MCAST Foundation Students’ Journey of the ‘Self’ through the Community Social Responsibility Unit: A Micro-ethnographic Approach

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Abstract: Even though to date there are several studies which have dealt with the theme of self-awareness, only a fraction of them have investigated whether, and when, students deem self-exploration-related curriculum to be relevant. Thus, this micro-ethnographic study attempts to address this research gap by acquiring insights into how foundation students, most of whom happen to come from challenging backgrounds, are influenced by self-awareness sessions presented through the Community Social Responsibility (CSR) unit. The research additionally focuses upon the point at which foundation students recognise the curriculum being offered during such sessions as relevant. The initial primary data for this qualitative study was acquired by means of micro-ethnography. The analytic memos extracted through an iterative-inductive approach served as a basis for the compilation of specific guiding questions, which were later used to conduct a number of semi-structured interviews. These were followed up by a final focus-group. The analysis of the data indicates that a student perceives curriculum and its content as relevant, specifically upon recognition of its utility value. Recognising the experience as useful gave the sessions appeal and augmented the students’ will to be present. Yet it also resulted that the students’ state of mind, which is conditioned by their emotional state, is a major influencing factor. Emotions, which actively influence one’s interpretation and approach towards an experience, may be externally induced, yet they can also be of a latent nature, lodged at a more subconscious level. The findings of this research suggest that to instil and increase relevance, the educational experience at MCAST Foundation Programmes requires to be perceived as both valuable and enjoyable by the students.

Keywords: self-awareness; education; relevance; micro-ethnography; vulnerable students; VET education

Introduction

Reflective learning presents an effective teaching and learning approach, that promotes self-awareness and the ideal transference of learning to the real-world context (Kember et al. 2000). The ability to engage in reflective practices ought to be cultivated as early as possible in educational and training opportunities (Calvert, Crowe, and Grenyer 2017).

Furman, Coyne, and Negi (2008) state that students carry an intrinsic capability of experiencing self-reflection. Logically, the educational journey would be even more enriching if it had to provide opportunities for self-reflection, yet this ought to be done within a safe and controlled environment (Ennis and Mc Cauley 2002).
The Community Social Responsibility Unit

Seeking to offer the necessary groundwork to prepare students for the constantly evolving needs and requirements of the industry, the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) offers a range of courses, which are specifically devised to equip students with the technical skills to meet the requirements of their educational journey. Through the provision of the Foundation Certificate courses, which are offered at Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) Level 2, in addition to the vocational content, students are also exposed to knowledge related to other fundamental skills. The latter are generally covered through several compulsory units, internally recognised as *key skills*. At MCAST, self-awareness reflective opportunities are devised to be majorly offered through the Community Social Responsibility (CSR) key skill unit.

Objectives of the study

This study aims to provide further insight about the ideal conditions required for MCAST foundation students to engage and develop self-reflective practices. This research aims to focus on the following overarching question and the branching peripheral questions:

What is the relevance and impact of self-exploration related curriculum present within the Community Social Responsibility (CSR) unit upon MCAST foundation students?

1. How are foundation students influenced by the content being offered within the CSR unit?
2. When do students recognise the curriculum being offered within the CSR unit as relevant?

Literature Review

In the porch before the Temple of Apollo's (Delphi) small chamber, one can still admire the inscriptions on a column—"Know thyself". The ancient Greeks appear to recognise the 'self' as inherently reflexive, meaning that it reflects back upon itself. Those who know about themselves reflect upon what they know about themselves.

To facilitate the understanding of the generation of a subjective perception of the ‘self’, this research anchored upon two specific theoretical frameworks. Warin and Muldoon’s (2009) Three Dimensions of the Self are based on the idea that the *self* is what constantly holds together “disparate self-experiences” through an ongoing narrative (2009: 293). The self, being a product of “perception is, in the end, a cognitive event. What we see is not simply a function of what we take from the world, but what we make of it.” (Eisner 2002: xii). Recognising that one’s self is an idea generated through a subjective perception, this research refers to Eisner’s (2002) theory behind the meaning of representation, which describes the act of “transforming the contents of consciousness within the constraints and affordances of a material” (2002: 6).

