



RESEARCH PAPER

‘Starting Strong’: A critical reflection of the complexities of orienting students in higher education

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Navigating any new environment can be stressful and confronting. For students in widening participation programs, orientation into the higher education environment can bring additional challenges potentially not considered nor adequately addressed by educators. This paper explores my own critical reflections as an academic in widening participation through the lens of my development and leadership of an orientation initiative – ‘Starting Strong’ – within an Australian enabling program. Through my involvement in the Centre for Excellence in Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) Writing Program at the University of Newcastle, I was gifted time and a critical friend to explore my own perspectives and approaches to this initiative, underpinning this with theories of enabling pedagogy. Through this process I was emboldened to recognise that whilst the concept of commencing students being ‘on a journey’ is a well-worn metaphor, attention to the role of the educator on this journey must not go unexamined. As educators who commonly adopt the role of the ‘mentor’ within the ‘Hero’s Journey’ of our students (Campbell, 1949), we need time and space to interrogate the initiatives such as ‘Starting Strong’, to ensure that such interventions, designed to help students navigate and negotiate their new environment, do not unwittingly reproduce the structural inequalities inherent in higher education.

Keywords: enabling; orientation; higher education; Starting Strong; critical reflection

Background and context

I think my personal experience of starting at the university had a lasting impact on my own feelings of belonging and validity as an academic. Fortunately, I was able to engage with others by using my own social capital to find out information, but simultaneously this eroded my own integrity by being self-deprecating to cover up how I felt inadequate, or to disguise things I didn’t know and felt I should. Many of these things were simple, perfunctory or process things for which some explicit instruction or guidance would have had a different long-term impact on my sense of identity as an academic. When reflecting on this, I feel the same must occur for students. We give them access to information but not sufficient guidance to decode it. Students are not shown where to look or introduced to who to ask. If these are the simple ‘straws’ that ‘break the camel’s back’ in terms of retention and

engagement, why aren't we getting rid of the straws? (Journal entry from Workshop 1, CEEHE Writing Program, March 2019)

The 'Hero's Journey' (Campbell, 1949) outlines a common pattern in the structure of many hundreds of stories, myths and fables. This monomyth structures the Protagonist's progression through their narrative. In its pure form, the structure has 17 stages, grouped into three key phases. In an abridged version, the Hero: (i) answers a call to adventure; (ii) meets a mentor to assist them on their journey; (iii) is initiated through a series of trials culminating in an ultimate boon; and, finally, returns home again changed to share their newfound wisdom with the rest of their world. While a narrative archetype for fiction, parts of this structure form a useful lens with which to view the journey of students commencing university.

The call to adventure

Whether small or great, and no matter what the stage or grade of life, the call rings up the curtain... The familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand. (Campbell, 1949, p. 51)

Navigating any new environment requires the generation of schemas grounded in a reality that help to understand our surroundings and ultimately reach our goal. This can be stressful, obstacle-laden and confronting. Navigating the university environment and its 'orientation week' can be seen as the 'call to adventure' for the thousands of students who commence their studies in higher education in Australian universities. Orientation programs in higher education are commonly understood to provide the opportunity to acculturate into a new environment, understand expectations and navigate the behavioural norms of a new space. Conceptually, orientation or socialisation into a new environment is "designed to reduce new-comers ambiguity about how they should behave" (Cable, Gino & Staats, 2013a, p. 4). In the case of universities, orientation activities frequently centre around student-to-student interactions or extracurricular opportunities. Whilst highlighting the social aspects of being a university student are valuable, these efforts do not provide adequate opportunity to address the norms and expectations that exist within the academic spaces of the institution. De-emphasising orientation into the academic culture of higher education through limited time and space for new students to learn and rehearse these required expectations and behaviours shifts the onus of this enculturation to students to learn this independently.

