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Can 'restorative circles' build relationships on master's degrees? Exploring students' and lecturers' experiences and perceptions of impact

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests a connection between student relationships with other students and lecturers, and their outcomes and experiences of higher education. Yet, master's students are overlooked in this area of practice and research, with few studies investigating relationship building at the postgraduate level. To date, moreover, no studies have used restorative circles – a methodology for designing and structuring dialogue processes that aims to build relationships among a group – on master's programmes. This article outlines the key findings from a study of a novel project, the 'MA Dialogue', on an Irish master's degree. Using restorative circles, this brought students and lecturers together for regular conversations to build their relationships. The dataset consists of 35 interviews with students (26/51) and lecturers (9/10) who participated in 'MA Dialogue' sessions over two academic years, considering their experiences and perceptions of its impact. The findings indicate that the project was experienced as a unique opportunity for relationship building, reportedly perceived to humanise lecturers, facilitate students' transitions to master's study, and support teaching and learning. If relationship building is a pedagogical strategy that transcends geographical and disciplinary boundaries, then quantitative research is warranted to investigate the effectiveness of restorative circles for relationship-building in higher education.

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1. Introduction

Research suggests that positive relationships among students and between students and lecturers improve students' outcomes and experiences of higher education. Some (e.g. Haddow and Brodie 2023; Parrish, Guffey, and Williams 2023) explore the effectiveness of community building projects for undergraduate students. However, empirical assessments of relationship-building initiatives at the programme or postgraduate level remain scarce.

This article presents, analyses and considers the implications of findings from a two-year study of the 'MA Dialogue', in which all those who lectured and studied on the Master of Arts in Comparative Criminology and Criminal Justice at Maynooth University (Ireland) were invited to regular, voluntary sessions, dedicated to building relationships. These 'Dialogues' were designed and delivered by the Programme Director (and this paper's first author) as part of their work to explore the different applications of restorative practices in higher education and other settings. Restorative practices are a set of principles and practical skills that guide professionals' interactions with citizens in service

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provision. The aim is to encourage professionals who work in education and other 'human services' (Karp 2019) to recognise the importance of building relationships with the citizens for whose welfare they are responsible and to enable citizens to participate, and for their voices to be heard, in decisions and discussions affecting them (Vaandering 2013). Restorative practices include skills that can be used to provide support and feedback one-to-one, as well as ways to structure group dialogue to build relationships proactively, or when reacting to harm or conflict (Pointer, McGoey, and Farrar 2020).

The specific practice applied here was the 'restorative circle' (or 'circles'), in which the participants sit physically in a circle, a facilitator asks a question, and the right to speak revolves around the group sequentially (Pointer, McGoey, and Farrar 2020; Pranis 2005). In person, participants pass a 'talking piece' to indicate turn-taking; online, the facilitator calls names in turn. This structure aims to reduce power imbalances by giving participants an equal opportunity to speak without interruption. Participants are free to pass rather than speak when it is their turn. This technique is not unique to restorative practices *per se*: both circle structures and turn taking are often used in educational settings. However, the rationale and body of knowledge that informed the design and delivery of the MA Dialogue was restorative practice (e.g. Pointer and Giles-Mitson 2020; Pointer, McGoey, and Farrar 2020; Pranis 2005) – delivering restorative circles proactively, outside class time and for explicitly relational purposes – hence the framing of this work as restorative in nature.

The idea to use circles regularly for relationship building was inspired by the 'sustained restorative dialogue' project at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand (Pointer and Giles-Mitson 2020). In that project, academic restorative practitioners observed a need to bring students together to discuss sexual harm on campus, and offered the same group the opportunity to discuss this subject over several sessions, using circle processes. We drew on the 'proactive' and sustained nature of their project. Neither Pointer and Giles-Mitson nor we were responding to a specific incident in a single session. Rather, both were observing an ongoing challenge (in their case, sexual harm on campuses; in ours, the need to build positive relationships among staff and students on programmes), and both hypothesised that inviting people to regular restorative circles with explicitly relational elements could enable fruitful conversations on the subject to occur. To our knowledge, ours is the first empirical reseach exploring whether restorative circles are a useful relationship building tool across a whole degree, or at the master's level.

The MA Dialogue was established for the 2020/21 academic year (September-August), and continued with a second cohort the following year. This article explores a dataset collected through 35 interviews with lecturers (9/10) and students (26/51) who taught and studied on the MA and attended at least one session these years. Interviews were conducted by students from each cohort (the second and third authors), who also led on the analysis. The research questions asked how interviewees experienced the MA Dialogue and perceived its impact, if any, on their relationships. Recognising the Dialogue's interactional character (Hagenauer and Volet 2014), herein we adopt an interpretive – not multi-dimensional – conception of 'relationships' as *how participants reported feeling about each other following these interactions*. This enables us to investigate what was important to respondents in understanding their relationships.

The paper considers the existing literature on relationships at the postgraduate level and on restorative practices in higher education, before explaining the project and research design. The findings then explore how participants experienced the Dialogue and perceived its impact, focusing on themes of relationship building, humanising lecturers, supporting transitions, and teaching and learning. Further research should explore the effectiveness of restorative practices as a relationship building tool using quantitative methods.

2. Relationships, transitions and postgraduate studies

Certain educational theories place relationships at the centre of teaching and learning. Social constructivism portrays learning as an inherently social process, whereby interpersonal interactions

inform knowledge construction (Pritchard and Woollard 2013). Relationships are essential in adult education theorising, or andragogy (Knowles 1984), which seeks respectful, collaborative, trusting environments to facilitate active, participatory approaches to learning. Equally, relational pedagogy encourages teachers to understand the importance of relationships with learners (Reeves and Le Mare 2017). Bovill (2020) and Gravett (2023) are among those urging lecturers to adopt relational pedagogies to co-create learning experiences with students and enable meaningful partnerships, among other normative and practical reasons.