The Three Dimensions of ‘Self-awareness’

“Self-awareness is perhaps best defined as the availability of, or ability to maintain and expand a rich, differentiated story of self.”
(Warin and Muldoon 2009: 293)

Recent research on self-awareness has brought forth theoretical approaches which do not “reduce the psychic to the social and cultural, and vice versa”, but recognise their ‘interweavement’ (Lucey et al. 2003: 286). This shift towards an interdisciplinary approach, which is described by Hall (2006) as the “suturing of the psychic and the discursive” (2006: 17), sees the focus on the reflexivity between the self and society. This phenomenon can also be witnessed in studies based on sociocultural approaches to identity (Cole 1992; Rogoff 1989), and research based on the analysis of the development of identity within communities of practice (Giddens 1991; Wenger 1999).

Fundamentally, these studies indicate that self-construction and the sociocultural context in which this process unfolds are interrelated, as outlined in Figure 2.1, and fully explained in sections 2.2.1-2.2.3. Through their exponential research, Warin and Muldoon (2009) collated and reduced the theoretical shifts in both psychological and sociological approaches into the “three dimensions of self-awareness” and argue that “it is important to note that these are interdependent categories that represent continua of emphasis rather than polarities: a theory can be weighted more to either end of each dimension” (2009: 291).

The following diagram provides a visual representation which aims to assist the reader with conceptualising Warin and Muldoon’s (2009) three dimensions of self-awareness:

![Diagram showing the three dimensions of self-awareness](image)

**Figure 1: The three dimensions of self-awareness (based on Warin and Muldoon 2009)**

**Individual - Social Dimension**

Vygotsky’s ideas on the social nature of identity construction sparked an analysis of the culture of individualism in schooling (Hargreaves 1982). This saw a shift in emphasis towards...
the intertwined development of the personal and the social context (Mead 1934). Mason (2004) inquires “whether and how relational and individualistic discourses and practices are interwoven” (2004: 163). Rather than being dismissed, the “grasp of individualism” ought to be understood through its exploration in a range of contexts and scenarios (2004: 163).

In outlining this sequence of theoretical relation between the individual and the social, Warin and Muldoon (2009) argue that self-awareness shares a direct link with social-awareness, and hence indicate that the act of self-exploration requires its conduction within a social context.

**Multiple – Unitary Dimension**

Research recognises the experience of different versions of the self within its own construct, as it appears to diversify according to the social context (Henriques et al. 1988; Hollway 1989; Weedon 1987). The experience of multiple shades of the self is described by Bauman (2000) and Holland et al. (1998) through the terms fluidity and liquidity in instances such as the application of changes and revisions to biographical narratives or improvisations.

Through pinpointing and highlighting texts based upon the experience of different versions of the ‘self’ within its own construct, Warin and Muldoon (2009) state that the self is in essence an attempt at uniting numerous versions of itself. Rather than a constant, the self is irregular, as it undergoes constant change.

**Historical – Present Dimension**

For a self to exist it “must be encoded as story elements” (Munro 1998: 6). Theorists brought together time, memory, and communication in an attempt to explain identity via story telling. Whilst highlighting that the self requires itself to be presented within a sociocultural context, Rose (1997) posits that “we use the stories of self that our culture makes available to us” (1997: 237). In fact, recognising that an individual constructs the idea of oneself and the ones around him, Giddens (1991) suggests that identity is the result of an ongoing story of the self.

Warin and Muldoon (2009), stress that an illusion of consistency results through the repetition of certain characteristics derived from constantly recounting stories of the self. Bridging with Frosh’s (1991) annotations of an ever-changing identity being experienced momentarily and provisionally, Warin and Muldoon (2009) state that the self is a “construction which draws together fragments of history, integrating them into a coherent story” (2009: 293). The emergence of the idea of the self being developed over a span of time may be recognised as an actively produced self-narrated story, being composed in the present moment, through the influence of past occurrences.