For students engaged in widening participation programs, navigating into this environment can bring additional challenges potentially not considered nor adequately addressed by educators. Widening participation programs offer an alternative pathway into university for students who have either not achieved the entry score needed for a Bachelor program or who, for a plethora of reasons, have not completed Year 12. The challenges students in widening participation programs face when commencing university are as diverse as this student group itself, yet frequently differ from those of 'traditional' students which the institution and its support systems have been designed to support. By recognising the strengths that students in widening participation programs bring to university, this provides an opportunity to both examine the existing enculturation processes embedded within the dominant hegemonic structures of higher education and work to build a suitable orientation that values these experiences. These dominant structures are built on histories of exclusion which continue to be exclusionary for those without the requisite knowledge or experience to decode them. Interventions which recognise students existing strengths as a valuable resource, to not only retain but further

develop as they commence their studies, provide an opportunity to make subtle shifts in these inherent and dominant structural inequalities.

Whilst a considerable body of literature has explored the various benefits of orientation for traditional university students, including the links between orientation and retention (Larmar & Ingamells, 2010), orientation and the development of a new student identity (Whannell & Whannell, 2015), and recognition of the importance of targeted support early in the student lifecycle (Brunton et al., 2019), research into orientation for students participating in tailored widening participation programs is underrepresented. Whannell (2013, p. 280) outlines the need for “a comprehensive orientation process [...] to facilitate the development of a robust sense of emotional commitment to a positive academic identity prior to the completion of the initial assessment tasks”. Habel and Whitman (2016) evidence the strong relationship between “enculturation experiences of any type and the success that these students have experienced” (2016, p. 78). More broadly, research into student experiences within widening participation programs outlines the complexity and confusion which can arise for students who are juggling multiple identities as they commence their studies (Willans, 2019; Hattam & Bilic, 2019; Hattam, Stokes & Ulpen, 2018).

As stated by Hodges et al. (2013, p. 5) the first three weeks at university are critical to whether students stay or leave. Zepke and Leach (2010) argue that student engagement is complex and multifaceted, but tangible actions, which include opportunities for students to “develop their social and cultural capital” and in addition “ensure institutional cultures are welcoming to students from diverse backgrounds” (p. 169), provide a solid rationale for the inclusion of a tailored and specific event for students entering widening participation programs. While the concept of providing events tailored to discipline-specific cohorts is not new, with similar programs having been offered for undergraduate students in engineering and science (Peat, Dalziel & Grant, 2001; Martin, Steedman & Keleher, 2006), evidence of tailored orientation within Australian widening participation programs is limited.

The Starting Strong program is a tailored and specific orientation for commencing students of UniSA College enabling programs. Starting Strong was developed in 2016 and is offered to all commencing students across UniSA College programs – Foundation Studies, Diplomas and the Aboriginal Pathway. The development of Starting Strong occurred after recognising the temporal power inherent in an orientation period. This was a recognition of both the timing of orientation – the ‘when’ – and temporality – the concept of where we find our beings in time. These concepts are explored by Bennett and Burke (2017) in the context of higher education who explain how “time is institutionally structured and caught within complex webs of social networks, relations and inequalities that are considered differently within different social contexts” (p. 914). An important consideration is the temporal location of the ‘Hero’ in the journey, that is at the beginning, having crossed the threshold between old and new; keen, even impatient, to begin. Recognition of this lived and embodied experience of time along with the shaping of time through the hegemonic discourse of higher education provided impetus to share specific information relevant to widening participation students at this point in their journey, beyond the existing activities provided by the university.

