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## **Anxiety and HRD: Possibilities for Cultivating Negative Capability**

### **Abstract**

Our article focuses on anxiety, which is an integral but still often ignored aspect of HRD. The context of our study is a particular HRD intervention in Higher Education (HE): the part-time MBA and here, for a group of managers who had taken less typical routes into HE and for whom anxiety was often heightened. Drawing on interviews with twenty students, we offer three contributions. First, we provide in-depth understandings of the manifestations of anxiety in MBA programs highlighting its location in self-other relations, and so progress understandings of anxiety as a social phenomenon. Second, we then provide insights into how these self-other relations simultaneously play an integral role in the development of a capacity for 'negative capability': that is an ability to recognize the anxiety of not knowing inherent to the learning environment, and with trusted others to contain it, until it has informed us to allow for the emergence of new insights and learning. Third, we illustrate the ways in which this capacity can also be mobilized in students' everyday managerial work by providing a starting point for public reflection. We suggest that these contributions offer promise for advancing critical forms of HRD.

**Keywords:** anxiety; critical HRD; MBA; negative capability.

## **Introduction**

Vince (2002) argues that emotion in organizations is viewed as ‘uncomfortable knowledge’, which thus gets ‘avoided or ignored’. This neglect can also be observed in the HRD context (Bierema & Callahan, 2014; Trehan & Rigg, 2011; Vince, 2014, 2016), which is surprising given emotion’s integral role in learning (Elliott, 2008; Fineman, 1997; Gilmore & Anderson, 2012, 2016; Vince, 2010, 2011), and the opportunities this affords for helping managers better engage with the emotions which pervade their everyday work (Edmonstone, 2016, Baek & Kim, 2017). Critical HRD scholars who recognize management as a social, political and economic practice and so foreground questions of power, emotion and political dynamics to analyses of learning and development have begun to rectify this neglect (Fenwick, 2004; 2005; Grey, Knights & Willmott, 1996; Hay, 2014; Sambrook, 2008; Trigg & Rehan, 2011). Our article contributes to this work and focuses on anxiety which has been identified as a major emotional output of attempts to learn and develop (Vince, 2010), perhaps not least as it often emerges when we do not know - a condition inherent to learning (French and Simpson, 1999). Consistent with Vince (2014), we suggest that improving how we engage with anxiety in the learning environment is an important first step towards helping people connect to it.

Our study’s context is a particular HRD intervention in Higher Education (HE), the part-time MBA. Our participants were managers who had taken less typical routes into HE and for whom anxiety was often heightened. We suggest analytically this provides opportunities to further develop understandings of anxiety in the HRD context. Drawing on interviews with twenty students, we build on previous work which has provided personal reflections of anxiety in management education (Sinclair, 2007; Vince 2010, 2011); and student reflections on their anxiety in the context of professional and full time MBA programs (Gilmore & Anderson, 2012; 2016; Griffiths, Winstanley & Gabriel, 2005; Simpson, Sturges & Weight, 2010), to offer three contributions. First, we provide in-depth understandings of the manifestations of

anxiety in part-time MBA programs as reported by students themselves and highlight its location in self-other relations. In so doing, we respond to calls for work which emphasizes “the relational and intersubjective dynamics” of anxiety to illustrate how “development is shaped and avoided by ongoing relations between the self and other” (Vince, 2014: 411). Second, we provide insights into how these self-other relations simultaneously play an integral role in encouraging a capacity for ‘negative capability’ - which we conceptualize as an ability to recognize the anxiety of not knowing inherent to the learning environment, and with trusted others to contain it, until it has informed us to allow for the emergence of new insights and learning. Third, we also illustrate the ways in which this capacity might also be mobilized in students’ everyday work as managers by providing a starting point for public reflection. We also therefore respond to calls from Saggurthi and Thakur (2016) for research which explores negative capability in management development. Taken together, we suggest that these insights offer promise for advancing critical HRD.

Our article is structured as follows. We begin by considering the literature on anxiety as it relates to management development. We then consider how anxiety in this context may generate important but so far neglected opportunities to cultivate ‘negative capability’. We next outline our study’s context: two part-time MBA programs that typically attract managers who have taken less typical routes into HE. We describe our interpretivist approach which utilized in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 MBA students. We then move onto our analysis to illustrate the specific manifestations of anxiety for this group and in so doing, progress understandings of anxiety as a social phenomenon. We then consider the ways in which students work with this anxiety with trusted others on the MBA program to begin to develop a capacity for ‘negative capability’ and then illustrate how this might also be mobilized in students’ everyday work as managers. Finally, we present our discussion and consider the implications for advancing critical forms of HRD.

## **Anxiety and management development**

Our stance on anxiety and its relation to learning and development is informed by a social constructionist philosophy. Simply put, we suggest that learning “is not something that people possess in their heads, but rather, something that people do together” (Gergen, 1991: 270; see Gherardi, 2006). This reflects an understanding that “we are always a self-in-relation-to-others, living in, shaping and shaped by a web of relationships...[since]...we do not live in isolation..... we create our social and organizational realities with others in our everyday interactions and conversations” (Cunliffe, 2009:95). In this way, emotion becomes an inevitable feature of learning, since it is an integral aspect of how people create meaning with others (Antoncopoulou & Gabriel, 2002; Voronov, 2014). Anxiety, in particular, is thought to play an especially important role (Fineman, 1997) since as French and Simpson (1999) observe drawing on the work of Bion, learning happens when we work on the edge of not knowing- a condition which evokes anxiety. We are therefore conceptualizing anxiety as a negative emotion which although ‘incites the feeling of being uncomfortable’ since it is associated with an anticipated threat (Salecl, 2004: 47), is a primary aspect of human experience (including efforts to learn) rather than a clinical condition. As Salecl (2004: 15) reminds us, anxiety may have paralysing effects but simultaneously might be “the very condition through which people *relate* to the world” (our emphasis).

Consistent with this more pervasive and relational view, previous studies that have provided insights into anxiety’s manifestations in management development contexts reveal that it is a more common experience than is often assumed and is located in self-other relations. Anxiety in the learning context tends to be evoked when self-other expectations are unsettled (Vince, 2010). This we suggest takes two major forms. First, anxiety can arise when one worries that they may not meet expectations of others. Perhaps the most obvious example relates to student assessment and performance. Gilmore and Anderson (2016) for example, highlighted the

anxiety surrounding students' abilities to meet faculty expectations following the implementation of an unconventional assessment on a professional program. Griffiths et al (2005) also provided examples of students who worried about being unable to apply knowledge in exams in subjects that were perceived to require more nuanced forms of interpretation. Anxieties relating to performance expectations of others are further amplified for those less familiar with the academic environment. For example, Griffiths et al's (2005) work revealed distinct anxieties for those who had returned to study after considerable periods away. They found that particular worries related to fulfilling academic expectations such as reading at the required level and worrying that others would be better placed to meet academic demands owing to their perceived more relevant backgrounds. The literature suggests international students also experience heightened anxiety owing to their lower levels of familiarity with the host country's teaching and learning approaches (Currie, 2007). Simpson et al (2010) for example, described the anxiety felt by Chinese MBA students studying in the UK that arose from their difficulties of speaking up in front of others in class. Students worried their language ability was below required expectations and so selected to remain quiet in class. This in turn evoked anxiety in other students as the Chinese students then failed to meet the expectations of the student as one who should contribute.