Grasping a foothold on Gidden’s conceptualisation of the self as the “capacity to keep a particular narrative going” (1991: 54), imbued with a liquid and fluid nature (Bauman 2000; Holland et al. 1998), as it interweaves (Lucey et al., 2003) with its social surroundings, Warin and Muldoon (2009) indicate that the self is not a regular constant, but rather a concept which has the role of “holding together disparate self-experiences” (2009: 293) through acquiring a balance of the aforementioned dimensions.

**The Meaning of Representation**

Elliot Wayne Eisner, a professor of art and education, embarked on the quest of dispelling the idea that “the arts are somehow intellectually undemanding, emotive rather than
reflective operations done with the hand somehow unattached to the head” (Eisner 2002: xi).

In his book *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, Eisner described the process of representation, which may be observed by means of the following visual representation:

![Figure 2: The process of representation (Adapted from Eisner 2002)](image)

The cognitive process initiates with the generation of an idea or an image. These may be immortalised through their transition into a physical form onto material. *Inscription* sees the contents of an abstract consciousness being translated and preserved in a durable form. Due to this shift towards a concrete representation, an inscribed idea or image would now enable the possibility of interaction and dialogue. The exposure and interaction with a concrete representation unlocks the opportunity of the enhancement of the *inscription* through the process of *editing*. Eisner describes editing, the second cognitive function of representation, as the “process of working on inscriptions so they achieve the quality, the precision, and the power their creator desires” (2002: 6). The process of editing transitions *work* into *art* by focusing on the relationship of elements and attending to details, similarly to how a rough draft is polished into a smoother version. Transitioning from an abstract to a concrete form, consciousness can additionally become public though *communication*, which Eisner remarks that is “taken too much for granted” (2002: 7) due to its natural process. This third cognitive function of representation introduces an external factor to the individual, that is, the other. An idea or image which has translated into public form, will now be interpreted and attributed meaning through a reality which is external to its creation, and thus unfamiliar to the origin of the idea itself. Eisner explains that individuals develop in part through interactions with others, thus relationships at their best may be identified as symbiotic. This can be observed in the social aspect of the educational process, which enables opportunities for individuals to develop symbiotic relationships with others, both through similarities and differences. Representation enables individuals to share the contents of one’s consciousness with others. This act of sharing is in itself a profound form
of communication. “Whether in music or the visual arts, whether through poetry or dance, whether through essays or acting” (Eisner 2002: 239), the arts offer a means to engage in a deeper form of communication. The fourth cognitive function of representation is based on discovery, which generates the element of surprise. Eisner explains that through the act of representation, constant opportunities for the discovery of new ideas are provided. Rather than merely imposing one’s thoughts upon material, the element of surprise experienced through discovery and invention provides the individual with the opportunity of growth. As discovery innately offers a source of satisfaction, learning is most likely to occur through the element of surprise. What is learned can then give rise to different and more advanced problems, which can also be addressed in pursuit of growth.

Eisner argues that the cognitive process behind the act of representation is not linear, but “more of a conversation” (2002: 7). Through the process of representation, the work itself seems to develop its own voice and calibrates the direction of the individual, who at times is constrained to surrender to the demands of progress. It is the paths that originally were uncharted, which prompt the element of surprise. These offer tempting opportunities and possibilities which might end up being pursued by the individual, upon the endless journey of searching for meaning.

The Overlap in Theoretical Frameworks

Warin and Muldoon’s (2009) three dimensions of self-awareness concept proclaims that the idea of the self is the result of an ongoing storyline which is constantly being influenced by the presence of all the content composing the surrounding environment. This automatically marks the relevance of the sociocultural context since it naturally hosts the individual. Claiming that individuals develop in part through interactions with others, a similar focus on the social factor can also be observed in Eisner’s (2002) process of representation, where he identifies communication as a means of sharing one’s consciousness with the surroundings.

