was and how emails can be one way of demonstrating care for our students within the South African higher education context.

INTRODUCTION

Issues of exclusion and injustice in higher education are often considered at a level of policy and institutional structures. This article reports at a micro-level of an intervention aimed at fostering social inclusion through making students feel valued and part of the institution. The email correspondence reported on here had, at a surface level, the motivation of students to invest time in their studies as its agenda. At a deeper level it had an agenda of connecting with individual students, recognising the multiple identities students have and facilitating access to the institutional culture.

If '...academic language... is no one's mother tongue...' (Bourdieu & Passeron 1994: 8) then academia is no one's birthplace. Scholars within higher education have recognised this and are calling for higher education practitioners to provide students with epistemological access to disciplines being studied (Morrow, 2007). When one considers the dismal throughput rates of the higher education sector (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007) and the call for equity of outcomes within higher education, one senses that there is a gap between the culture of teaching and learning at schools and at

universities. In other words, schools and universities may not necessarily value the same academic ways of being (Badat, 2007). It is this difference in ways of being that constitutes a cultural gap between school and university; a cultural gap that students need to negotiate (Huysamen, 2000); it is this cultural gap that higher education practitioners need to help students negotiate.

The call for epistemological access within higher education suggests that higher education practitioners need to develop more effective, supportive and transparent ways of teaching concepts to students. If we are to provide students with effective support then we need to understand the schooling culture from which our students come.

In the Science Foundation Programme on the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of KwaZulu- Natal (UKZN), where this study took place, the majority of Foundation Programme students are from the province of KwaZulu-Natal, which is one of the poorest provinces in South Africa (Taylor, Jinabhai, Naidoo, Kleinschmidt & Dlamini, 2003). Besides the issue of poverty, the province is grappling with high HIV/Aids infection rates (Moletsane, Morrell, Unterhalter & Epstein, 2002) and the many children in HIV/ Aids households are forced to take on more family responsibilities, negatively impacting their schooling (Griessel-Roux, Ebersohn, Smit & Eloff, 2005; Hepburn, 2002).

Further, the Foundation Programme is specifically directed at providing access to students from historically disadvantaged schools¹. Foundation students are mainly from township and rural schools. These schools are often, though certainly not always, sites of substance abuse (Taylor et al, 2003); violence (de Wet, 2003; Maree & Cherian, 2004); and high teenage pregnancy rates (Department of Education, 2007). Lack of resources (Ngidi & Sibaya, 2002); teacher apathy and learner misconduct (Joubert, de Waal & Rossouw, 2004) contrive to diminish the culture of teaching and learning within these schools, effectively rendering the majority of township and rural schools dysfunctional (Department of Education, 2009; Morrow, 2007).

Students, who survive such a culture of schooling, arrive at university hoping to negotiate the academic terrain in pursuit of a brighter future. This article will show that

personal communication, in this case in the form of motivational email messages, can be used towards a pedagogy of caring thereby contributing to diminishing the cultural gap between school and university, and student and lecturer. A pedagogy of caring may help higher education practitioners provide epistemological access to students. For students, a pedagogy of caring may help them to feel valued and so more readily able to embrace the academic ways of being that are valued by higher education.

Within the South African higher education context of transformation and social equity, through a pedagogy of caring, students may feel part of higher education institutions and so invest themselves in their studies. In so doing, personal communication as an aspect of a pedagogy of caring can contribute to creating a learning environment in which academics can ‘...become aware of, and learn to understand the students they teach, by being much more sensitive towards these [all] students’ (Department of Education 2008).