Prior to Starting Strong, existing workshops designed to build student confidence in academic skills and further nurture a developing sense of belonging to the university environment suffered limited attendance. This was despite perceived student need for such initiatives. Even with a ‘just in time’ approach to scheduling throughout the semester, we were unfortunately never going to be there ‘just in time’ for every student. This connects with how time is shaped

in higher education, with limited or little recognition for differing student relations to time, along with the symbolic, material and structural inequalities that are reinforced through this misrecognition (Bennett & Burke, 2017). Evaluation of the limited attendance, including significant discussion with students, suggested that complex lives alongside competing course demands and variable emotional investment in their studies meant that workshops (as a non-compulsory or graded event) were mostly attended by those who had already developed the skills and confidence the workshops were designed to foster. With feedback about the workshops always positive and echoing the professional, concentrated effort put in by the academics who devised and delivered them, it became clear that timing was the primary limitation to their success. Further, the time and space available for engagement during orientation week was recognised as an underutilised opportunity.

The initiation

As a Program Director privileged to formally welcome students into the university environment, I recognised the commencement of studies as when students seemed most in need of practical information about how best to face their impending challenges and trials. Standing in front of a lecture theatre welcoming over 500 faces wide-eyed with both anticipation and anxiety reminded me of my own commencing journey at the university and formation of my own academic identity.

As found by King, McCann and Luzeckyj (2019), the formation of a student identity is a profound change which is complex, multifaceted and common. For widening participation students, this can be compounded by a lack of familial role-models to provide understanding or guidance from lived-experience. In line with Whannell and Whannell's (2015) suggestion of the high probability of identity conflicts for widening participation students I considered this timing an opportunity for students to recognise the multiple roles they play and build confidence in the skills needed to define the boundaries of this new identity. Positioning this during orientation week when the maximum number of students in the same situation are present could situate this developing student identity into a community (Scanlon, Rowling & Weber, 2007). This would make visible the constraints that students often face in widening participation programs and thereby begin to reduce the structural inequalities inherent in higher education. The transition would be smoother, not because students would suddenly change or forget who they were, but rather because this diversity of the student body could be recognised in the institutional culture (Burke, Crozier & Misiaszek, 2012, p. 89). Students might then commence their program with increased confidence and understanding of their existing strengths, as well as recognition of areas in which they might further acquire, develop and challenge the required cultural and social capitals needed at university, and how to access available supports to enable them to do so (Burke, Crozier & Misiaszek, 2012, p. 89).

Methodological and conceptual tools

Autoethnography provides a grounding to connect micro-events from one's life to larger societal, cultural and political structures and problems. Tracy (2013) has stated that, "Through a vivid focus on power and justice, auto-ethnography can improve social conditions and unpack the personal implications of difficult issues" (p. 6). In this paper I identify as an academic working within a widening participation program at a South Australian University. I am drawing on autoethnographic approaches and pairing this critically reflexive methodology with Burke's (2016) concept of 'acknowledge, unsettle, enquire' with Munro et al.'s (2019) idea of 'grappling'. I have used these as a lens to analyse my documentation of the experience of creating an orientation for students within a widening participation program aiming to value the experiences that students from non-traditional pathways bring to university. This paper

documents me unbundling the challenge of implementing an intervention designed to make the implicit explicit in order to reduce existing structural inequality, as far as might be possible, whilst negotiating this space to ensure inequities are not instead unwittingly reproduced.

I am a Caucasian female from a comparatively privileged educational background to many of the students I teach. Despite this privilege, my own orientation into the university environment, albeit as an employee, confronted me with the need to develop my own new ‘academic’ identity. On reflection, this emotional experience of ‘crossing the threshold’, on my own Hero’s Journey (Campbell, 1949), strengthened my resolve to ensure that my ‘crossing the return threshold’ (when the protagonist returns and retains wisdom gained) would have a positive impact on students.