Focusing on the arts, Eisner states that the representation of an idea sees the transformation between an abstract to a concrete form, with the intention of sharing and interacting with the contents of the consciousness. “Children and adolescents engaged in imagemaking, whether in music or the visual arts, whether through poetry or dance, whether through essays or acting, are engaged in a potentially profound form of communication” (Eisner 2002: 239). Eisner explains that communication patterns are fundamental for a culture to thrive and grow. Reminiscent of Lucey et al.’s (2003) interweavement between society and the individual, the individual needs a culture, and the culture needs the individual. Eisner suggests that “we develop, in part, by responding to the contributions of others, and in turn we provide others with material to which they respond” (2002: 7). This statement complements Warin and Muldoon’s idea of the ‘self’ which is being constantly influenced by the other, both through similarities and differences.

The nature of students’ mental representations of their abilities and performance drives the development of their self-concept (Peiffer, Ellwart and Preckel 2020). In an academic context, the strengthening of a student’s self-concept could be empowered by the provision of self-reflection opportunities. Nevertheless, this ought to be experienced within a safe and contained environment (Ennis and Mc Cauley 2002).

Research Methodology

Keeping Warin and Muldoon’s (2009) and Eisner’s (2002) theoretical frameworks as a north star, the researcher opted to conduct a micro-ethnography. Bryman (2012) explains
that ethnographic research encapsulates both the method of collection and production of data. Although due to a time limitation factor a full-scale ethnography was not possible, focusing upon specific aspects of the topic being investigated made it possible to carry out a micro-ethnography (Wolcott 1990b).

This qualitative study saw the researcher’s immersion in a classroom social setting for a set period of time. Apart from active interaction, this approach enabled the researcher to acquire observations of student behaviour within a closed context, thus developing an understanding of the classroom culture of the participants, and its influence upon the development of the self. Through an iterative-inductive approach, during the micro-ethnography, the researcher was circulating between actions of observation, participation, listening, writing, reading, and reflecting. This led to an extensive and ongoing analysis out of which the researcher extracted general assertions from the specifics of the acquired data (O’Reilly 2012).

Data Collection – Micro-ethnography

The rationale behind the chosen research approach was to observe and interact with participants in their academic habitat during the process of self-exploration, triggered through their weekly CSR sessions. Being meticulous in the phase of data gathering would build a solid foundation, in turn incrementing the chances for the generation of a substantial analysis.

Observation and Field Notes

The initial primary data was acquired in the form of field notes, generated during a total of six one-hour CSR session observations. During the sessions, the researcher took an overt, active participative approach. Whilst applying a similar approach in his ethnographical research on commercial cleaning, Ryan (2009) discovered that his willingness to assist cleaners with some of their tasks increased his credibility. In return, this led to their preparedness to be interviewed by him. Likewise, the researcher’s involvement and participation during the CSR sessions assisted in securing trust as the participants perceived an elevated level of commitment, which in turn enhanced credibility and prompted further collaboration by the students.

Although it can prove to be convenient to take field notes right away, wandering around with paper and pen in hand, and jotting down notes on a continuous basis presents the imminent risk of making participants self-conscious. The researcher opted to compile mental notes (Lofland J. and Lofland L. 1995; Sanjek 1990) during the observation sessions. These mentally imprinted annotations were later jotted down into notes, after which they were converted into full field notes, by the end of each observation day. During the conversion of the field notes, the researcher would go over the brief and compact mental annotations and expand them by adding “some personal reflections about one’s own feelings about occasions and people” (Bryman 2012: 447). This process would also be accompanied by the encryption of data into analytic memos, which are described by Miles et al. (2009) as “brief or extended narrative that documents the researcher’s reflections and thinking processes about the data” (2009: 88). Being an integral aspect of data analysis, this process assisted in maintaining a reflexive exercise in relation to the ongoing fieldwork.