I next briefly outline the literature review on this subject before describing the conceptual framework of the study. Thereafter I discuss the methodology, findings and then make some concluding remarks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several ways in which email has been used within educational contexts. The uses include: sending and receiving of course material such as assignments (Smith, Whiteley & Smith, 1999); to facilitate communication between students and teacher (Bloch, 2002; Hassini, 2006); to facilitate communication between teachers and colleagues (Hu, Wong, Cheah & Wong, 2009); to foster collaborative learning (Hwang, 2008; Kim & Keller, 2008); and to address students’ conceptual understanding with regard to course content (Murphy & Manzanares, 2008; Valadez & Duran, 2007). However, there is little research surrounding the use of email for the improvement of students’ motivation to study (Kim, 2008; Kim & Keller, 2008). This paper seeks to address the gap in the literature by reporting on the changes in students’ academic identities brought about by their exposure to motivational email messages; highlighting the potential of email to motivate students to invest in their

studies.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The adoption of new academic practices entails a particular cultural understanding of what learning constitutes (McKenna, 2004). Practices such as checking your work, reflecting on material covered in lectures, preparing for tutorials by attempting tutorial problems in advance of the tutorial, practising concepts covered in class and consulting with lecturers and peers in order to sort out difficulties with course content, all assume a particular understanding of learning. Such an understanding may either be foreign to students or may be at odds with their previous learning experiences (de Kadt & Mathonsi, 2003); in effect preventing students from adopting the academic practices expected of them (McKenna, 2004). Since learning is an experience in identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991), a conceptualisation of identity was needed for this study.

Sfard and Prusak (2005) used a narrative approach to conceptualise identity in terms of actual and designated identity. The narrative approach frames identity as an individual's collection of stories about their life (Wojecki, 2007). It is this collection of stories that influences how individuals act in various situations; when applied to this context, either facilitating or blocking students from using new academic practices. For example, if a student used to do poorly in mathematics tests then that experience would be storied as a negative within their actual identity. The negative story could make a student envision future failures in mathematics thereby forcing a student to construct an associated negative designated identity. Consequently, the student will embark on a negative learning trajectory, taking on practices associated with poor academic behaviour. In other words, the construction of a negative actual identity can result in a student performing in a way that realises an associated negative designated identity (Sfard & Prusak, 2005).

1 A classification list provided by the Department of Education used to identify a school's level of disadvantage.

How are actual and designated identities operationalised? Actual identities are characterised by present tense statements (Sfard & Prusak, 2005), such as: 'I am bad at algebra'; 'I like studying'; and 'that lecturer does not like me'. These present tense statements give rise to an associated designated identity characterised by future tense statements (Sfard & Prusak, 2005), such as 'I am going to fail the next algebra test'; 'I will be able to apply for a bursary'; and 'there is no point in me trying to ask that lecturer for help'. Thus, in order for students to assume academic practices that are valued by academia, students' learning experiences which are storied as a negative in their actual identity needs to be re-scripted. Through exposure to positive learning experiences the negative stories can be replaced with positive ones and new designated identities can be envisioned in order to allow students to follow positive learning trajectories (Wojecki, 2007). Thus, when new, positive actual and designated identities are scripted, learning is taking place (Sfard & Prusak, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

The following research question is answered in this paper:

To what extent can motivational email messages be used to develop the academic identities of Science Foundation Programme students in mathematics?

This paper is exploratory in nature, based on participants' perceived influence of the motivational email messages on their academic identities. Larger questions, such as the design and implementation of motivational email messages, are not the focus of this paper; these are potential areas of further research. Rather, this paper establishes the potential use of motivational email messages as a tool to engage students in learning mathematics within higher education.

The data presented in this article emanates from a larger project (Aungamuthu, 2009), which made use of a case study research design within the interpretive paradigm. The project was a case of Foundation students' perceptions of learning mathematics with the aid of Information and Communications Technology (ICT).

A case study design was considered appropriate as the project was exploratory as opposed to empirical in nature; seeking to understand and gain insights into participants' experiences of learning with the aid of ICT; generalisation was not a

priority. The project (ibid) was about a particular phenomenon, experienced by a particular group of students, in a particular place at a particular point in time, studied with a particular set of research methods; reflective of the bounded nature of the project. It was the bounded nature of the project that made it a case study. I describe the methods used in the project before discussing the motivational email messages which are the focus of this article.

Purposive sampling was used to consider participants for the project. Of the 90 students from the 2008 cohort of Foundation students 13 volunteered to be participants in the project. Data was collected by conducting face-to-face semi-structured interviews with each participant. In all 13 interviews were conducted; data saturation occurred after ten interviews. Hence there was no need to call for more volunteers. Given the exploratory nature of the project, data saturation is considered suitable in deciding whether to sample further or not.