These ideas remind us that a single-minded focus on the *task* of knowledge transfer can lead us to omit attending to the *social climate* in which processes of learning and transitioning to university occur. Research suggests that relationships among students and between students and lecturers can affect students' experiences and outcomes. Richardson and Radlof (2014) surveyed around 9,000 lecturers and students in Australia, observing that students who reported low quality relationships with lecturers (perceiving lecturers as unavailable, unsympathetic and unhelpful), were most likely to consider changing programmes (see also Eloff, O'Neill, and Kanengoni 2021). For Hagenauer, Muehlbacher, and Ivanova (2023, 820) research shows that 'meaningful' lecturer-student relationships increase student 'motivation, engagement, achievement, retention and well-being'. Studies also connect these relationships, and those between students, to students' resilience (Bleasdale and Humphreys 2018), belonging and satisfaction. Given growing student diversity, Haddow and Brodie (2023) state, institutions must try proactively to foster a greater sense of belonging. For Wiers-Jenssen, Stensaker, and Grøgaard (2002), universities can take advantage of the links between social climates and satisfaction, because climate is easier to improve (by better integrating first-year students, for example) than is campus architecture and other determinants of satisfaction.

The 'transitions' literature in particular commonly recognises the role of relationships in supporting higher education students. For example, the need for social support during the transition to university is well understood (if under-resourced) for undergraduate students. In criminology specifically, a study found that students feel physically, socially and academically 'awkward', creating a 'knot of discomfort' that hampers transitions (Williams and Roberts 2023, 1138). Its authors proposed using subject-specific strategies to improve the social climates on courses, observing that, in this subject, retention was aided by a strong interest in the subject matter.

Although postgraduates, too, struggle to adapt to a new learning style, environment and culture, they remain an 'overlooked cohort' (Coneyworth et al. 2020, 262) in research that considers the importance of relationships in aiding student transitions (see also, White 2023). McLaughlin and Sillence (2023, 63) observe comparatively little attention on social support for the transition to postgraduate study, although postgraduate students reported 'high levels of stress, poor mental health and fatigue'. This is important for the current study: our first cohort learned online during a COVID-19 lockdown, which contributed towards loneliness and mental health problems among young adults (Lee, Cadigan, and Rhew 2020). The 'emergency pivot' to online study – confirmed just one week before the master's started – meant that there were few opportunities for its students to find commonalities, develop friendships, or bolster each other's confidence by offering support and validation (Berry 2019). Without (and, perhaps, even with) a relational intervention, these students may have had especially limited access to social support from other students and lecturers during their transition to their master's programme.

Unique issues for master's students include the challenges in finding social support, in the context of the higher academic demands of postgraduate study. Using small focus groups, McPherson, Punch, and Graham (2017, 45) found that many master's students expressed 'concerns around how to integrate with fellow [postgraduate taught] students'. Spending less time on campus over fewer classes were barriers to integration, especially for those who had studied at another institution previously. Students reported 'feeling secluded and overwhelmed' by not knowing staff or students (McPherson, Punch, and Graham 2017, 45). Although peer and staff support helped create a sense of belonging, this mostly benefitted those returning to the same institution; others needed to overcome the challenge of feeling like an 'outsider', on top of the 'usual' transitional difficulties. For

McLaughlin and Sillence (2023), intellectual challenges are compounded by 'academic loneliness', when a lack of social and emotional peer support causes a limited sense of connection to the group.

Postgraduates therefore require bespoke, discipline-specific interventions, attending to the challenges of working at this higher academic level and the social environment universities provide. In McLaughlin and Sillence (2023, 71), 'a course-based peer network was effective in meeting the social support needs of postgraduates', buffering against academic loneliness. Coneyworth et al. (2020) developed a master's support programme with workshops on skills and wellbeing, as well as social events such as group walks. They collected feedback from two cohorts and, without commenting on the impact on relationships, they found that around 60% of students felt the programme helped them adapt to a new learning environment and clarified expectations. White's study (2023) of a postgraduate transition programme found it also built knowledge and clarified expectations by providing substantive support. Many postgraduates study part-time, work, have caring responsibilities or spend little time on campus (e.g. Micari and Pazos 2014), but offering theoretically-informed activities with social objectives outside of class time seems to improve (at least some of) their experiences nonetheless.

3. Restorative practices and relationship building in higher education in Ireland

Building relationships between lecturers and students is challenging due to the time and skills required: few educators are trained to practice relationally (Llewellyn and Parker 2018), while there may be substantial cultural differences between lecturers and students (Smith et al. 2017). More than this, in many countries, the marketisation of higher education acts to 'recast the relationship between academics and students along the model of a service provider and consumer' (Furedi 2011, 2). For example, Furedi (2011) argues that transactional approaches to education are sufficiently embedded in UK higher education that relationships are characterised primarily in commercial terms: degrees are bought, so 'students-as-consumers' must express satisfaction with the 'product', even if this comes at the expense of intellectual development, challenge and deep engagement with a discipline. Criminology has been notably subject to commodification – partly due to its ability to attract large numbers of undergraduate students – at the expense of the critical thinking and imagination needed for criminology to offer emancipatory educational experiences (A. Barton et al. 2010; Palmer 2020; Sweeney 2022).

