

# Embedding Reflective Dialogue in Personal Tutor Conversations: A Powerful Tool in Mitigating the Smoke and Mirror Illusion of Student Mattering Within Higher Education

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## ABSTRACT

Reflective conversation is a powerful relational pedagogical tool. When embedded within personal tutor conversations, it can enhance the student experience of mattering in higher education, where increasing student numbers can reduce the relational quality and experience of learning. Personal tutor conversations that embed reflective dialogue therefore have the potential to become purposeful conversations, empowering students to feel heard and understood. As key components of mattering, feeling heard and understood when achieved, enable personal tutors to develop accurate, empathic understanding of the student's lived experience of learning and teaching. Furthermore, reflective dialogue embedded within personal tutor conversations can empower students to get to know themselves. Supporting the student to develop an enduring curiosity into *who* and *why* they are creates space for the generation of knowledge that can enhance self-awareness. However, this piece argues that for this to be truly meaningful, personal tutors need to recognise the value of reflection for themselves, have the courage to develop their own reflective mindset and skills, and model reflective behaviours if students are to perceive they matter through the relational reflective pedagogy inherent in personal tutor conversations.

## KEYWORDS

Personal Tutor, Conversations, Reflection, Relational Pedagogy, Mattering

## **Mitigating the smoke and mirrors of student mattering**

Relational ontology advises that learning and development for an individual does not occur in isolation but occurs against the rhythms of how individuals relate to the world around them, with relating being co-constructed through dialogue, belonging and a coming together of people (Stetsenko, 2008). Relational pedagogy within higher education, being influenced by relational ontology, places emphasis on the importance of the humanness of the connection between student and teacher, and the experience of this as central to learning and knowledge exchange (Riddel and Hickey, 2023 and Hinsdale, 2016). Personal tutoring, I would argue, is one such space where the relational connection between student and personal tutor ought to happen; where through the expression of qualities such as respect, empathic regard, warmth, genuineness, combined with reflective dialogue, personal tutors can create the relational quality for human-to-human connection to occur, where the student may perceive they matter.

The current landscape of higher education means the quality of the student experience is often framed through satisfaction metrics driven by teaching evaluations and National Student Survey (NSS) scores. What troubles me here is that strategies relating to enhancing the student experience are often driven more by meeting performance targets and what universities think students need, than genuine understanding and relational care. This could be perceived as a smoke-and-mirror approach to the student experience of mattering. In a Wonkhe insight report for Advanced HE, McVitty (2025) observed that as a result, university strategies that over-emphasise meeting learning objectives, so that students pass, indicate that the students' lived experience is not truly understood. This, combined with the increase in student numbers, I believe limits the genuine individual attention that students require to connect in a meaningful way with their course. It can dilute universities' empathic understanding of how students wish to experience their learning. As a result, students I have encountered report feeling lost, misunderstood, and unprepared for the world beyond higher education.

Therefore, I argue that personal tutor conversations that embed reflective dialogue have a powerful part to play in affording the individual attention students deserve within relational pedagogy and increasing the quality of the overall student experience of mattering. A core message I shall return to is this: to help our students understand the empowering quality of reflection personal tutors need to embrace and experience the value of reflection themselves. Personal tutors need to have the courage to afford time and space to be reflective educators,

modelling the reflective practice we hope to encourage in our students. It is this stance of ongoing self-enquiry through our own reflective practice that will naturally enrich the meaningfulness of conversations with our students (Brookfield, 2017).

Integrating reflective dialogue within personal tutor discussions establishes a rare and authentic space, where the student should feel they are heard and understood. Through being supported to explore their thoughts and feelings and how these shape their behaviours, students can make sense of their experiences within higher education (Gibbs, 1998; Mesirow 1981 and 1991). By creating space for reflective conversation the personal tutor can demonstrate genuine interest in how students experiences learning, and can engender the relational quality where a sense, *that I matter*, can be perceived by the student. Therefore, embedding reflection into the personal tutor conversation will create a framework that increases the relational quality of connections. It will encourage students to make sense of their experiences, enhancing self-awareness. It will enable personal tutors to have a greater understanding of their students' lived experiences, helping to fill the deficit in mattering.

Importantly, personal tutors can embed reflective dialogue into their conversations almost immediately, without requiring formal permission, intensive training, or wider cultural or systemic change within their higher education institution. Reflective dialogue embedded within the personal tutor conversation is therefore an important tool to mitigate what could be perceived as mere symbolic smoke-and-mirror strategies to address student mattering.

### **Reflective conversation – embedding, not forcing**

Although I argue that embedding reflective dialogue within personal tutor conversations does not require intensive training, as personal tutors we must still review our understanding of reflection, as this provides the foundational basis from which the facilitative skills required to embed reflective dialogue will emerge. We must also look inward and have the courage to develop and model our own reflective mindset.

Reflection recognises that every experience we have in life contains information about *who* and *why* we are. Reflecting is process-orientated and requires us to develop a purposeful and enduring curiosity into self (Brookfield, 2017; White, 2004; Wieringa, 2011). Questioning inherent assumptions, exploring what influenced our thoughts and feelings and examining how they shaped our behaviours in those experiences will increase knowledge of self (Robins et al., 2003 & Roberts, 2015). This increased knowledge leads to greater self-awareness, a key

component of emotional intelligence (Mayer et al., 2008). It can be used to inform how we wish to navigate future experiences, leading to transformational change and empowering us to 'the best version of' ourselves (Clarke 2024: 2). Reflection has been found to enable emotional growth, providing a perceived safe space within which to develop the emotional bravery to be honest about how experiences affect us (Barbagallo, 2021; Hazen et al., 2020; Jarvelainen et al., 2018). Reflection therefore casts a critical eye over experiences, where the focus of that exploration is on how the person reflecting perceives what occurred.