Second, anxiety can also arise when others fail to meet students' expectations. In a management development context, a number of examples are illustrative. Studies suggest that anxiety is often evoked when new teaching and learning methods are introduced. Sinclair (2007) reported the considerable anxiety generated when she introduced a critical and experiential approach to teaching leadership to MBA students. Similar experiences are also described by Vince (2010) in his reflections on teaching business undergraduate students and, Gilmore and Anderson (2016) in the context of a professionally accredited program. As Vince (2010) elaborates, this anxiety results from unsettling students' expectations of the roles of the teacher as one who

should talk and the student as one who should listen. Further, it is not just teachers who might fail to live up to students' expectations, but fellow students too. This is often most acutely seen through experiences of group working which is a common feature of many management development programs. Griffiths et al (2005) for example, described the considerable anxiety evoked when MBA syndicate group members failed to act as expected, such as when students displayed aggression towards others rather than showing respect.

Previous studies thus indicate a rather complex role for anxiety in management development. As glimpsed above, anxiety often arises through attempts to get rid of it (Salacel, 2004; Vince, 2010). In the case of the Chinese students described above for example, anxiety is enlarged for the self and others through students' efforts to avoid it. In this way, anxiety serves to discourage or hinder learning through what Vince (1998) has described as 'willing ignorance'. However, anxiety also simultaneously has an important role to play in promoting insight and learning if it is held and contained (Elliott, 2008; Vince, 1998). This we suggest has important links to recent calls for the cultivation of a capacity for 'negative capability' in management education and development (Chia, 2005; Saggurthi & Thakur, 2016) which have so far been overlooked.

### **Negative Capability**

The concept of negative capability originates from the work of the poet Keats in 1817 who described it as "when a man [sic] is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats, 1970:43). It is also evident in the field of psychoanalysis where there is a focus on the containment of uncomfortable emotion to provide for the progression of thought (Bion, 1984). Eisold (2000:65) describes it as "an ability to tolerate anxiety and fear, to stay in the place of uncertainty in order to allow for the emergence of new thoughts and perceptions". This relates to Bion's assumption that growth occurs through exposure to truth continually discovered in the moment. This requires that we let go of the

security of the known ‘to leave space for a new idea’ (Bion, 1980: 11). Thought progresses ‘in or out of the relationship and relatedness of patient and analyst’ (Simpson & French, 2006) whereby the analyst contains thoughts ‘in search of a thinker’ (Bion, 1967) as well as the uncomfortable emotion associated with this. Ultimately as Salzberger-Wittenberg et al (1983: 60) observe “the person who has repeated experiences of his [sic] distress being understood and detoxified by another can thus gradually come to contain more emotional pain, find it less totally overwhelming and be able to think about his experience”.

More recently, the concept has been drawn upon by organizational scholars who have identified its relevance to management practice (Chia, 2010; Chia & Holt, 2011; French, 2001; Grint, 2007; Saggurthi & Thakur, 2016; Simpson et al., 2002; Simpson & French, 2006). Chia and Holt (2011:211) suggest in a management context it “implies containment and the capacity to endure rather than the capacity for active intervention: the cultivated resilience to resist premature closure in the face of vagueness, uncertainty and equivocality”. The focus is on holding, staying in the moment and ‘basking in the totality of experience’ (Chia, 2010). A key aspect of such ‘basking’ is the ability to tolerate anxiety (Saggurthi & Thakur, 2016). Indeed, for Grint (2007: 241) negative capability *is* “the ability to tolerate anxiety and to ensure it does not become excessive (leading to panic) or be denied (leading to inaction)”.

Negative capability then crucially involves an ability to contain uncomfortable emotion evoked by conditions of not knowing, and is manifest in behaviors such as waiting, observing and listening, and implies a degree of humility and openness to allow one’s mind to be changed by others (French, 2001; Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002). As noted by Simpson et al (2009) and Saggurthi and Thakur (2016), its mobilization also requires a strong sense of self in order to endure the discomfort of not knowing and resist the urge to react. It is a capacity which is especially important to strategic leadership, since conditions of uncertainty and doubt are inherent features of such roles (Watson, 2001). As Hay (2014) has illustrated, those



transitioning into more strategic roles, report intense struggles in dealing with conditions of not knowing. Addressing such conditions then becomes important since as French (2001) argues, leaders who fail to engage with not knowing, leave their organizations particularly vulnerable. For example, Simpson et al (2002) observe an inability to deal with not knowing may give rise to mindless action. The mobilization of negative capability then may offer promise for considered and inclusive organizational action. In this way, the advancement of negative capability might also resonate with aspirations of critical HRD which extend beyond simplistic notions of organizational and shareholder gain to embrace a plurality of stakeholder interests (Bierema & Callahan, 2014).

However, whilst negative capability holds much promise for critical HRD, it is challenging to develop. Drawing on the work of Needleman (1990), French (2001) notes a tendency for individuals to engage in dispersal activities- defensive-reactive impulses- such as rushing into action to avoid the anxiety of uncertainty and not knowing. So for example, “we try to break problems down into apparently manageable ‘bits’ in an effort to make them seem manageable after all” (p.485). This tendency is exacerbated for managers, as managing is oriented towards problem solving and action (Mintzberg, 2004; Simpson et al., 2002; Yanow, 2009) and privileges rationality over emotionality (Hopfl & Linstead, 1997). The dominant response to anxiety of not knowing is often work to ensure immediate problem solution which thus meets the expectation of the other. However, this simultaneously limits possibilities for considered action since opportunities for anxiety to develop new insights are diminished.

We suggest that if negative capability is difficult for managers to foster in the course of their management practice, then management development programs potentially offer a more promising site for its advancement. Indeed, Chia (2005) has argued that the cultivation of negative capability should be a key objective of our offerings. Yet to date it has remained unexplored in the HRD context, and Saggurthi and Thakur (2016) suggest “it is a field wide

open for study” (p.189). In a HRD context, and as will be substantiated from our analysis of student accounts later, we conceptualize negative capability as the ability to recognize the anxiety of not knowing inherent to the learning environment, and with trusted others to contain it, until it has informed us to allow for the emergence of new insights and learning. Against this background, our article provides detailed empirical insights into the often hidden experiences of anxiety in MBA programs. Further, we illustrate how working with this in the MBA program can cultivate negative capability, and how, in turn, this capacity might also be mobilized in students’ everyday managerial work. We now turn to consider our research approach.