This poses a direct challenge to relational and participatory approaches to pedagogy, or indeed, to these approaches to public service provision more widely. Ireland is not immune to neoliberal impulses in higher education policy. Yet, it is not clear that every aspect of the UK's system that might inhibit relational pedagogy is experienced as acutely in Ireland. For example, while Holborow (2012) points out that government rhetoric and policies frame universities as players in a 'skills agenda' which links degrees to economic growth, Hazelkorn (2015), Brooks et al. (2022) and others characterise the sector as less marketised and more social democratic than that in the UK. With a lower gulf in perceived quality between institutions, students more likely to live at home and attend their local university, and sectoral collaboration on admissions all representing a stark contrast to the competition-oriented UK landscape, it is not necessarily the case that the 'students-as-consumers' culture is as rampant in Ireland. Moreover, whereas professional discretion in the UK is highly constrained by performance management (Gravett 2023), Ireland has nothing analogous to the Research Excellence Framework and no domestic rankings systems of note. The informalism enjoyed in the UK public sector before New Public Management remains largely in place here (Hamilton 2019), making it easier for academics to practice and experiment in universities, and engage deeply with their students, with relative autonomy. On the whole, these conditions are conducive to investing in meaningful relational practices, which students may be less likely to dismiss as 'ploys' motivated by the instrumental drivers of consumer satisfaction or resource management (Lohmeyer 2018).

In this context, the MA Dialogue was predicated on a hypothesis that circles can create a space for lecturers and students to speak, listen and better understand each other as people, rather than 'only' or primarily as students or lecturers. Wachtel (2014), citing Habermas' ideas of 'the system' and 'the lifeworld', contends that professionals can utilise restorative practices to ensure citizens experience public services as more humane and less bureaucratising of their lives. In the only other study of restorative practices in higher education in Ireland, Marder et al. (2022) found that circles enabled lecturers and students to have open and honest conversations in ways that accessed their emotional relationships with teaching and learning and helped identify actionable changes that could be made to a course's design.

Circles do not remove power altogether, nor can they abstract conversations from wider institutional and social contexts (Marder and Kurz 2023). However, we can expect the structure to be conducive to relationship building for two reasons. First, where a facilitator designs questions in advance, they can encourage relationally-oriented conversations by, for example, offering participants the opportunity to tell stories about their personal experiences, lives, hobbies, likes and dislikes, families. Facilitators can scaffold questions so that easier, mundane discussions precede more personal, affective conversations. Second, circles use the talking piece to regulate participation sequentially: every person has the same chance to respond to each question. Notwithstanding that participants can pass their turns and that it can take time for several people to speak, circles might enable deeper conversations and connections within a group than, for example, an informal lunch at which attendees speak mostly to those whom they already know or have pre-existing positive biases towards, or have more general and surface-level conversations, if any, with those they do not (Pointer, McGoey, and Farrar 2020).

The largely theoretical nature of the preceding discussion reflects the limited empirical research regarding the mechanisms by which circles might 'work' and regarding their proactive applications in higher education. Most work to implement restorative practices in education focuses on resolving conflict in schools (Hollweck, Reimer, and Bouchard 2019). The largest studies explore the outcomes of 'whole-school approaches' to implementation. For example, Augustine et al. (2018) and Acosta et al. (2019) conducted randomised control trials in dozens of schools. These found positive results for school climates, social skills and connectedness, but rarely attribute their findings to a specific practice, with the focus generally on improving responses to conflict.

Brown (2017) and Parker-Shandal (2022) are among the few scholars directly to study the impact of community-building and/or proactive restorative circles in schools. Brown (2017) observed that circles helped teachers connect, listen and implement projects. Parker-Shandal (2022) explored how teachers used circles in classrooms as pedagogical tools, finding that they helped teachers facilitate constructive dialogue on topics where views diverge, and in ways that ensure disempowered students' voices are heard.

Some universities in the US, New Zealand and Canada offer restorative responses to conflicts (Karp 2019), but this remains relatively underdeveloped in tertiary education settings. For Pointer (2019) a 'restorative university' uses restorative practices for relationship building *and* conflict resolution. Circles, she continues, are key for relationship building as the structure facilitates discussions to establish norms and interpersonal connections better than hierarchical, task-oriented structures typical of inductions and lectures.

A few circle-based projects in universities have been analysed empirically. At Victoria University of Wellington, Residential Advisors oversee student residences. In 2016–18, these 'RAs' were trained to facilitate circles at the start of the year to 'establish group norms' by helping residents discuss 'what they need for a positive living environment' and agree new community guidelines (Pointer 2019, 266). A small survey identified the belief that this helped students communicate. This was informed by work at the University of Vermont, a qualitative study of which found that restorative practices training encouraged RAs to identify community building opportunities (Whitworth 2016). At Italy's University of Sassari, second-year students were trained to facilitate circles to support first-years' 'social integration'. This was found to prepare students academically, build community and reduce

isolation, especially for older students with families (Bussu, Veloria, and Boyes-Watson 2018, 15). McMahon and Karp (2020) replicated this at an American university, facilitating circles on health, academic integrity, friendship and diversity, among other topics. These were recorded and analysed, with their findings indicating strong levels of engagement and improved social support and connections among participants.

Finally, in New Zealand, Pointer and Giles-Mitson (2020) used circles to bring students together to discuss sexual harm in universities. This was informed by 'sustained dialogues', in which diverse groups of students discuss polarising issues over several meetings (Flint 2019). With nine students over five sessions, they built relationships and norms before asking what was happening on campuses, who was affected and how, and what was needed to make things right. As noted earlier, this project greatly informed our own – especially its 'sustained' nature (i.e. inviting the same group to participate over several sessions). Observations, surveys and interviews found high participant satisfaction, strong support for replication, and a belief that it provided insight into sexual harm: story sharing 'put a face to the issue' (Pointer and Giles-Mitson 2020, 32–35). Overall, restorative circles seemingly help students connect, enabling varied, even sensitive, conversations in to take place in higher education settings.

4. Current project – the MA dialogue

4.1. Design and delivery

The MA Dialogue aimed to build and maintain relationships among those who studied or lectured on the MA programme. This idea preceded COVID-19, as the Director previously sought to apply and research restorative practices in higher education (Marder et al. 2022). By September 2020, however, the work felt especially timely as COVID-19 meant that all classes (and MA Dialogue sessions) were delivered online in 2020/21. In 2021/22, classes were in person, eight Dialogue sessions were online and four, in person (see Table 1 for session topics, dates and formats).