Semi-structured Interviews

Kuper, Reeves, and Levinson (2008) argue that qualitative research allows the researcher to generate data of qualitative value through the compilation of inquisitive questions targeting the exploration of the participants’ behaviour and reality. Through the formulation
of analytic memos upon the acquired full field notes, the researcher closed down on a fairly clearer focus from the more generic research topic. Sharpening the focus of interest led to the formulation of specific research questions. This move gave the researcher an additional incentive to opt for the conduction of semi-structured interviews, with the aim of addressing more specific issues (Bryman 2012).

**Focus Groups**

The participants for the focus group were the same ones with whom the semi-structured interviews were earlier conducted. The researcher opted for this decision as the participants “are known to have been involved in a particular situation” (Merton et al. 1956: 3) and thus were asked about their views and opinions.

Bryman (2012) discusses that there are diverse approaches and questioning strategies towards moderating focus group sessions. Whilst adopting a rather open-ended approach during prompting moments, the researcher simultaneously instilled focus and structure through the guiding questions, which were based upon themes elicited through the earlier conducted thematic analysis.

**Thematic Analysis of Data**

As a tool to elicit meaning from the acquired primary data, this study utilised a thematic analysis approach, as it is also a common method utilised by ethnographers and other qualitative field researchers to analyse their data (Bailey 2018).

Conforming with common approaches towards data analysis in ethnographical research, both topical and overarching themes (Bailey 2018) were identified through the application of an iterative-inductive approach. This is described by O’Reilly (2012: 180) as the “practice of doing research, informed by a sophisticated inductivism, in which data collection, analysis and writing up are not discrete phases, but inextricably linked.” By applying this approach, rather than in a linear format, the data analysis of this study occurred in a spiral and ongoing process. General assertions from the specifics of the acquired primary data were elicited. Through acts of reflexion, the researcher’s analytic choices were constantly informed by what was being discovered through the stages of the research process.

**Coding Cycle and Themes’ Identification**

Initial coding began during the early stages of the micro-ethnography, under the form of descriptive markers featured within the full field notes (Bailey 2018; Brewer 2000). The coding underwent a build-up process through the application of a cycle of code drafting, memo writing, and code refining. Through the process of multiple coding cycles, code categories were refined (Madden 2017). At the end of each coding cycle, the researcher purposely distanced himself from the research to refresh his perspective towards the understanding of the primary data. This process led to the identification of key themes, which conveyed the manifested (apparent) meaning of data, alongside its ‘latent’ (underlying) meanings (Saldaña 2011).

The distinction between Bailey’s (2018) topical and overarching themes is a result of conceptualisation, which sees the transference of codes from concrete actions into the abstract form of concepts and ideas. Topical themes summed up specific phenomena observed during the fieldwork, whilst overarching themes encapsulated the ideas and concepts that the aforementioned specific observations suggested. Engagement in conceptualisation gave more leeway to the researcher to instil connections to selections of theory.
Limitations of the Research Methodology

Due to logistical constraints, only a singular group of students was selected for participation in the realisation of this research. This choice has inevitably constrained both the elicited data and the consecutive findings to be extracted from one specific specimen. This suggests a potential distinct reality, implicating that the findings might not necessarily apply to a wider and more general scenario.

Due to imminent time and logistical constraints, the researcher was not able to conduct a full-scale ethnography, as these usually require a long period of time on the field being studied. The micro-ethnography was conducted during the initial weeks of the academic year. This implies that, in essence, the raw data is solely focused upon a context which excludes the ongoing development of group dynamics in a classroom over a stretch of time.

Research Findings

Introducing the Perception of Relevance Model

Following the analysis of all the primary data, this study generated the ‘Perception of Relevance’ model (Figure 3), which illustrates the relations between all the identified themes. Figure 3 provides an interpretation of the student self-exploration experience during CSR sessions, and its respective influence upon the development of the self. The results also bring forth valuable arguments based on the exploration and analysis of factors which determine the perception of relevance towards the content presented within the classroom during CSR sessions held with the selected group cohort.

![Figure 3: Perception of Relevance Model](image.png)
The experience of relevance may be conveniently grasped and interpreted upon placing a closer examination of its context, in this specific scenario, being curriculum addressing the self. The researcher is suggesting that the factors at play may be viewed as influenceable and somewhat controllable; nevertheless, there’s a distinction between the affinity of what may be influenced through internal, versus external sources.