### **Research Approach and Context**

The methodological complexities of studying emotion have been previously noted. Sturdy (2003:81) for example, notes that it is “considered to be especially elusive, private, intangible, transient, unmanageable and unknowable”. Re-collection and self-censorship present particular issues, and the latter is especially problematic in the case of negative emotion such as anxiety which provides our focus here. Given such issues, Fineman (2006) suggests the need to embrace qualitative forms of research to develop our understandings of emotion. Accordingly, our study adopted an interpretivist approach which rests upon an attempt to understand “the complex world of lived experience from the view point of those who live it” (Schwandt, 1994: 118) with a specific aim to progress understandings of the experiences of student anxiety in management development.

Our study focuses on a particular form of management development- the MBA in HE, which is recognized by many as an important site for HRD (Mills, Trehan & Stewart, 2014; Perriton, 2014). We focus on programs which were offered by what arguably might be labelled as ‘less prestigious business schools’, (in terms of global rankings) belonging to what are collectively

described as ‘new universities’ in the UK. These primarily former polytechnics, with their focus on professional vocational education, were granted university status in 1992. Although the different histories of national education systems make direct comparisons difficult, they are broadly similar to applied universities (e.g. in Germany and the Netherlands) or universities of technology (e.g. Australia). As was historically common at such institutions, many of our students had often taken atypical routes into HE. Previous work and indeed, our own experiences of working with such students, suggests that anxiety is often amplified for them (Hay & Hodgkinson, 2008) and we suggest that working with these participants provided enhanced analytical opportunities for advancing our understanding of this often overlooked aspect of development. Based on the logic of purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) then, specifically with the aim of collecting rich, in-depth understandings of experiences of anxiety in MBA programs, the research team contacted both current students and recent alumni from two Business Schools at ‘new universities’, via email or a briefing, and those interested in taking part then contacted the research team. Our sample comprised of 11 males and 9 females, aged 25-58 years, with 70% being over 40 years old. Participants had taken a range of routes into HE, with many entering HE at later stages of life through Access programs or returning after considerable breaks. Participants came from both private and public sector organizations, and represented a broad range of industries, including, healthcare, construction, manufacturing, local government, Higher Education and finance. Participants held both operational roles and strategic roles, with some owning small businesses. The diversity of our sample reflects the student mix that we have typically found across these two programs.

This diversity of background reflects the MBA’s broad focus on enabling managers to transition into or to consolidate more senior strategic leadership roles, and as stated earlier, negative capability may be especially relevant to such roles. Both programs focused on integrating theory and practice and exposed students to the full range of management

disciplines including strategy, HRM, finance and marketing. Students belonged to a cohort of around 15-25 students and experienced a variety of teaching and learning methods, including, group discussions and projects, role-plays and a research dissertation. Both programs were offered on a part-time basis, with modules taught in short blocks. Programs were completed over a two year period.

## **Interviews**

Consistent with our interpretivist position, data were collected using semi-structured interviews which are especially useful for providing space to unveil issues of personal importance (Barley & Kunda, 2001). Interviews were conducted face to face, and at the request of the interviewee, took place either at their business school or at their workplace, and lasted between thirty to ninety minutes. In order to facilitate an increased openness in response, interviews were conducted by the first author and a research assistant, neither of whom had any involvement with the programs studied. Before, the interview commenced, each interviewee was taken through an information sheet which outlined details of the study and then were asked to provide their consent to participate. The interviews were based on a guide to ensure each covered key areas whilst also providing space for interviewees to elaborate on issues of personal relevance. The interviews began by asking respondents to provide a brief overview of their career to allow the researcher to understand the individual's program learning experiences in the context of their broader biography. In doing so, this also encouraged rapport which was especially important given the subsequent discussion of the potentially sensitive topic of anxiety. In relation to anxiety specifically, the interviews then explored its sources and expressions related to their MBA programs, coping strategies and learning accomplished.

## **Data Analysis**

All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Our analysis was informed by Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory approach where themes emerged from our empirical materials. This meant that our analysis consisted of three key stages. However, these stages were not linear but, instead, consistent with Corley and Gioia (2004:183-184) formed a "recursive, process-oriented, analytic procedure (Locke, 1996: 240) that continued until we had a clear grasp of the emerging theoretical relationships". First, we began to familiarize ourselves with our data where we both independently read and re-read the initial interview transcripts. We then began to utilize an open coding process to identify initial categories or first-order codes (Van Maanen, 1979) related to understanding the sources of anxiety for this particular group of part-time MBA students, such as capability for Masters level study, performance and group dynamics. Open coding then continued with an interest in understanding how this anxiety was dealt with and the learning accomplished. For example, we began to notice the importance of interactions with other students as well as the ways in which anxiety for many was ostensibly better contained following MBA study. While undertaking this stage of the analysis, following Bowden (1992) (see Sandbergh, 2006) we acted as 'co-judges'. While the first author was primarily responsible for identifying and describing the initial codes, the second author probed the first author's categories of description and the developing structure, and in so doing, allowed additional perspectives on the data to emerge. Consistent with Kvale's (1996) notion of 'dialogical intersubjectivity', these were discussed between us until agreement was achieved, and always with referral back to the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As we began to identify first-order codes, we used NVivo software to formalize and organize our analysis. Second, we then engaged in axial or pattern coding (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) which focused on looking for relationships between the first-order codes

which allowed us to assemble them into higher order themes, for example, failing to meet expectations of others and others failing to meet student expectations.

Once we had our initial codes and themes in place (after 5 interviews), we then undertook further successive interviews and analysed each of these in turn to extend and confirm our initial structure. After 20 interviews, while we recognized that further variation is always likely (Anderson, 2017), we felt that additional interviews would fail to add anything significantly to our current understanding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Third, as this analysis progressed we began to integrate our themes into overarching dimensions which when taken together, helped to deepen our understanding of the experiences of our students (Bansal & Corley, 2012). While, as stated above, the analysis followed an iterative process throughout whereby themes emerging from the interviews were compared against the literature (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000), at this third stage, our key theoretical dimensions began to crystallize. What is important to acknowledge however, is that this process and theorizing is also informed by what we bring to the empirical materials (Samra-Fredericks, 2010). For us, students' reports of their anxiety resonated with relational understandings of learning and anxiety (Cunliffe, 2009; Vince, 2014) and emergent discussions of negative capability in the organizational literature (e.g. Saggurthi & Thakur, 2016; Simpson et al, 2002) and to which we had been previously exposed. Our analysis suggested that while anxiety was manifest in self-other relations, simultaneously interactions with others allowed anxiety to be productively embraced to begin to develop a capacity for negative capability. While we aim to remain as close to the interviews as possible, in line with our constructionist stance, we accept that the analysis offered is, of course, our 'construction of the constructions of the actors one studies' (Schwandt, 1994:118). Yet, we add that our findings resonated strongly with our current MBA students when we shared our work with them. This perhaps also provides a form of assurance of the credibility of the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We now turn to this analysis.