Dialogue sessions were roughly monthly. To emphasise their voluntary nature, attendance was not taken and invitees were asked not to notify the Director if they could attend. Consequently, we lack attendance figures, although interviewees were asked to recall how many sessions they attended (see 4.3 below). The first author recalls that at least two lecturers and four students attended each session, except for Y1.11, which no students attended. Student attendance was often in the double digits. The lack of objective attendance data (such as an attendee head count that could have both supplemented the interviewee-reported data and replaced the first author's recollection stated above) is a serious limitation of the study. It means that we cannot undertake quantitative analysis of attendance, we do not know how representative the interviewees are of their wider cohorts and we do not know how many students attended any, all or no sessions. A core challenge is that we did not know we would have the resources to study the MA Dialogue until partway through the second cohort; hence, we lack baseline data, attendance figures were not recorded, and we did not triangulate interview data methodologically through, for example, independent observations of the sessions (Patton 1999). What our qualitative data may lack in reliability, however, they make up for in their validity, permitting us to analyse and understand the experiences of those students who did attend sessions of the MA Dialogue and participated in an interview (Noble and Smith 2015). Other research questions we might have asked about the MA Dialogue, including students' and lecturers' reasons for non-attendance and whether there was a causal relationship between student attendance and academic performance, cannot be answered from the dataset and are beyond the scope of this study.

Two sessions did not use circle processes: Y2.10 involved attending a book launch and did not involve circles, while Y2.12 involved a social event at a pub after students submitted their dissertations. These sessions took place at a time when COVID-19 restrictions were lifting and it was possible to attend in-person events. It was decided that these in-person

Table 1. MA dialogue sessions, 2020/21 and 2021/22.

Year, session	Date	Format	Activities/topics	Notes
Year 1, Session 1 (Y1.1)	30/09/20	Online	Relationship building, agreeing group norms	Agreed features of effective learning and inspiring teaching
Y1.2	23/10/20	Online	Check in, discussions about online learning	Circles and Padlet used to collect feedback
Y1.3	26/11/20	Online	Check in, relational work, photography competition	A student and lecturer judged the competition
Y1.4	17/12/20	Online	Check in, relational work, deciding later Dialogue topics	Concluded Dialogues should include games and careers talks
Y1.5	04/02/21	Online	Joint discussion with students/lecturers at Vermont Law School	Listened to a podcast before, discussed criminal justice in US and Ireland
Y1.6	04/03/21	Online	Check in, discussed dissertations/student-supervisor relationships	Shared hopes and fears, agreed norms, made commitments
Y1.7	26/03/21	Online	Check in, dialogue with justice professionals	Speakers with similar education backgrounds, working in the field
Y1.8	16/04/21	Online	Check in, show something that tells a story about you	
Y1.9	30/04/21	Online	Check in, dialogue with justice professionals	Speakers with similar education backgrounds, working in another field
Y1.10	03/06/21	Online	Check in, online games	
Y1.11	28/06/21	Online	'Shut up and write' for dissertations	Nobody attended
Y2.1	23/09/21	Online	Relationship building, agreeing group norms	Same as Y1.1, students from last cohort spoke
Y2.2	19/10/21	In person	Check in, relational work, discuss interests	
Y2.3	16/11/21	Online	Joint discussion with students/lecturers at Vermont Law School	Same as Y1.5
Y2.4	14/12/21	Online	Check in, relational work, reflections on semester, feedback on course, photography competition	Same as Y1.2 and Y1.3 combined
Y2.5	02/02/22	Online	Check in, show something that tells a story about you	Same as Y1.8
Y2.6	17/02/22	Online	Check in, discussed dissertations/student-supervisor relationships	Same as Y1.6
Y2.7	07/04/22	In person	Meeting needs of victims from migrant background	Workshop with justice professionals
Y2.8	28/04/22	Online	Checking in, reflecting on the semester	
Y2.9	25/05/22	Online	Checking in, discuss assessment marking	
Y2.10	08/06/22	In person	Attending book launch on Irish youth custody	
Y2.11	26/07/22	Online	Checking in, Careers Centre talk	
Y2.12	25/08/22	In person	Pub following final dissertation submission	

events would be prioritised and also 'double' as MA Dialogue sessions, on the assumption that prospective participants had busy schedules as restrictions lifted and would struggle to attend more than one MA-linked event per month. However, the remaining 21 of 23 MA Dialogue sessions all involved circles – even those with other social activities (such as the photography competition) used circles to check in with students and undertake relational work.

Circle questions aimed to check in (e.g. 'what are your energy levels today out of ten?'), build relationships through story sharing (e.g. 'what would you have studied if not criminology?' in Y1.3 or 'what's the best or worst present you've ever received?' in Y1.4), enable reflection on studies to date (e.g. 'what's something you've done that you're proud of this semester and something you've found difficult?' in Y2.4) and discuss teaching (e.g. 'what do you need from a dissertation supervisor or student to thrive?' in Y1.6 and Y2.6). Participants were told that the circle aimed to give them an

equal opportunity to speak and reduce any power imbalances between more and less dominant personalities, and lecturers and students.

4.2. Data collection and analysis

Qualitative interviews explored how participants experienced the Dialogue and perceived its impact on relationships. The same interview schedule was used both years, and for students and lecturers. It asked, *inter alia*, about participants' overall experiences of the MA Dialogue, how they described its environment, whether any activities or conversations left a lasting impression on them, and whether their participation made a difference to them or affected their relationships with others. Interviewees were also asked about their views on the circle process. Ethical approval, prepared in line with the Maynooth University Research Ethics Policy and the British Society of Criminology Code of Ethics, was sought and obtained from the Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Subcommittee.