An inductive thematic content analysis was carried out by reading across interview transcripts: coding of the transcripts involved capturing the essence of a participant's statements with a phrase of no more than five words. By looking for possible relationships between codes, related codes were clustered together to form sub-themes. Similarly, related sub-themes were clustered together to form themes. These themes and sub-themes were validated in three ways: by comparison to findings in the research literature surrounding learning with ICT; by making use of peer debriefing which involved explaining the study and the process by which codes, sub-themes and themes were constructed to a colleague teaching Foundation mathematics at the Westville campus of UKZN; and by a panel discussion, with participants constituting the panel, to establish cultural validity. At the end of the panel discussion, participants left with a sense that their experiences had been accurately captured. The validation process allowed for the refinement of codes, sub-themes and themes, giving the researcher a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

Why were the motivational email messages sent? Amidst students' poor preparation for tutorials, low levels of enthusiasm for mathematics, the mediocre quality of work submitted, and poor performance on tutorial and monthly tests; there was the growing

sense that students were not investing themselves in their studies. To this end, it was decided to use email messages to motivate the entire cohort of Foundation students. This was done with the hope that this would get them to take their studies seriously and so invest in their academic identities.

Initially, the motivational messages were sent out twice a month. This would be after a test or when it was sensed that students needed their spirits to be lifted. During the first semester of 2008, a few students wrote back saying that they liked the messages because it gave them encouragement. This prompted the sending out of messages weekly in the second semester. During the June and November examination period, one email message was sent out to wish students good luck for their examinations.

The nature of the motivational email messages had two aspects to it. The first aspect, which was usually never more than a sentence or two, was a personal message from me offering a few words of encouragement together with a gentle prompting of students to reflect on their academic behaviour. The second aspect took the form of an email attachment, usually a PowerPoint slideshow, which narrated brief stories of people overcoming difficult situations in their lives. The attachments consisted of pictures with annotated text and accompanying soothing music. Each attachment emphasised the importance of staying true to your dream by working hard. The attachments also emphasised the need for a person to learn from setbacks in order to move closer to achieving a dream. These attachments were sent to me by friends and family. I found them inspirational and motivating and thus decided to send them to my students.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section I present and discuss three themes that emanated from the data analysis of the semi-structured interviews with participants. These themes reflect the extent to which the motivational email messages developed participants' academic identities in mathematics. The messages helped participants form new actual and designated identities; in the process aiding participants' acquisition of academic practices and behaviours valued by academia thereby highlighting the use of motivational email messages as a learning tool within higher education. Further, the

themes reveal how participants experienced the academic culture of the university.

Persistence

Participants explained that the email motivations helped them to persist with their studies.

The message that was there [in my email] was helpful coz when you think of giving up coz like during exams with all the stresses but then if we have that kind of motivation it is much better (Nomonde).

The motivations and solutions ya coz like at some point you feel like eish like you realize that you are drowning... ...And then you go to your emails and you realise that there are messages that encourage you then you feel better than you were (Thulani).

The stress associated with their academic workload and the impending examinations caused anxiety for these students, making participants feel that they could not succeed with their university studies. The stress associated with their academic workload mirrors the feelings of Foundation students in Keke's (2008) study. Other participants spoke of their disillusionment with their university studies as a result of their poor performance on tests. These experiences filled participants with negativity towards their studies, causing them to construct negative actual identities, such as giving up on their studies.

Through their engagement with the email messages, participants' negativity was replaced with motivation to persevere with their studies, allowing them to construct new, empowering actual identities in their study of mathematics.

You see like when you you have read the motivation most of the time you feel like as if eish I can go back in my room and do something else (pause) because what is being said in the motivation, it is what I needed to hear (pause) but I was not sure about it...(Khumalo).

For myself if I asked myself where I am right now and the advice [from the email

motivations], what am I prepared to do for instance if I got a problem and the next question am I willing to make a difference or just continue the way things are right now (Moe).

Instantly it doesn't do anything but when you need them 'cos you feel down or the marks are not so great, you have something to go to or if you fail, you still have someone to go to (Se).