## **Findings**

Consistent with Vince (2010), our analysis suggested that anxiety was an integral feature of the MBA programs here. Anxiety was reported by all students and was found to be a pervasive feature throughout the duration of their studies. As we will see, it was experienced as an uncomfortable feeling and expressed in various terms such as fear, worry and angst. While the sources of anxiety were varied, all were associated with conditions of not knowing inherent to learning and consistent with a relational understanding of learning as ‘something that people do together’ (Gergen, 1991), were manifest in self-other relations. Our analysis suggested that this took two distinct forms: where the student worried that they would not meet the expectations of others and conversely, where others failed to meet the expectations of the student. Further, this took a particular shape given the atypical routes into HE taken by our students. Of course, we acknowledge that the dynamics of anxiety in management development are likely to be complicated and as such, we do not suggest that these dimensions are the only ones at play. However, we hope that the identified dimensions offer practitioners a clear and informed starting point to facilitate understanding of anxiety in HRD. Next then, we share students’ expressions of anxiety and implicitly glimpse the ways in which the avoidance of anxiety could potentially threaten learning through ‘willing ignorance’ (Vince, 1998).

### **Failing to meet expectations of others**

#### *Capability for Masters Level*

At the outset of the programs, for many there was considerable anxiety surrounding their ability to meet the university’s expectations for a Masters’ Level qualification. This was associated with not knowing what to expect informed by the long breaks from education characteristic of many of our interviewees or indeed, for some a lack of previous study at HE level:

*"I was really scared to be honest. I had never been to university so I didn't know what to expect. I thought everyone [at] university was going to be very, very clever."* [Interviewee 20]

As illustrated here, we see the ways in which the atypical routes into HE often elevated the status of university study. Indeed, another student also notably commented that his work diary recorded his program attendance as being at '*clever school*' [Interviewee 8]. As we implicitly glimpse in the above quote and as is made explicit in the next example, we see the ways in which this anxiety was generated and reinforced in relation to others (Voronov, 2014):

*"I was completely thrown, I was incredibly anxious because I instantly thought you are not going to be good enough for this... We were all very courteous with each other, it was like tigers and lions pacing around the cage and just watching each other with great interest."* [Interviewee 15]

Like many here, this student described how silent comparisons to others made at the start of the program amplified anxiety. Indeed, likening students to 'tigers and lions', rather large and scary animals waiting to pounce, illustrates the anxiety integral to this initial encounter with the cohort. As seen in the quotes above, at the program outset, comparisons to others, called into question one's academic capability with many students suggesting they would not describe themselves as 'academic people' and often worried that the MBA was 'beyond them'. In this way, we see how comparisons to others undermined self-efficacy, that is "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997: 3) and in so doing, reinforced anxiety. Indeed, Bandura (1997) notes that students with a low sense of efficacy to manage academic demands are especially vulnerable to anxiety. This dynamic was often exacerbated as the MBA progressed as we see next.



## *Academic Study*

*“When I started I thought ‘[expletive] what have I done?’ I thought I was way out of my depth...because I had been out of education for so long when we were suddenly dropped these assignments...I didn’t know what you guys were wanting from me... It just blew my mind to start with...And I didn’t just quite expect it to be what it was...It gave me a little bit of a knock and made me question myself, have I bitten off more than I can chew?” [Interviewee 4]*

This is one illustration of the anxiety that was evoked when students did not understand academic demands of faculty. Further, as seen in this example, this often lead to a questioning of confidence that was typical of many, particularly in the early stages, and again suggests that low self-efficacy reinforces anxiety. While students were very much aware that they had enrolled on a *Masters* program, simultaneously, for some, it seemed that they had not quite anticipated the academic expectations that followed. This perhaps is not so surprising given the self-noted practice orientation of our students. In particular, our analysis identified that anxieties relating to academic reading and writing created special difficulties in meeting faculty expectations, and, again, as we see in the first example, comparisons of the self-in-relation-to-others exacerbated such anxiety:

*“...because it was academic, I was really worried that I would flounder.....Things such as reading academic papers and being able to understand them and sort of the background feeling that everybody else would know how to do it and I wouldn’t.” [Interviewee 17]*

*“I remember when [the tutor] gave us our first lecture on scientific management and I thought ‘yes I am understanding all of this but how do I then give her what she wanted, in a 1, 500 word essay...I don’t even know how to begin to write like this. How do you reference? This was a complete uphill battle for me....I was absolutely terrified.” [Interviewee 15]*

Here, we see the ways in which following academic conventions such as reading, writing and referencing evoked anxiety as students often did not know how these might be achieved. This echoes the findings of Griffiths et al (2005) who reported similar anxieties for those returning to education after long breaks. The anxiety of not knowing how to meet the expectations of faculty was a consistent theme throughout the MBA programs and was often magnified, in what was arguably the pinnacle of academic study here- the research dissertation:

*“The dissertation... nobody knows what to expect, what sort of level we need to perform at, so there is a lot of anxiety right at the end, ‘gosh, what is it?’ ‘How much work is it going to involve?’ And because it is a new area for many of us, doing qualitative and quantitative research, we don’t know if we are doing it right”* [Interviewee 1]

As the quote illustrates, for many students, the dissertation was something completely new given the atypical routes into education taken. The task of undertaking a piece of academic research generated anxiety in terms of not knowing what was expected by faculty which also raised questions of one’s capability, here performing at the required level. Indeed, concerns relating to performance generally were an important source of anxiety for these students.

### ***Performing at the required level***

*“Not knowing where you are in terms of [performance] levels....writing it [an assignment], I have no idea if this is a fail, a distinction or where it sits on the scale....And I still probably feel like that now because the marking appears to be a bit random... I know what I need to do to present to our CEO but I don’t know if that is right for the academic world so that caused me a degree of frustration and angst, and I didn’t like that too much.”* [Interviewee 19]

Here, we see one illustration of a common form of anxiety for this group associated with not fully understanding the expected performance levels of faculty, and indeed, the perceived subjectivity involved in assessing performance in the “academic world”. Gilmore and

Anderson (2016) similarly noted that being unsure of performance expectations evoked anxiety in the context of an unconventional assignment, yet, here, given the background of our students, this was of a much more basic level. Further, as this quote and the next example illustrate, this anxiety was heightened by comparisons to performance expectations in their everyday work:

*“I did worry about my performance because I always want to do the best...I am very career focused... but I don’t think I am a very academic person. You are always afraid you are going to fail an assignment...I failed one of my assignments... on my favourite part of the course, leadership. I let myself down and that really knocked my confidence because I knew I should have been able to have done that one standing on my head.”* [Interviewee 7]