But moving through the reflective process is not meant to be formulaic, linear or forced. Johns (2022) likened reflecting to a fine stream, authentically meandering its way to the river, moving with the flow in whatever direction it may take. A student undertaking reflection with their personal tutor would therefore shuttle back and forth between describing their experience to their personal tutor, being aided through gentle, probing, exploratory Socratic questioning to view the experience through a critical lens, to making sense of that experience, to drawing conclusions about the self that can be used to inform future experiences (Clarke, 2024).

Embedding reflection within personal tutor conversations creates a space where we can interact carefully with our students, ensuring their experiences are recognised as unique and subjectively individual (Gravett and Winstone, 2022). With genuine curiosity, the skills and attitude of empathic regard held by the personal tutor, a climate of safety can be created that supports the student to be their authentic self. As a result, the student can be encouraged to view their experience through a critical lens, exploring the meaning of their experience and meander through aspects of the reflective process. Requiring the student to 'think' in this way will enable them to view and understand their experience from different angles. The personal tutor conversation therefore becomes a conversation space for relational pedagogy to occur and supports the student to "learn how to think well" and "acquire the general habit of reflecting" (Dewey, 1933: 35).

I am not suggesting that in every conversation with students the personal tutor should facilitate reflection of an experience through the entire reflective process. It does not need to be that 'tidy'. The purpose here is to embed reflection into these conversations where the personal tutor is comfortable asking questions about how students feel about what they are experiencing. Asking questions that relate to and explore feelings can be powerful in demonstrating the personal tutor is genuinely interested in how the student is experiencing university, and from the student's perspective can be very validating. Asking questions about their thoughts and helping them to explore what influences this thinking will enable students

to get to know themselves, and the personal tutor to gain far greater insight and understanding of their lived experiences.

### **Beyond the student: attending to *your* reflective mindset matters**

I am, however, certain that many of you reading this would not dispute the need for relational pedagogies in the quest for students to perceive they matter. And you may have already embraced the empowering nature of reflection for yourself. For me, that enduring curiosity into self, framed within reflecting on the unscripted critical moments in life, holds such power for generating self-understanding (Clarke, 2025). I embraced this enduring curiosity over thirty years ago, when first introduced to reflection as a student by my mentor. As a result, I believe I have far greater self-understanding, meaning I have agency over how I experience my life. In getting to know myself I have also been able to have a better understanding of why and how people respond to me in the manner they do. I am by no means a perfect person, but I no longer move through life in an uninformed manner.

Some of you will also further embrace embedding reflection into personal tutor conversations. However, if we want students to reflect, personal tutors should endeavour to be the tutor who embodies a reflective approach towards themselves (Brookfield, 2017; Clarke, 2025). Therefore, not only do personal tutors need to ensure they are theory-informed in their understanding of reflection, they also need to develop the skills to embed reflective dialogue within personal tutor conversations while developing their own reflective mindset.

To model what it means to be a reflective practitioner, we as personal tutors need to:

- Recognise that getting to know **yourself** is important.
- Recognise that **every** experience in life has something to tell **you** about **who** and **why** you are.
- Recognise that understanding **your** thoughts and feelings will give **you** information about how these shape **your** behaviours within **your** experiences.
- Develop curiosity into and about **you**.
- Investigate **you**.
- Practice empathic regard towards **yourself**.
- Be brave and honest about how **you** experience life.

- Know that by the time you finish reflecting, you will know more about **you** than you did at the start.

### **It is important to matter**

Embedding reflective dialogue within personal tutor conversations provides personal tutors with a way to create meaningful connections with students where they can feel heard, understood and perceive that they matter (Tang et al., 2022, Gravett and Winstone, 2020 and Clarke, 2024). Creating purposeful relationships through relational reflective pedagogy is what can mitigate the smoke-and-mirrors illusion of student mattering within higher education. However, I argue that this can only occur if what we *want* to matter to students, truly matters to us as personal tutors. Students will experience authentic mattering through personal tutor reflective conversations so much more when these conversations are grounded in our own commitment to being reflective.

Therefore, *matter* to yourself as personal tutor. Become a reflective educator, develop the courage to model reflective behaviours and engage in your own reflections. Get to know yourself. Claim your own voice, so you can empower your students to claim theirs. Engage in CPD to develop the required skills and find space to embed reflective dialogue within personal tutor conversations. As a result, students will perceive they matter, develop the inclination to think for themselves and in doing so, find their own authentic voice.

### **About the Author**

Nicola Clarke is an Associate Professor in Reflective Academic Practice within the faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences at Birmingham City University. Nicola has over two decades of learning and teaching experience within a higher education institute. Nicola teaches reflection, reflective practice, academic skills and early in her academic career taught mental health nursing. Nicola is also the manager of the Academic Development Department and acts as the faculty Recognition of Prior Learning and Continuing Professional Development advisor. Nicola has authored two student textbooks, several articles and has presented at international conferences on reflection. She is an avid country music fan, has one amazing daughter and loves cats.

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