A student from each cohort (the second and third authors) was hired to conduct interviews with their cohorts, and with lecturers willing to participate in an interview that year. The use of 'peer researchers' is an increasingly common methodology in qualitative research that aims to empower and to build lived experience of a topic into data collection and analysis to help interpret the data and 'sense check' findings (Edwards and Alexander 2011). In our case, we also aimed to make interviewees more comfortable being critical: the second and third authors organised, transcribed and anonymised the interviews, providing a 'firewall' so that the MA Director could not attribute a comment to an individual. Respondents were informed about this process in advance to reduce the risk of social desirability bias in responses. This was the key ethical issue to which we attended: it was important that interviewees did not fear being critical, which they might have had the Director conducted the interviews or even had access to details of who participated in an interview or provided which data points. Enabling students to lead data collection and analysis also increased the independence of these processes, supporting the credibility of the study in the context of the project lead's involvement.

The researcher who conducted the first cohort of interviews worked with the Director to develop an interview schedule, used with both cohorts, aligning with the research questions. Interviews took place online on Microsoft Teams and mostly lasted 30–40 minutes. They were semi-structured, meaning that the researchers could ask participants to elaborate on interesting, unusual or shorter answers. The researcher who interviewed the second cohort used NVivo to code and thematically analyse the full dataset, while the first author reviewed the anonymised transcripts to get to know the data and highlight where participants described their experiences of the Dialogue or discussed its impact. The authors discussed the codes and agreed four themes that appeared to us to give the best structure to the data, allowing us simultaneously to discuss the main patterns within the data and to contextualise these in relation to how they align with, or deviate from, existing literature. This thematic, triangulated approach enabled us to identify, interpret and report on patterns in the data, with a broadly deductive approach used to answer the research questions (Braun and Clarke 2006). As the findings demonstrate, this analytical process created detailed knowledge embodied in participant experiences.

4.3. Population and sample

The researchers invited ten lecturers who taught the MA, and 23 and 28 students from 2020/21 (one part-time) and 2021/22 (two part-time), respectively, to an interview. These took place from December-January after grades were released in October. It was decided to leave time between grade release and interviews to reduce the chance that emotions relating to grades would influence responses.

Ultimately, each year, 13 students were interviewed. In Year 1, eight of the 10 lecturers were interviewed, with one more interviewed in Year 2. Overall, 26 of 51 students and nine of 10 lecturers

were interviewed. In line with our ethical approval, we did not record demographic information. However, most students in both years presented as female, and the university attracts the highest proportion of deprived students in Ireland (Higher Education Authority 2019). Many students were probably the first in their family to study a master's (or indeed, an undergraduate) degree, potentially influencing their sense of belonging (Pedler, Willis, and Nieuwoudt 2022).

When asked if the student interviewees studied criminology in the same university previously, 77% in Year 1 and 54% in Year 2 had done so, compared with 70% and 50%, respectively, in each year group overall. Consequently, interviewees broadly represented their cohorts in terms of whether they studied criminology in the same university previously. We asked interviewees to estimate the number of MA Dialogue sessions they attended. Lecturers reported attending a mean of 4.2 sessions (range: 1–11) and students, a mean of 7.0 (range: 2–10) in Year 1 and 6.3 (range: 2–10) in Year 2. Although over 50% of students were interviewed over the two cohorts, interviewees' views may not represent their cohorts if those who attended or enjoyed the Dialogue were most likely to be interviewed. We suspect our sample is likely to be biased towards students who attended regularly (although we do not know by how much), and we cannot comment on the ability of this work to address the needs of students who did not attend and may have felt most socially excluded. Still, given that both lecturer and student interviewees generally attended multiple sessions, these data represent a valid way to research MA Dialogue participants' experiences and perceptions of impact.

Where quoted, participants are allocated a code including a random number, a letter to indicate Students (S) and Lecturers (L) and Y1 or Y2 to indicate their year. L5Y1 was a lecturer interviewed in Year 1, S12Y2 was a student from the second cohort, and so on.

5. Findings and discussion

Both the students and the lecturers who were interviewed reported experiencing the MA Dialogue positively and perceiving a range of benefits emerging from their participation. In this section, we divide the patterns that emerged from our analysis of the data into four themes, and situate the findings in the literature on relationships, social support and transitions in higher education. We discuss findings that the MA Dialogue reportedly succeeded in building relationships by helping people connect and share personal stories, and made lecturers seem more 'human' in students' eyes, with students expressing feeling more cared for and being more likely to seek help as a result. The MA Dialogue was also described as supporting student transitions as they were reassured that other students felt the same as they did, and they understood academic expectations clearer. Interviewees also indicated that the relationships built helped students feel more motivated to engage actively with learning, and lecturers, more comfortable teaching online.

5.1. A unique opportunity to connect and build relationships

Interviewees depicted the MA Dialogue as different to anything else they experienced or heard about in higher education due to its focus on relationship building. They described it as helping them get to know each other and as creating relationships among them. In contrast, several students reported discussing the Dialogue with friends studying other master's courses, who did not know their lecturers or other students as well. S3Y2 said that friends 'didn't really know anyone in their department [but] we literally know every single lecturer, whether they're our lecturer or not'. S16Y1 reported that their cohort were 'all very close', but friends studying for a master's elsewhere 'don't know half their class'. Lecturers also described this as unique: unconstrained by the imperative of content delivery, they reported engaging in group activities alongside students, and connecting with students 'as people'.