We see how anxiety is evoked in relation to failing to meet faculty’s performance expectations and the ways in which comparisons to high levels of workplace performance exacerbate this, again, here, leading to low-self-confidence, especially as this was a subject which the student felt particularly comfortable with. The analysis further revealed that contrary to common assumptions, for these students, familiar subject areas often caused special anxiety:

*“I was dreading the finance one because I didn’t want to be exposed as somebody who has been in finance for twenty years but actually is a complete charlatan!”* [Interviewee 10]

For this group of experienced practitioners, there was often particular anxiety associated with failing in subjects related to their everyday practical expertise where others would therefore expect especially high levels of performance. As we see in the next illustration, although finance was often an important part of everyday practice, the theoretical aspects introduced in the MBA, nevertheless evoked anxiety since they were perceived as somewhat ‘alien’:

*“Finance- I was in tears, I was going to leave.... Finance is something that I deal with every day. I manage a UK budget of 45 million pounds, I manage an international business of 5 million...but actually the theory of finance and all the balance sheets that I have, there are a*

*team of finance officers that present me my accounts. And so I had to appreciate that I had to learn about this...it was something that was completely alien.” [Interviewee 15]*

The challenges of particular subjects then could provoke intense anxiety - to the extent where the student would consider program exit. Implicitly, again, we also see how anxiety is associated with low self-efficacy, here in respect of dealing with ‘actual theory’ and hence, a concern that they would fail this particular module. This reinforces the ways in which students worried that they would be unable to fulfil faculty’s expectations. As we will see next, conversely faculty also failed to meet student expectations and in so doing, generated conditions of not knowing which evoked further anxiety.

### **Others failing to meet students’ expectations**

#### ***Unexpected Teaching and Learning Methods***

Supporting Sinclair (2007) and Vince (2010), the analysis identified that a major source of anxiety related to the use of unconventional teaching and learning methods deployed by faculty:

*“I guess the one that most put me out of my comfort zone and this was the same for many people, was the art and drama one. The lady came in... I enjoyed it and I really forced myself to get to the front and get involved but I was quite scared by it because I have never ever been involved in that kind of thing...I could see the benefit in business as well, it opened up my eyes to well, actually, that’s something different but I could see how it might work.”[Interviewee 13]*

As the quote illustrates, for many, anxiety was evoked by teaching approaches which unsettled anticipated role expectations of the teacher as one who talks and the student as one who should listen (Vince, 2010) and which instead required more active student participation, raising questions of how to act. Further, we see how this kind of anxiety is again intensified by comparisons to managers’ everyday practice, where such participation would be highly unusual. Nevertheless, and as will be elaborated later, we begin to glimpse the ways in which

anxiety if contained, could have productive effects (Elliott, 2008; Vince, 1998). Arguably however, the analysis revealed that not all anxiety evoked by faculty was necessarily productive.

### ***Poor organization***

*“There is a perception at times of a lack of organization...the first day back was the perfect example, we had no tutors.. and it undermines your confidence in the organization...I think there is recognition of cock ups but I don’t think there is a full understanding [from tutors] of the impact and the mental state that you get into.” [Interviewee 3]*

Here, we see one example of the anxiety generated by faculty failing to turn up and hence meet a basic expectation of the students, placing students in a condition of not knowing what to do. This may appear as rather mundane but as the quote highlights, for students this could cause considerable anxiety which was often reinforced through their discussions with other students leading to a questioning of faculty’s capability. As Vince (2010) highlights, calling the competence of others into question is one way of avoiding anxiety. This anxiety was perhaps partly explained by the time demands on these part-time students as is further elaborated below:

*“Having two exams on two consecutive days has been really tough because the revision has all come at one block as well. So I don’t think there has been an appreciation of some of the roles that we take on and this is supposed to be part time and flexible, it has felt more like a full time MBA and a full time job.” [Interviewee 15]*

Here, we see the anxiety evoked by faculty failing to meet the special requirements of part-time students with demanding work roles. This provides empirical support for Vince (2010) who has similarly noted that administrative issues can be a key source of student anxiety and arguably, such issues may be especially problematic for part-time students as expectations

surrounding organization are especially important to them. The analysis further revealed that it was not only faculty who failed to live up to student expectations, but also fellow students.

### ***Group Dynamics***

*“The group dynamics have been bizarre. At times I [have felt like] I am in a group of pre-school children and that sounds a little condescending. There is a whole host of politics, for a group of experienced managers, it feels very strange, I am just sitting there thinking, ‘really?’ The behaviour that we have seen in some of the classes, the way they are not happy and protest and verbalize things.... I didn’t expect the challenges on that side...I was expecting a much more cohesive, supportive, group.... It certainly got quite uncomfortable - you didn’t feel like you were in the best learning environment.” [Interviewee 19]*

This illustrates a common form of anxiety where other students, notably also experienced managers, failed to behave as expected. The example points to the unanticipated childlike behaviour of others where ostensibly ‘toys are thrown out of the pram’ which is a manifestation of the anxiety of faculty failing to deliver student expectations noted above. Further, this highlights the ways in which student discussions sometimes served to amplify anxiety, again leading to a questioning of faculty’s capabilities. For example interviewee 12 elaborated how in this case, students had *‘decided that [lecturer’s name] was an idiot and complained about him’*. As described by Interviewee 19, this avoidance of anxiety created an ‘uncomfortable learning environment’, and concisely illustrates Vince’s (1998) notion of ‘willing ignorance’ where attempts to learn are hindered. This problematic dynamic was also acutely visible when students were required to complete group assignments, as illustrated next:

*“Oh dear, oh dear! Probably all of the good and bad experiences were on group work for me, and I think for everybody...I was surprised people on the MBA program had got so little*

*experience in business...I was making interventions that were land mines and when you stood on the first two, you were gone". [Interviewee 8]*

Again, we glimpse the ways in which other students evoked anxiety by failing to live up to one's expectations, here in terms of anticipated levels of 'business experience' which is interesting given the wealth of experience across the programs studied. Indeed, this is perhaps another manifestation of a questioning of others' capabilities to deflect anxiety. Others' perceived 'un-business-like' behaviour evokes unease as the student was unsure how to deal with this. His response was to avoid anxiety by taking control of the situation. However, he failed, as he describes, such interventions acted like (land) mines. Consistent with Salacel (2004), attempts to get rid of anxiety, further amplified it. In this way, we see how students were complicit in their expectations being unfulfilled.