The email messages seemingly got participants to refocus their energies on their studies, making them want to succeed in their academic endeavours. The email messages prompted participants to question their learning strategies and to think about taking on alternative learning strategies. The participants' comments above reveal that the email messages not only rejuvenated their focus on their studies, but engaged participants in self-reflection. The messages helped participants take stock of themselves thereby forcing them to question their actions.

Through their self-reflection, participants began to make decisions about their learning. By investing in themselves, students engage and take ownership of their academic identity (de Kadt & Mathonsi, 2003; McKenna, 2004). In effect the messages engaged participants' identities, moving participants beyond their feelings of self-doubt, prompting them to confront their academic ways of being and grapple with their emerging academic identity. Through this confrontation with their inner thoughts and feelings, participants opened themselves to the possibility of further developing their academic ways of being by envisioning and following positive designated identities.

Psychosocial Support

Participants felt that the motivational email messages gave them a psychosocial lifeline. The messages made them feel connected to, and supported by, the university:

It makes you feel happy coz like if you going through a rough time and someone says you are not alone may be there are people who care about you and maybe you working hard, just have to go through your work then you see that eish I'm not that bad. Maybe you can look at yourself the other way round rather than finding it difficult and stressful

(Thulani).

Participants' feelings of loneliness and worry were replaced with feelings of composure and connectedness. Participants took solace in feeling cared for, giving them the confidence to regain belief in themselves. Their renewed mental and emotional fortitude helped participants engage with mathematics, allowing them to see that they could understand the work.

Numerous studies show how the literacy practices expected in the academy can seem confusing and can even lead to feelings of exclusion (for example, de Kadt and Mathonsi, 2003; Lillis 2003). Students may come to feel that their ways of seeing the world and of reading, writing, and being within it are not valued by the university. They may also become aware that new ways are expected of them but be unclear as to what these could be (McKenna 2004). By feeling connected to the university through the person of their lecturer, participants were able to find a space to consider these anxieties, even though such a consideration was admittedly difficult to articulate. The psychosocial connections provided by the motivational email messages helped the students to engage with the target academic identity.

Ja and for the motivations I think they really helped cos like they give us more moral to know that like everyone as you always said that everyone can do mathematics (Tokyo).

By facilitating participants' scripting of new actual and designated identities, the email messages helped participants believe that they could achieve their academic goals. This belief gave participants the confidence to engage with the study of mathematics.

Other participants explained that living away from their families during their academic studies prevented them from freely accessing their family's support:

...some of us are very far away from their homes therefore we do need some sort of motivation (Nomonde).

'cos now even I did badly in first semester but now with the [emails] and coming to consultations [with the lecturer] I know that it helps, there's someone there to help me when I've got problems 'cos I'm not at home. At home they always supported me (Lu).

Nomonde and Lu both illustrate the feelings of being untethered from their familiar support networks when they need it most on entering the foreign culture of the university. The personal correspondence with their lecturer provided some sense of connection to what could be perceived as an intimidating institution.

The email motivational messages provided participants with 'somebody' to go to for support, and this 'somebody' was a member of the university thereby acting as a mentor. The email messages replaced their feelings of self-doubt, isolation and loneliness with feelings of support and guidance.

It does encourage you, does encourage you 'cos you know you are never alone, there's always someone there (Lu).

There are times when you need them [email motivations]...Yes, some of them [email motivations] I print it out and hang them on the wall (Se).

The messages gave participants something tangible to hold onto, to support them and to guide them. Given students' feelings of alienation and isolation within higher education institutions in South Africa (de Kadt and Mathonsi, 2003; Department of Education, 2008), the motivational email messages helped students feel part of the university. The feelings of isolation and loneliness which initially formed negative actual identities within participants were replaced with feelings of support and belonging. This allowed participants to write new actual and designated identities for themselves, which in turn facilitated their acquisition of more positive learning strategies that are synonymous with good academic behaviour.

In feeling psychosocially supported by, and connected to, the university, participants began to see themselves as students of the university. The email motivations created a climate of psychosocial support for participants which allowed them to create new learning trajectories for themselves. The learning climate has been acknowledged as a factor that affects student learning (Downey, 2008; Killen, 2007). By seeing themselves as students of the university - fledgling members of this new community - participants identified with the academic practices that are valued by the university. In effect, the email messages spoke to participants' psychosocial needs thereby opening participants up to the possibility of adopting some of the academic practices valued by the university.