Interviewees reported that dedicating time to relationship building outside class helped them get to know each other and connect at a human level. As the sessions were separate from classes, they

could 'talk about things that are not just related to the course [but that are] more personal' (S10Y2) and felt 'treated as a human rather than a student' (S14Y2). Students in both years said that they would not otherwise have been able to build these relationships. Those who studied online during COVID-19 felt this keenly. For S5Y1, COVID made it 'very difficult for students to create bonds, so [the Dialogue] was a great way of doing that', while S13Y1 said that 'after the Dialogue, I was more comfortable speaking to everyone in the group chat'. S7Y1 reported that it 'gave us that time to have the informality and make friends'. S10Y1 compared it to 'catching up with friends', continuing that this seemed 'mad' because '90% of us never met each other. I don't think, without the Dialogue, we would have had relationships'. Year 2 students had their classes in person, but still noted that the Dialogue built connections that may not have existed otherwise. S6Y2 said the MA Dialogue was the only reason they had spoken to 'all 27 other people'. For S8Y2, it meant that 'nobody was a stranger'.

Seemingly, sharing personal stories was the mechanism by which relationships were built. For example, S11Y1 said: 'you did really get to know people. Someone would tell a story that was maybe personal, and you would just get to know that person and what they were like'. S14Y1 stated that 'talking about our backgrounds, our interests, our hobbies and finding things in our house and then describing the significance of that item' helped them get to know each other. Several interviewees recalled this session: they were invited to 'find something in your house that tells a story about you' and, in circles, present it. As S4Y1 recalled: 'loads of people had Star Wars things, and I'm like, "yeah, that's my jam". You bonded with people off that'. These data reflect the fact that circles ensure that every participant can equally share and listen, while the absence of 'content' and the relational focus enabled people to share aspects of their lives, beyond being a student or lecturer. One lecturer (L20Y1) said:

> It's funny because I don't remember what any of them got in my class. But I remember who loved horse riding, who did kickboxing or who had cats. [. . .] I think that's why you feel more connected and invested with them because you actually know them as people, not just students or names on a spreadsheet.

While the pandemic could have prevented students from getting to know each other outside of class, the Dialogue seemed to provide a unique opportunity to connect across the programme that transcended online and in-person learning. Not all students attended every session, but the circle structure meant participants always heard from everyone who went, connecting students and lecturers who may not otherwise have spoken or gotten to know each other. This represents a level of social integration that one might reasonably expect to contribute to positive student experiences and support student transitions (Bovill 2020).

5.2. Humanising lecturers

Data suggest that the Dialogue helped students recognise lecturers' humanity and connect with them on a 'human' level. The knowledge they gained about 'lecturers as people' appeared to foster student empathy for lecturers, narrowing a perceived distance between them. Students reported feeling more cared about and willing to seek help as a result.

Students reported that lecturers speaking about their own lives reduced distance between them. This seemingly helped students empathise with lecturers and see them as 'more human', and less as abstract authority figures. From hearing about work-related challenges and opinions unrelated to their discipline, to learning that they were nervous public speakers – 'a pretty damn human thing to admit' (S21Y1) – and even that they were awaiting a food delivery, it appears that virtually any knowledge about lecturers' lives built students' empathy for them. This also indicates that the default position was to perceive a high degree of distance. Many described seeing lecturers as 'more human' because of the Dialogue, such as S16Y1:

> It was nice to see that they were like . . . not to say that they're not humans, we know that they're humans, but kind of like bringing them down to that level of, 'oh yeah, like they're humans too'.

S10Y2 studied elsewhere beforehand and previously 'wouldn't really know about my lecturers [but] the Dialogue opened up that space to get to know them more personally, which changed my perspective on the Department'. Here, they recalled that a lecturer simply mentioned what they had studied at undergraduate level. For S4Y2, this kind of learning:

> Took away that mentality of, like, your lectures are far off from you [. . .] They're people that you could relate to, talk to, who have experienced what you're experiencing. [. . .] It helps you see your lecturer less as equal to God, it helps them become more relatable.

This knowledge, in turn, affected both how students perceived lecturers and how they believed they were perceived. Several described trusting lecturers more and feeling cared for and valued. S2Y2 noted that 'when you have that opportunity to get to talk to lecturers as people, you make them respect you more as an academic, and you kind of trust them more'. For S10Y2, 'it was nice for your lecturers to actually be interested in you and ask what you're doing and how you're getting on. It made you feel important I suppose, it made you feel heard'. To S6Y2, this meant 'you felt more valued', and for S11Y1, it 'makes you a person instead of just a number'. S15Y2 described realising that their lecturers were 'normal, everyday people', who did not 'look down on me because they have all these amazing qualifications and I don't'.

This seemed also to reduce students' fear of lecturers, making them more willing to ask questions and report problems. S6Y2 mentioned Session S2.Y1, in which lecturers and students were asked to discuss things they had in common:

> Not that you didn't see them as human, but then you see them like, 'oh they do the same thing I do' or 'they feel the same'. It broke down a stigma of like, 'I can't approach them'.

Several others used language around 'approachability' (e.g. S19Y1: 'it just took away this big scary appearance of them being unapproachable'), or otherwise associated knowing lecturers 'as people' with being comfortable seeking help. S13Y1 described overcoming the stereotype that 'lecturers are very like strict and stuff', but that 'when they're talking to you, it does really help with being more comfortable asking for help'. Others said this made them feel comfortable contacting lecturers if a problem arose, with some linking this to the challenges of reaching out during COVID-19, adapting to a new institution, or, like S4Y2, disclosing personal issues:

> I had, like, issues when I first came in and it was hard just walking up to someone and asking for help. But I think it was after the first Dialogue or the second one, I felt like 'ok, you know what, I could approach two or three people and just ask for help'. [. . .] I think it helped me to be vulnerable, to ask for help and not shut myself off.