### **Cultivating negative capability in management development**

While as we have illustrated so far, others often evoked anxiety and served to further amplify it, our analysis simultaneously suggested that it was through interactions with others that anxiety could be contained and productively worked through to promote insight (Vince, 1998). In this way, a capacity for negative capability began to emerge, ensuring that as described by Grint (2007), anxiety did not become excessive (leading to panic) or be denied (leading to inaction or here to non-learning). Our analysis suggested that over the duration of their programs, students learnt to turn to others as an important means to contain their anxiety. More specifically, the support of fellow students seemed especially salient:

*"The support of other students was the most help for me to get through" [Interviewee, 9]*

*"I didn't particularly go to academics and talk to them about [my anxiety]. And to be honest, I felt like it was something that I had to work my way through" [Interviewee 13]*

The importance of other students in developing negative capability was seemingly attributable to suggestions such as the one above, that dealing with anxiety was something that students ought to be responsible for, a belief which might be expected for this group of experienced managers. Further, it was also noted that relationships with faculty felt *'quite transient'*, since on these MBA programs *'you are there for four days and then you are gone, and you don't see them again'* [Interviewee, 19]. In contrast, relations with students were more enduring, and were generally described as being supportive *"I wouldn't say [relations] were competitive, I think everybody was supportive"* [Interviewee 6]. However, it was not the case that relations with all students helped to cultivate negative capability, but rather there were select trusted others that provided support:

*"Within the group we all discuss fairly openly but I think as an entire class, it doesn't come out, I think there are boundaries. Everybody has a got at least a couple of people in their group where they can sit down and they can confide in each other and counsel each other effectively"* [Interviewee, 4].

With trusted others, anxiety could be contained since as the quotes below illustrate, anxiety comes to be recognized as a shared feature of the learning environment:

*"I benchmarked that [anxiety] against some of the other members of the group who were in similar positions so I didn't feel out on a limb in my nervousness. I actually felt quite comforted by the fact that other people felt the same way."* [Interviewee 3]

*"It was really, really good cos I found one of the other part timers, who I could actually say 'are you really, really struggling with it?' ...Learning to talk through with [others] perhaps, towards the end, not at the beginning. So I did learn to use other people which I am not very good at. I am very much find the answer yourself and I did find it was nice that other people admitted the same mistakes that you had made."* [Interviewee 13]



*“I suppose you seek comfort that it’s not just you”* [Interviewee, 12]

All three quotes convey a sense of relief in talking to others about their personal struggles and a comfort in being similar to others which seemingly quietens a questioning of personal capability: ‘it’s not just me’. The second quote further explicitly highlights that it was particularly at later stages of the programs that other students were instrumental in developing a capacity to contain the anxiety of not knowing. As the example highlights, before the program, typically the individual would deal with anxiety far less productively and suffer alone, an approach which was also echoed by many of the similarly experienced managers in Hay’s (2014) study. Consistent with Bandura (1997) then, peer support implicitly bolstered personal efficacy, which here, allowed students to contain the anxiety of not knowing inherent to the learning environment. This suggests that a strong sense of self-in-relation-to-the-other is an ostensibly an important condition for developing negative capability.

While it was pre-dominantly peer support which played a pivotal role in developing negative capability, our analysis also highlighted that additional forms of support from others were also important:

*“The biggest thing was the anxiety of wondering whether I could and then realizing that I could. I would get anxious and then realize that as I was starting to get more and more into it, that I can actually do this and I think for me if I felt anxious, if there was something that I didn’t understand, I would get a book and I would read it. And I would read it until I did understand....And if I didn’t then to discuss it with one of the lecturers.”* [Interviewee 17]

Here, the individual experiences the anxiety of not knowing and turns to others’ words, either in the written format of books or in talk through face-to-face interaction with faculty, and we explicitly see how others bolster self-efficacy ‘*I can actually do this*’. In this way, the individual recognizes their anxiety and with others contains it, and in so doing, they learn. As the next

example further illustrates, faculty played an important role in bolstering students' confidence which allowed them to contain the anxiety of not knowing:

*“Giving you more confidence and the constant reminder that ‘I am teaching all of you pretty much something you don’t know about, so you are never going to ask a stupid question...every question is relevant’ and they [faculty] make you feel much more comfortable, much more relaxed and trying not to make you feel wrong if you don’t understand”.* [Interviewee 14]

Here, we see how faculty encouraged students to recognize and tolerate anxiety by constantly reassuring them that this was to be expected in a learning environment and by then persuading them to act on this and to ask questions of others to allow for the emergence of learning. In this way, we again see how MBA study begins to inform negative capability where the anxiety of not knowing is recognized and with trusted others, here, faculty, is contained, to allow for the emergence of new insights and learning (Eisold, 2000, Grint, 2007).

### **Mobilizing negative capability in managers' everyday work**

The analysis also revealed that this emerging negative capability could also be beneficial to managers' everyday work. As the next quote begins to illustrate, there was often a recognition that the uncomfortable feelings of the learning environment mirrored those of organizational life:

*“There is a guy who is working under me who is so set in his ways it is unbelievable. I have had some dire email tennis with him... and if I saw him, I think I would probably punch him, he is that frustrating. But even in the academic sense, I think you have to have those experiences to generate a bit of learning because it will test your metal, and unfortunately, the world isn’t that perfectly round shape that people like to believe it is...other people at work are certainly a hell of a lot more flustered when turbulence comes along...I think I am more reserved...I will be the last person to knee jerk”* [Interviewee 12].

Here, consistent with French, (2001), there is a recognition of uncertainty and ‘turbulence’ to organizational life along with the uncomfortable feelings that it incites. For this individual, we glimpse the ways in which this uncomfortable emotion, here expressed as frustration when another fails to behave as expected, is contained and manifest through less reactive behaviour. The next example further highlights the ways in which uncomfortable emotion of organizational life comes to be recognized and better contained:

*“I can focus on things and let them escalate but I need to take a step back and be objective and pull myself together, hang on a second, you are worrying about this, when actually you can do something about this. ..I have learnt I do tend to react quite quickly to things whereas now I will sit on something overnight or for a few hours and come back and approach it differently. It is that sort of management technique of just being a bit more considered”* [Interviewee 6]

This example illustrates how instead of letting anxiety escalate seemingly leading to panic (Grint, 2007), she recognizes and contains it, and avoids reacting quickly. This illustrates one manifestation of a growing capacity for negative capability were, consistent with French (2001) and Simpson et al (2002), one contains their anxiety and waits instead of rushing into action. Further, we see the ways in which uncomfortable feelings are then also exploited as a source of learning in everyday practice. Implicitly, they alert the manager to uncertainty which requires further exploration. As we see here, this invites different perspectives which she suggests allows for more considered organizational action. This begins to suggest that negative capability can provide a starting point for public reflection in organizational practice, as is further elaborated by Interviewee 5:

*“I do tend to add in a few more steps now...where based on the knowledge you gain or the continuing knowledge, you realize that you don’t know everything...I have learned that I am*

*not the fountain of all knowledge and it is good to sit and reflect sometimes but maybe not too much.” [Interviewee 5]*

Here, we see the ways in which the student recognizes and tolerates the anxiety evoked by his unknowingness and responds by adding in ‘a few more steps’ which involved ‘sitting and reflecting’. Implicitly this acknowledges the importance of reflecting with others when we do not know. As Vince (2010:s32) has argued, “when one does not know...it becomes important to ask, interpret or experiment”. Yet at the same time, as Vince goes onto acknowledge “this is not always easy to do” and indeed, for this student there is also a sense of unease with this learning given his suggestion that one should not sit and reflect ‘too much’. However, others suggested a growing ease with reflecting with others in everyday practice following their MBA study:

*“People’s views which I thought ‘whoa’, I am not comfortable with at all... beliefs I had, have been challenged, have made me a lot more confident but actually subtly confident, I have become more modest...What has changed I think fundamentally is my ability to listen more and take on other people’s views. That is a big change for me because I have been working in a cohort for the last two years with people who are a lot brighter than me and you know I make up for my lack of intellect with determination. So knowing that and experiencing that and doing that I have certainly changed the way that I approach my team. It’s not just “we are going to do this because” [instead] let’s sit down. It doesn’t mean to say I have become the agony aunt but I listen a lot more as a consequence of the process.” [Interviewee 10]*

This quote illustrates how working with the emergent anxiety of self-other relations in the classroom has developed this manager’s ability to listen to and reflect with members of his team. Anxiety is contained to embrace rather than avoid difference. The perspectives of others are now deliberately sought which ostensibly provides possibilities for more considered action.

Of importance, we also see the ways in which to do so required a ‘subtle confidence’. Further, some described how in considering the perspectives of others, sometimes a capacity to do nothing was important, an action which again implicitly requires confidence:

*“I have had to learn that intervention is one of the hardest things and you should avoid it, if you intervene you are going to own that, don’t intervene, try and manage it in a different way and I learnt that from the MBA, from the group things where I had no power”.* [Interviewee 8]

Consistent with Chia and Holt (2011: 211) this student demonstrates the ‘capacity to endure rather than the capacity for active intervention’ and so again, we glimpse an emergent negative capability in managers’ everyday work since anxiety is contained to allow for different possibilities. We also see how this capacity to contain anxiety and resist action developed from the problematic group relations on the MBA where attempts to act further exacerbated anxiety. On one level, a capacity to do nothing might seem a rather strange outcome of MBA study, but as illustrated here, sometimes this might be the most constructive course of action.

## **Discussion**

Our article has sought to offer detailed empirical insights into the experiences of anxiety in HRD. This may seem perhaps unremarkable but as Vince (2016) has commented it is “somewhat depressing that emotional aspects of learning within and about management and organization are not so obvious and ever present that they are already integral to business and management school thinking and practice” (p539). Crucially, we have also illustrated how engagement with this anxiety in management development programs can begin to develop a capacity for negative capability. Further, we have also sought to highlight how this provides important opportunities to allow managers to better connect to the emotional dynamics which pervade their everyday work. In so doing, we begin to progress HRD’s position in “encouraging people in organizations to engage with the...range of emotions...that influence

their roles and relations in order to be able to comprehend the dynamics that affect these roles and relations” (Vince, 2014: 413). These broad observations give rise to three contributions.

Our first contribution centres on progressing understandings of anxiety as a social phenomenon, which arises from the illumination of the lived experiences of anxiety for a group of part-time MBA students who had taken atypical routes into HE. For our learners, their lack of experience of HE highlighted anxiety associated with not knowing if or how expectations of others could be met, while their considerable business experience highlighted anxiety associated with not knowing how to respond when others failed to fulfil their expectations. In these ways, we see how anxiety is evoked in relation to our understandings of others’ expectations of us and our expectations of others-it is these relations that carry a threat that the MBA will not be attained. Our work therefore contributes to leveraging relational understandings of anxiety in HRD to detail the ways in which anxiety emerges in and through ongoing relations between self and others (Vince, 2014), and highlights that this is also shaped by the particular backgrounds brought to the classroom, such as notably here, late entry into HE combined with considerable managerial experience.

Our second and related contribution details how these self-other relations simultaneously play an integral role in developing negative capability which is an important but so far overlooked outcome for HRD (Chia, 2005; Saggurthi & Thakur, 2016). In this MBA context, we have proposed that negative capability is an ability to recognize the anxiety of not knowing inherent to the learning environment, and with trusted others to contain it, until it has informed us to allow for the emergence of new insights and learning. Notably, in contrast to previous studies which have highlighted a lack of peer support in other MBA programs (Griffiths et al, 2005; Simpson et al, 2010), in our study it was the support of fellow students which was integral to the development of negative capability. This was related to the continuity of peer relations over the course of the program which contrasted with the more transitory relations with faculty. In

addition, the central role of peer support was also ostensibly facilitated by the absence of hyper competitive relations reported in MBA programs offered by more prestigious schools (e.g. Griffiths et al 2005). Our analysis has illustrated how here students learned to turn to other students as a way of containing and working through their anxiety. In contrast to silent comparisons to others early in the programs which served to amplify anxiety by questioning one's capability, as the programs progressed, students voiced their anxieties to trusted others which bolstered feelings of personal efficacy since students took comfort in the shared nature of their uncomfortable feelings and recognized 'it's not just me'. Our study therefore extends understandings of negative capability by illustrating that it is perhaps not so much a strong sense of self that is important to its development (Saggarthi & Thakur, 2016, Simpson et al, 2009) but rather a strong sense of *self-in-relation-to-the-other* which is crucial, and that here, this emerges through the endurance of peer relations in the classroom.

Our third contribution highlights the ways in which this emerging capacity for negative capability can also be beneficial to managers' everyday work. We have shown how working with the anxiety of the learning environment allowed managers to both better recognize and contain the uncomfortable feelings which pervaded their organizational lives *and* to exploit these as an important source of learning. Consistent with understandings of negative capability which centre on an ability to tolerate anxiety until it has informed us (Chia & Holt, 2011, Eisold, 2000, Grint, 2007), we have seen how managers reported that they were able to endure these uncomfortable feelings and how this was manifest through behaviours such as waiting, listening to others and reflecting. These manifestations suggest that a key element of negative capability is that individuals are able to exploit these uncomfortable feelings as a source of knowledge about the ways in which emotions are embedded in organizational life- they reflect its uncertainty, complexity and confusion (French, 2001, Hay, 2014). Our analysis underlines how uncomfortable emotions not only provide managers with clues that they do not know but

that crucially, that further exploration is necessary. Managers then begin to see the importance of inviting the opinions of others and giving voice to different interpretations of what is going on. Our work contributes to understandings of negative capability by illustrating that it can provide a starting point for public reflection in organizational practice. Negative capability then potentially allows possibilities for more considered and inclusive organizational action since decision making is less reactive and invites diverse perspectives. In this way, we suggest that the cultivation of negative capability may embrace a plurality of stakeholder interests so integral to critical HRD (Bierema & Callahan, 2014) and in doing so, this potentially moves us towards the ‘equity, justice and organisational democracy’ called for by Fenwick (2005).