Student-lecturer bond

Related to the previous two themes, is the theme of the student-lecturer bond. Participants explained that the motivational email messages helped them see that their lecturer cared for them.

... errrr 'cos sometimes we tend to forget what we came here for, but when we see lecturers who are, who, who see the potential in us and who keep reminding us what we came here for it's nice just to know that you know lecturers are there for you (Siphamandla).

And then with the motivations I said, I always tell my friends later I think Mr Y got a sense about the SFP students 'cos every time we are down and about to say it's enough of maths and I'm not doing it and you get this motivation and you ask yourself okay can you read our minds at times? Now I realise that [pause] it keeps us going (Tsepo).

While we have indicated that students often battle with adopting what seems to them to be mysterious academic practices, we should also acknowledge that they may be more concerned with forging new social identities (McKenna, 2004). Some participants indicated that they were distracted by the social freedoms associated with student university life. These distractions shifted participants' focus away from their studies. Other participants felt like giving up studying mathematics. The email messages

helped participants refocus their efforts on their studies and, in so doing they developed a bond with their lecturer.

Through the development of this bond with their lecturer, participants felt motivated and confident to succeed with their studies.

It creates a more relaxable, it's like ya I respect you as an adult but errrrrrrr it don't just see you as someone who is far, who just came to do his work and teach me and then go away, you know what I'm saying, it's very different. It's that special relationship, it's that this man you can trust you can consult, he is there to help you, he cares. So that you get motivated, like say you, this man is putting so much work on me, why am I not doing, returning the favour(SSK SD-4000).

As the above participant explained, the student-lecturer bond helped him see that he was not 'far' from his lecturer. In other words, by reducing the social distance between student and lecturer, the email messages helped forge and strengthen the student-lecturer bond for the participant.

Through the development of this bond, participants saw that their lecturer was interested in them and their futures. The interview data indicates that this belief in them by a member of the university community played an important role in their motivation to work.

At least now we, we come for consultations we always know that okay I'll get motivated, I'll go try a new idea, try different ways of doing things, I'll see where it takes me (Lu).

Students are notorious for not using support structures made available to them. In this case there was an excellent uptake of consultations with the lecturer. I would argue that the personal communication by email had forged a relationship between the student and lecturer that is impossible to forge in the context of a mathematics lecture. On the basis of this relationship, these students felt comfortable and safe enough to schedule consultations where mathematics problems could be worked through

individually. Participants started to use the help that was available to them and were willing to risk engaging with new strategies of approaching their studies. Participants were increasingly open to exploring new academic ways of being. While difficult to attribute a causal relationship between the emails and the 81% module pass rate achieved by students in the November 2008 examination, at the very least the pass rate is an indicator of students' willingness to invest themselves in the study of mathematics.

CONCLUSION: WHAT DOES THIS SIGNAL FOR HIGHER EDUCATION?

The data presented in this article gives a glimpse into Foundation students' experience of university; signalling students' need for multiple layers of support during their studies. Foundation students are concerned about their university studies but often fall prey to the stresses associated with their academic workload. Feeling vulnerable and isolated they become disillusioned with their studies, filling their thoughts with negativity.

However, through the use of personal communication, in this case email correspondence, participants rekindled their desire and determination to succeed with their university studies. The email messages provided participants with the emotional strength to persist with their studies. The messages provided them with psychosocial support thereby allowing participants to forge a bond with their lecturer. In effect the email messages opened participants to new academic ways of being, allowing them to risk engagement with new learning strategies by facilitating their construction of new actual and designated identities.

Email motivation messages can be used to foster a bond with students and so contribute towards developing a pedagogy of caring by higher education practitioners. Through a pedagogy of caring, higher education practitioners can reduce the social and cultural gap between student and lecturer, and

student and university. Through the reduction of this cultural gap, higher education practitioners can begin to provide students with epistemological access. Through a pedagogy of caring, universities may become sites of social and cultural dialogue,

understanding and respect; and so work towards socially inclusive educational practices.

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