For Dost and Smith (2023), students feeling a 'connection to the faculty' is a central element of belonging. Likewise, Gravett and Winstone (2022) found a sense of disappointment among students when academics failed to connect authentically with them. First-generation students in particular might lack information about whether academics respect and care about them, or look down on them and feel that their time is better spent elsewhere. The Dialogue appeared to help fill this information vacuum, enabling lecturers to communicate their humanity and desire to support students in ways that students heard and understood. In youth work contexts, where professional-citizen relations have been studied (e.g. Fullerton, Bamber, and Redmond 2021), the main indicator of a positive relationship for citizens was the feeling that the professional genuinely wanted to support them. While Parrish, Guffey, and Williams (2023) found that face-to-face teaching was more conducive to students feeling connected to their lecturers than online teaching, participants in both cohorts – one of which learned online and the other, in person – reported that the Dialogue helped them see lecturers as empathetic, caring 'humans' whom they were willing to contact if needed.

5.3. Supporting transitions: peer reassurance and expectation clarity

Students in both years reported that the Dialogue supported their transitions to master's study by reassuring them that their feelings were shared by others, and clarifying expectations. Some recalled that the first Dialogue – before the first class – calmed their nerves. S11Y2 said that they were 'really nervous to start a master's', but 'the September Dialogue made me relate to other people in the master's because everyone was going through the same thing'. Numerous others said that hearing other students' hopes and concerns at that time helped lessen 'imposter syndrome'. This, combined with the finding that sharing personal stories and interests helped them connect, supports Brodie and Osowksa's contention (Brodie and Osowska 2021) that providing non-academic activities during orientation reduces barriers before teaching begins, and further evidences the circle structure's utility for enabling listening and emotional exchange in this context.

The sustained nature of the Dialogue reportedly provided ongoing peer reassurance for those who felt stressed during the programme. S21Y1 quipped that 'it was nice to hear other people suffering [laughter]. I'm just joking. It was nice to hear that other people were finding it difficult', while S4Y2 said that 'you could hear your other classmates having the same issues. And it's like, "ah, ok, I'm not alone"'. S8Y2 similarly explained:

> I really enjoyed the circle reflection because you can get in your own head and you think it's only you struggling, then when you hear from other students that they're in the same boat, it somehow makes you feel better.

This aligns with findings by Walton and Cohen (2011) that universities can enhance students' sense of belonging by framing their adversity as common and transient. The Dialogue did this by allowing students to share, and to listen to others sharing, their intellectual insecurities. The realisation that their stresses were common seemed to reassure them. S19Y1 felt that 'hear[ing] each other's concerns' also produced a 'sense of bonding with everyone because it actually just shows you're not alone'. This could be an illustration of M. Barton and Kahn's (2019) 'relational pauses', where collective, dialogic reflection on shared adversity enhances group resilience and relationships. Likewise, circle participants in Pointer and Giles-Mitson (2020, 37) expressed a 'sense of liberation' from 'sharing their experiences and hearing the experiences of others'.

A research review by Schillings et al. (2023) found that students perceived dialogic support for academic writing to clarify expectations better than didactic instruction or written feedback, as dialogic approaches facilitate peer-to-peer learning and enable lecturers to answer questions and explain their reasoning. In this research, some students similarly reported that the Dialogue clarified expectations, supporting the transition to master's study. Some related this to studying in another discipline or institution previously, while several mentioned that Session Y1.6/Y2.6 on student-dissertation supervisor relationships clarified expectations. For S1Y1, dissertations (a 20,000 word final thesis) were 'incredibly daunting', but it helped to have the 'conversation to manage expectations [about] what I'm expected to provide for my supervisor [and] what my supervisor is expected to provide'. S7Y1 reported that 'it was nice to hear like the expectations of lecturers. It kinda made it a bit less daunting'.

L3Y1 echoed that this discussion 'left a lasting impression. [I've] never really heard students talk about dissertations. It's something that staff tend to do on their own with a student, so the collective discussion was really interesting'. Students had attended a lecture introducing dissertations, but the Dialogue uniquely involved two-way conversations exploring lecturers' and students' feelings: their hopes and fears. This exchange seemed to help respondents better understand each other's needs' and clarified norms. For L15Y1, in the dissertation sessions 'a real conversation happened, as opposed to each group of people listening to the other'. This unusual authenticity could stem from circle processes being conducive to a two-way exchange, or from participants already having relationships that gave them the motivation and confidence to speak openly, hear and understand each other. Either way, it seems that the Dialogue likely helped.

5.4. Enabling teaching and active learning through confidence and motivation

Students reported that the Dialogue built their confidence, comfort and motivation to attend and participate actively in class, usually attributing this to their experiences of speaking in front of others or the relationships built. Lecturers, too, reported that knowing students better improved their confidence with (particularly, emergency online) teaching.

For some students, the Dialogue built relationships that helped them talk in classes. For example, S5Y2 reported that the Dialogue 'encouraged me to speak up more because I was comfortable enough with the relationship'. For others, it lessened their nervousness about being judged for a contribution. S6Y1, for example, said that the MA Dialogue 'just helped bring up confidence, knowing that your opinions were valued and there was no such thing as a stupid question or statement', while S4Y2 said that 'in class, I was able to share my opinions without feeling like "ah I've said something wrong". Like it just it helped me to engage more'. Students gave examples of where relationships built through the Dialogue reduced awkwardness when discussing difficult subjects like sexual violence, or it representing public speaking experience which increased their comfort with groupwork and presentations. This indicates that speaking together during Dialogues created relationships and set a precedent of participation that enabled active learning in classes (Knowles 1984).

Likewise, the dataset suggests a connection between relationships between students and lecturers, and students' motivation to engage. For S11Y1, knowing lecturers better 'makes you want to go to class'. Relatedly, for S14Y1:

> You even begin to like them a bit better or whatever and kind of engage more in classes because you know something else about them. [. . .] It makes you more interested in what they have to say when you have that connection with them on a more personal level.