**Understanding the Patterns**

The students’ inclination within the classroom appeared to positively influence their willpower towards engagement during the sessions. Furthermore, the students’ relatability to the circumstances presented to them seemed to place an appeal upon the experience. Both student inclination and relatability levels appear to be directly related to the students’ utility value of the said experience.

The presence and frequency of obstacles placed a direct impact upon student attention. Obstacles may by introduced through an external source (eg. distractions via smartphones, the presence of a loud student, a knock on the door), yet they may also be present internally (eg. bearing a specific condition, lacking specific skills, language barriers). Additionally, the students’ needs appeared to be paramount towards their capacity of making sense of an experience. Student needs were identified to pertain to both personal, as well as contextual levels. Successfully addressing student needs evidently appeared to positively influence their level of trust. Both obstacles and needs were observed to inter-relate with the students’ state of mind, hence their emotional experience of their perceived reality.

**Inclination and Willpower**

Through their behaviour and interaction, some participants were observed to be more interested, curious, and attentive. Apart from being open to challenges and new experiences, it emerged that the participants experienced an overall feeling of looking forward towards attending the CSR sessions.

*It’s something which challenges you to do new stuff, to try out new experiences.*

**Participant A**

*As a lesson, it interests me – also, when we speak about ourselves it really helps us to get to know each other. I enjoy it.*

**Participant B**

Participant B is highly interested by the content as well as the manner it is presented during the sessions. The sharing of experiences is in itself a deep mode of communication (Eisner 2002).

**Relatability and Appeal**

The content and how it was presented to the students seemed to influence its impact. During one of the earlier sessions, through the use of visuals, the researcher disclosed information about himself to the participants. Participant B had initially been noted to appear uninterested and disengaged, yet as soon as a specific visual (a manga character) was displayed in class, the student appeared to switch behaviour. The student was observed to suddenly sit up straight, gazing at the visual.

*...you inspire us, as well as your own inspiration. You had showed us a character from Berserk.*

**Participant B**
Upon being prompted with familiar information, Participant B appeared to instantly relate to the content, and the session suddenly became significantly appealing. During a later session, once again the researcher brought forward a personal story, this time recounting his own growth and learning through his motorcycle restoration project. Images displaying the various phases of the restoration were displayed in class.

You told us about restoring your motorbike... first you mentioned that you had no idea, and that then you started watching videos... it's like you can learn so much, even if you start from nothing.

Participant B

Although participant B lacks the background in understanding the concept behind mechanics and electronics and spraying and polishing, the student seemed to highly relate to the story, and was able to recount it with specific detail. The key factor which triggered the student in relating to the story of the motorcycle restoration is tied to the emphasis of pursuing a project on the sole basis of self-belief; since this fuelled the student's subjective dreams.

Needs and Trust

Participants seemed to experience specific needs, some of which were related to the context surrounding them, whilst others were of a more individual nature.

Participant A always used to sit at the rear-end of the classroom. When questioned about this during the semi-structured interview, the participant answered:

I tend to hold back in comparison with others. I need to be roped in to participate.

Participant A

On the other hand, rather than being put right under the spotlight, Participant D remarked that:

...I would always prefer if you came beside me.

Participant D

Displaying a less introverted nature, some other students did not appear to experience any problems with passing on their contributions in class. Nevertheless, the accompanying needs were recorded to be of a different nature:

...to be around my friends... maybe they make me feel happy. ...I feel more comfortable around them than around anyone else.

Participant C

In the original version of The Hierarchy of Needs Five-Stage model, Maslow (1943) suggests that an individual experiences needs of safety, and consecutively love and belongingness. This suggests that stability and interpersonal relationships place a degree of influence upon behaviour.