### **Implications for HRD practice**

Acknowledging Bierema’s (2015:122) ‘call-to-action that moves beyond critique rhetoric’, our work has a number of implications for advancing critical forms of HRD and here, specifically one which recognizes negative capability as a legitimate outcome for HRD. At a general level, this is important as there is a growing recognition of the problems associated with postgraduate student anxiety in the HE context (Flaherty, 2018). For our students, anxiety was indeed a pervasive feature of their program experience and if ignored, could hinder learning and ultimately for some, lead to considerations of program exit. It is therefore crucial that HRD practitioners better support students to recognize and work with their anxiety to alleviate such detrimental consequences. Further, in relation to the MBA specifically, given that it seeks to support transition into or consolidation of more senior strategic roles, developing a capacity for negative capability becomes significant since as Hay (2014) has highlighted, anxiety evoked by conditions of not knowing is commonly reported by individuals making such transitions yet is typically silenced. It is then important that students are supported to understand the ways in which such uncomfortable feelings provide important learning opportunities about the complexities of organizational life. We now therefore turn to a consideration of the ways in



which HRD practitioners might seek to support students to work with their anxiety in the classroom to begin to inform a capacity for negative capability.

First, in order to help students to better recognize anxiety in the development context, it is important to acknowledge that anxiety is an expected and common aspect of efforts to learn and develop. One way of doing this is to share empirical research such as ours with students. In offering a ‘thick description’ of previous students’ experiences such research can provide a sense of relief to other students that they are not alone in their uncomfortable feelings, and may also help them to reconceptualize anxiety as a social phenomenon rather than an individual shortcoming. Our analysis thus provides a resonance for students which is an important but often neglected aspect of HRD (Chia & Holt, 2008). In these ways, a strong sense of self-in-relation-to-the-other can be enhanced which is as we have seen, an important condition for developing negative capability. Recognizing that part-time MBA students’ learning is often enhanced when they come to theory through their lived experiences (Hay & Hodgkinson, 2008), particularly when students do not describe themselves as ‘academic people’, sharing such theoretical resources is likely to be more powerful when students have first experienced and explored situations of anxiety on their programs. The insights into the specific anxieties faced in the MBA context here provides a starting point for educators to help students explore their anxiety. For example, given that our work identifies that understanding assessment expectations is a common source of anxiety from the outset of programs, initial assessment tasks might include questions that examine students’ understanding of assessment requirements set by faculty and how they feel about fulfilling these. However, as we have suggested educators also need to think about how the backgrounds of their particular students might shape their anxiety.

Second, once anxiety is better recognized, efforts to help students contain it can inform their capacity for negative capability. As we have seen, for this group of experienced managers, the

role of faculty is to create a challenging learning environment but it is principally fellow students who support each other in working on these challenges. While recognizing the contradictions of the learning environment (Vince, 2014), given this crucial role of student support, we suggest the value of vehicles such as learning sets as one support mechanism which may provide a safe space to turn to trusted others to contain anxiety. We suggest the benefit of introducing such sets in the initial stages of programs to encourage students to turn to others earlier than is typically found. In addition, in our experience it is also important to allow students to have some degree of control over set composition as this can contribute to the development of a safe space to facilitate learning. Where set composition is imposed this can be experienced as threatening and is likely to hinder learning by amplifying anxiety. Along similar lines, as far as is possible, learning is also likely to be enhanced if set membership remains consistent throughout the duration of students' programs.

Third, once the anxiety of the learning environment is better recognized and contained, faculty can help students to exploit it as a source of learning about the ways in which emotions are embedded in our organizational lives and use these as a springboard for collective reflection. For example, using anxiety as an indication of our partial knowingness which requires further exploration, educators can support learning set members to identify and give voice to different perspectives. This provides one route for educators to begin to illustrate how in organizations 'diverse knowledges [might] be treated not as a problem to be managed, but as a source of organizational ingenuity and sustainability' (Fenwick, 2005:228). Students' learning can then also be reinforced by inviting them to engage with the often unexplored literature on negative capability. Recognizing the performance orientations of organizations and society more generally, Simpson et al (2002) observe that negative capability tends to be excluded from organizational discourses, and indeed our own experience suggests that for students, the concept is often novel. Engaging with this literature provides one small way in which MBA

students can be further supported to re-think anxiety and work with conditions of not knowing inherent to organizational life (French, 2001).

Consistent with our relational stance on anxiety, leveraging emotional aspects of HRD as one avenue to develop negative capability will also have implications for faculty, not least because this is likely to be uncomfortable for educators themselves. Indeed, an anonymous reviewer of an earlier conference presentation of this paper commented “I am not convinced that I want further investigation of this!” As Sinclair (2007) has illustrated critical approaches to HRD are likely to be more unpredictable and therefore, reduce control faculty have. In seeking to develop negative capability, faculty may well have to deal with adverse student reactions to discussions of anxiety where some might seek to deny its relevance and for example, call into question the competence of tutors or raise questions about the ‘value for money’ offered. Attempts to develop negative capability therefore involves risks for faculty and these may be amplified in a climate where favourable teaching scores and student satisfaction are increasingly prioritized. Such adverse consequences may discourage future attempts to work with student anxiety to develop negative capability. A key implication for developing students’ negative capability is therefore for educators to develop their own. Given the challenges of doing so, we suggest that the support of colleagues and wider institutions are likely to be critical.

### **Directions for future HRD research**

Given the paucity of scholarship in this area, it is important that future research builds on our study to understand the particular manifestations of anxiety in other HRD contexts to move us towards a position where, as called for by Vince (2016), discussions of anxiety become integral to HRD thinking and practice, and in so doing a capacity for negative capability may become a common aim for HRD programs. In moving forward we would encourage others to utilize

qualitative approaches given the challenges of studying anxiety (cf Fineman, 2006). As used here, interviews develop trust and rapport with participants which helps to facilitate discussions of this often sensitive topic. Interviews might explore a number of areas. How is anxiety expressed for the less experienced (such as those on undergraduate management development programs) and the more experienced (such as those on growing DBA programs)? In the case of younger and less experienced students, are they able to contain anxiety with other students or is a higher level of support needed from faculty? Related to this, future work might build on Gilmore and Anderson (2016) and focus on the educator's experiences of anxiety. What approaches do individual faculty use to help students recognize and contain their anxiety? How do they deal students who question faculty capabilities as a way to avoid anxiety? Finally, further work is needed which follows managers into the workplace to provide a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which a capacity for negative capability might flourish (or otherwise). This would require more intensive qualitative approaches such as ethnography. Our work is of course reliant upon interview data which reports how negative capability may begin to inform organizational practice. We are not so naïve as to suggest the unproblematic mobilization of this capacity in organizational life and recognize the challenges provided in the face of performance driven organizations (Sambrook, 2008). How for example is negative capability enabled and constrained in particular organizational settings? Where a leader displays negative capability, how is this received by other colleagues? Does the mobilization of negative capability lead to more ethical outcomes? Developing our understanding of these issues would enhance our efforts to underline the importance of and work with negative capability in the HRD context.

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