This aligns with studies finding that student perceptions of positive relationships with lecturers (Leenknecht et al. 2023; Xerri, Radford, and Shacklock 2018) and supportive learning environments (Richardson and Radlof 2014) can improve active engagement in learning. Here, lecturers also suggested that the relationships promoted engagement. L18Y1 said that Dialogues 'helped my teaching', as they 'didn't feel as disconnected from [students] as I would have otherwise [and] they were a lot more comfortable with me when I was teaching'. L7Y2's dissertation supervisees did not study their course, but meeting in Dialogues usefully 'accelerated the relationship'. Thus, these relationships were perceived to support teaching, as well as learning.

L3Y1 and L8Y1 reported feeling uncomfortable teaching online during COVID, but that meeting students beforehand helped. For L3Y1:

> It certainly benefited me because I felt I wasn't coming cold to the class [. . .] I really felt, 'I know these people'. In the context where you're talking essentially into a computer, a void, it helps to know there are rounded personalities on the receiving end.

Likewise, L8Y1 told the interviewer:

> I had heard your voices, which in the age of this kind of technology is really important. [. . .] I had less butterflies despite being terrified of teaching online because I met all you and heard you speak. I saw what you looked like in the little boxes so it was like 'oh yeah, here's part of the group from the Dialogue'. That helped enormously.

Research seldom includes lecturers' perspectives on their relationships with students, despite the likelihood that these affect their working lives, pedagogical practices and job satisfaction (Hagenauer and Volet 2014). More research is required on relationship-building initiatives and their effects, if any, on teaching and learning, especially at postgraduate level. Here, lecturers reported detecting both emotional and practical benefits to the MA Dialogue, improving their confidence to teach online – at least, in the context of the pandemic.

6. Conclusion – the need for relationship building on master's degrees

Pedagogical theories and empirical studies propose that relationships are a major factor in determining students' experiences and outcomes in higher education. That literature mostly comprises quantitative analyses of the factors influencing undergraduate student outcomes and satisfaction. Few studies analyse specific relationship-building initiatives focusing on master's students (or incorporate lecturers' views), and none have empirically researched the utility of restorative practices in this exact context.

This paper addresses some of these gaps by providing a thick, qualitative understanding of how students and lecturers experienced the MA Dialogue. Its findings align with quantitative research indicating that positive relationships among students and lecturers can support student transitions and improve academic engagement. Specifically, it implies that restorative circles can help build relationships within master's degrees. Lecturers and students alike told of feeling more connected by getting to know each other 'as people', both during and after the 'emergency pivot' to online education. They described the Dialogue as providing a (unique) opportunity to build relationships and empathy between them, as they shared information about their personal lives, needs and emotions – the mechanism through which the Dialogue seemed to have a relational effect.

Educators and students often lack empathy for each other and fail to understand each other's motivations and practices (Hattie and Yates 2014) – a disconnect that Richardson and Radlof (2014), 613) attribute to a lack of 'sustained and significant contact' between students and lecturers. Here, a disconnect was detectable only insofar as students described a newfound recognition of lecturers' humanity, and lecturers reported better understanding students' needs. In this sense, the Dialogue was an 'intergroup dialogue' – a structured, facilitated conversation that reduced stereotypes and increased empathy between 'groups' (Dessel and Rogge 2008). It reportedly supported student transitions in an ongoing way (Araujo et al. 2014) by clarifying the norms and expectations of master's study and demonstrating the care and approachability (perhaps, the humanity) of lecturers. This is crucial when students feel culturally marginalised from their academic environment (Haddow and Brodie 2023).

One practical implication is that lecturers may be able to understand students better by speaking with them about non-academic issues, and humanise themselves in students' eyes by building more personal anecdotes into their interactions. That said, we appreciate that there is a certain level of privilege in feeling comfortable enough to show such vulnerability in front of students without the fear or risk of being judged, or of one's expertise and professionalism being undermined. Indeed, although it might be more time-intensive, there may be more safety for lecturers in going down this route as a team and alongside departmental/programme leaders, or otherwise in groups. The conditions under which lecturers do or do not feel safe to engage vulnerably with students in this manner could be the focus of further qualitative research.

This dataset helps us understand how students and lecturers experienced the restorative approach to relationship building, and indicates the potential of this approach to support student transitions and teaching and learning. These students' views may not represent those who were not interviewed, and whose needs the Dialogue may not have met. Many interviewees reported that they would have been more disconnected without it, but plausibly, the most disconnected participated in neither Dialogues nor interviews, raising concerns of equity. More broadly, the study must be seen in context: this project took place during or adjacent to COVID restrictions, in a country (Ireland) where academic discretion remains higher than in its highly managerialised neighbours. Moreover, lecturers had some familiarity with restorative practices due to the first author's research. This article speaks only to one discipline, context and time, to students of a specific demographic, and to a cohort of lecturers who were open to relational approaches.

Still, this research provides sufficient theoretically-informed evidence to merit further study. A randomised control trial could involve numerous master's degrees and collect baseline data

that permits the impact of restorative practices on relationships, teaching and outcomes to be measured quantitatively. This research could explore whether discipline, country and dosage (e.g. monthly vs quarterly meetings) matter. This may be particularly valuable in developing similar programmes that are more accessible to lecturers and students because they require less of an investment of time. For example, given the apparent importance of building relationships at the outset of a programme, future projects could compare sustained (monthly) approaches with those that frontload relational work or that use it to 'bookend' semesters. Experiences and outcomes from online and in-person delivery could be compared, while efforts could be made to build this work into compulsory modules so lecturers are not overburdened with additional contact hours and students need not be available outside of class time to benefit. Practically, we can develop training in restorative circle facilitation and relational pedagogy for programme leaders to empower them to consider how best these can be applied in context, considering the significant cultural and organisational differences between higher education sectors and staff-student relationships in different countries (Brooks et al. 2022). Building relational or dialogic work into programme leads' responsibilities might represent a pathway to its mainstreaming.

Meanwhile, we believe that the evidence that relationships matter and improving them is possible is sufficient for lecturers proactively to consider how to build relationships on the master's programmes they lead and teach.

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