Participants of this study appeared to experience needs, ranging from inclusion and encouragement to the provision of adequate time and space. The provision of honest and suitable attention was fundamental in achieving an enhanced perception of trust. This in turn brought forth an increase in disclosure of meaningful personal experiences, consecutively strengthening relationships between the students, as well as the researcher.
As trust levels started to strengthen, a stronger sense of belonging within the classroom developed. Relationships worthy of trust appear to be the initial step in augmenting and extending students’ experiences (Ennis and Mc Cauley 2002).

**Obstacles and Attention**

When conducting the micro-ethnography, the researcher observed that participants seemed to experience a selection of hindrances. Distractions caused either by louder students, interruptions, and the occasional presence of mobile phones were categorised as external obstacles, as these typically stem from surroundings. On the other hand, language barriers, energy levels, physical, and cognitive conditions were grouped under internal obstacles, as these were observed to stem from within.

> When I use my mobile phone, I tend to get distracted...
> **Participant C**

Even though generally highly participative and engaged, this student was observed to make use of a smart device on several occasions during the duration of the micro-ethnography. In reaction to this, another student in an adjacent seat would also be observed reaching for their smart device, suggesting some kind of compliance to the behaviour. As the students would engage with their smart devices, both their presence and participation were observed to wane.

As a counteraction, the researcher invested in enhancing the relatability factor, thus presenting the students with a more appealing experience, which consecutively augmented their inclination and will to participate. Contribution would at times be of a more in-depth nature, and this would in turn strengthen the levels of trust within the group, fulfilling the need for safety and comfort.

**The Perception of Relevance – Utility Value and State of Mind**

On the quest of strengthening the relatability factor within the sessions, the researcher sought to question the usefulness of the content to be presented to the students.

> During one of the first lessons we were drawing, describing what we like, that was really enjoyable!
> **Participant B**

This student perceived the session in discussion as relevant since in this individual circumstance, drawing is subjectively perceived to bear a high utility value—“it’s like this is my dream job” (Participant B). Knowing that the session involved drawing was very appealing to the student, thus naturally relatable. Eisner (2002) discusses that the way one chooses to represent abstract thinking has a profound effect upon one’s mental life. This happens “because people tend to seek what they are able to represent... the tools you work with influence what you are likely to think about” (Eisner 2002: 8).

Participant B is capable of utilising art as a tool for representation, thus this experience bore a higher utility value. This combination of events also led to a boost in willpower and inclination towards participation. Engaging in the act heightened the student’s focus and attention. Sharing and discussing the artistic product enhanced the perceived levels of trust with the rest of the audience. Throughout, and also in conclusion of the highlighted session, the student experienced joy, which suggests that the student was in an optimal state of mind, which in turn enabled an evident enhanced reception and engagement.
The perception of relevance model, which was synthesised through this research, suggests that relevance is denoted by an experience’s subjective utility value and a diverse combination of emotions echoing within an individual’s reality. Keeping in mind the liquid and fluid nature of the self (Bauman 2000; Holland et al. 1998), it is worthwhile highlighting that although of a subjective quality, both utility value and emotions are always under the active influence of the surrounding environment and the accompanying circumstances (Warin and Muldoon 2009).

White (1995) recommends the provision of a safe place for all students within any educational context. Through the active investment in relatability factors and the constant steering towards meeting any present needs, the educator can still influence a student’s experience of utility value and emotions.

**Conclusion**

Through the quest for understanding the relevance and impact of self-exploration-related curriculum present within the CSR unit, the researcher brought forth specific insights on conditions which promote an ideal learning environment for MCAST foundation students towards achieving an enhanced engagement and development of self-reflective practices.

*The Basis for a Strong Foundation*

Hailing from challenging backgrounds, foundation students have specific needs which need to be prioritised and satisfied before they are able to fully concentrate upon their academic path.

Maslow’s five-stage hierarchy model suggests that on the journey of achieving *self-actualisation*, an individual needs to satisfy a number of needs. At the bottom of the hierarchy Maslow (1943) identifies the most *basic needs*, which encompass the physiological needs, followed by the need for safety and security. The hierarchy proceeds towards the identification of *psychological needs*, which are described as the need for love and belonging, and also the need of a solid self-esteem. Upon satisfying these needs, the individual will advance towards attempting to satisfy the need for self-fulfilment.

*Active Communication and Sharing*

During the micro-ethnography, it was observed that heightened attention was most generally present during moments featuring the sharing of information of a more personal nature.

Eisner (2002) argues that communication transitions thoughts from an abstract to a more concrete form, thus making them perceptible to others. As interactions with others also contribute to the development of individuals, supporting the growth of relationships in the classroom can be highly beneficial in the social aspect of the educational process.

As participants engaged in communicative practices, a sense of familiarity developed during the CSR sessions. Making a specific reference to schools, White (1995) posits that these are fundamental places where students encounter active opportunities to instil trusting relationships with classmates and teachers, thus naturally students learn to forge trustworthy connections that go beyond family.
Instilling Trust and Safety

Heath and McLaughlin (1993) and White (1995) argue that students hailing from challenging backgrounds appear to find it logical to move towards creating classroom communities with levels of distrust. This reality is related to the absence of experiencing caring relationships (Noddings 1992). In turn, as outlined in Maslow's (1943) original hierarchy of needs model, the absence of caring relationships augments the need towards satisfying feelings of love and belonging.

It is essential to acknowledge that developing trust in situations where its history is limited or even inexistant can be rather challenging. Due to this reason, educational institutions ought to provide students with a safe place where they could form trusting relationships, to further consolidate a basis for their educational journey (White 1995). An environment which promotes the development of trust is best created in scenarios where both students and teachers can work and interact in a safe environment over a prolonged period. By successfully doing so, feelings of respect and acknowledgement of the authenticity and competence of one another are cultivated (Hoy and Kupersmith 1985).

As the needs of participants started to be gradually met, the perceived utility value of the CSR sessions experienced a boost. The provision of honest and appropriate attention to satisfy student needs was fundamental in developing an enhanced level of trust. This in turn brought forth an increase in disclosure of meaningful personal experiences, consecutively strengthening the relationships between the students, as well as the researcher.

The development of trustworthy relationships within the educational context ought to be an essential curricular component, deserving its proper planning and embedding in curricular activities. Apart from presenting the foundations in expanding and extending students' experiences, trust paves the way for additional positive outcomes consistent with a broader range of curricular goals.

Supporting the Educators

Moulding a classroom community worthy of trust requires educators who ideally are skilled on the levels of curriculum design, content formulation and presentation, as well as class management (Noddings 1993). In addition to these capabilities, educators also ought to be capable of both understanding and empathising with their students' life histories (Nieto 1994).

As the educator is constantly in direct responsibility of the students' educational experience, establishing a trusting class community requires the educators to address the students' needs and concerns. Hollingsworth et al. (1993) suggest that an educator's ability to deliver content meaningfully in part relies on having a relationship with the students. Applying meaning and effort in the act of teaching and learning becomes a personal and emotional process that weaves a web of trust by means of interactions between the educator and the learner.

Conclusion

...in each lesson you always tell us a story about your life... it makes me feel like maybe I could also speak about my own personal stuff.

Participant D

Participants of this study appeared to experience needs ranging from inclusion and encouragement to the provision of adequate time and space. The provision of honest
and suitable attention was fundamental in achieving an enhanced level of trust. This in turn brought forth an increase in disclosure of meaningful personal experiences, consecutively strengthening relationships between the students, as well as the researcher. The development of a supportive culture in a classroom community ultimately contributed towards the participants’ ongoing story of the self. The findings of this social research confirm and strengthen the notion that the individual and the social are inter-related. The individual blooms in the presence of a safe and supporting context, which in turn nourishes itself through the development and resilience of healthy individuals.

To instil relevance, the educational experience of the foundation courses at MCAST needs to be perceived as both valuable and enjoyable by the students. Frequent opportunities of establishing communication and investing in genuine relationships can potentially result in building a solid foundation towards a quality experience for the whole MCAST community.

References