My data for this paper is my own reflection on the development and delivery of Starting Strong, a program underpinned by enabling pedagogies, along with student comments and personal communications. This draws on the narrative approaches outlined by Burke (2012) which provide an opportunity to examine which and whose stories are told, and importantly, how these stories then become embedded into policy and practice. The inclusion of my own narrative in this article aims to outline the fundamental shift in my approach to the inclusion of this orientation ‘intervention’ within a widening participation program. Many of the statements included in this piece were recorded during my involvement in the writing program at the Centre for Excellence and Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) held at the University of Newcastle during 2019, reflections from my own personal journal, and conversations with my CEEHE writing mentor. Through my involvement in the CEEHE writing program I was gifted both time and a ‘critical friend’ (Croker & Trede, 2009). This enabled me to be critically reflexive of my practice, and understand not only the importance of the theory that has underpinned my work, but the communication of this to ensure that the structural inequalities or deficit viewpoints, which have the capacity to thwart the good intentions that such interventions aim to provide, are not unwittingly reproduced.

Due to the subjective nature of this material, I have been influenced by phronesis, recognising both the contextual knowledge and my iterative construction of this as fundamental to my research, alongside the influence of my own values. Phronesis assumes that perception comes from self-reflexivity, ultimately shaped and formed by preceding individual actions and motivations. Research conducted under its guidance serves “to clarify and deliberate about the problems and risks we face and to outline how things may be done differently, in full knowledge that we cannot find ultimate answers to these questions or even a single version of what the questions are” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 140). Instead, “by identifying a particular issue, problem, or dilemma in the world [we can] then proceed to systematically interpret the data in order to provide an analysis that sheds light on the issue and/or opens a path for possible social transformation” (Tracy, 2013, p. 4).

The trials – Acknowledging my perspectives, the structures, the theories

What if it’s ok to slow down and really find out whether what we’ve put so much energy into is being valued or not? (Journal entry from Workshop 1, CEEHE Writing Program, March 2019)

I answered my own ‘call to adventure’ when I commenced the writing program in 2019. I arrived with a sense of confidence and had dutifully brought survey responses from hundreds of students which I intended to write about. Through my involvement in the CEEHE writing

program, I had the time needed, away from the competing demands that face any academic, to recognise there was an area of my practice worthy of further exploration. As the dates of the academic calendar roll by the emphasis usually remains on working with and supporting students, teaching, marking, meetings and the plethora of other tasks involved in being in a student-facing academic role. There is limited opportunity for writing. Adding the increased performativity expected by academics (O’Keefe, 2019) to achieve outputs and publications contributed to my inertia in putting pen to paper, or fingers to keys.

My intentions for the Starting Strong program from the beginning were clear. I wanted to provide students at the start of their journey with what Appadurai (2004) outlines as ‘navigational capacity’. Appadurai’s (2004) concept can be used to explain how differing groups in society are able to pilot their aspirations; “The capacity to aspire, like any complex cultural capacity, thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture and refutation” (p. 69). The same could be said of successfully navigating the unfamiliar university environment and the subsequent identity of the ‘good’ student. By creating an opportunity to practice, explore and repeat some of the key skills prior to commencing their studies, these practices could be outlined, and students given a place to experiment, explore and rehearse the skills required for successful transition into this new identity, before the onslaught of discipline-specific content commenced.

Starting Strong was initiated by myself and colleague Dr Paul ‘Nazz’ Oldham at the commencement of 2018 with a cohort of 500 students. The program received overwhelmingly positive feedback. Evaluation with colleagues followed the pilot to refine the initial offering in preparation for the mid-semester commences. 2019 saw another further revised version of the initiative. In mid 2019, due to workload constraints, my leadership and delivery of this initiative was passed to a colleague. Again, it was a success, but this was also the moment that the tensions and complexities were revealed for me and something, which now seems so glaringly obvious, first became apparent. The delivery of what was now an established event had been a success, but my communication of the theoretical underpinning and importance of a solid understanding of this to those involved in its delivery was not. It was at this time that I realised that the Starting Strong initiative provided the ‘meeting the mentor’ moment for students as they commenced their Hero’s Journey. As equally as the students needed the opportunity to build their navigational capacity and identity through experimentation, exploration and rehearsal, so did those who deliver this content. It was at this time that I recognised that this was as fundamentally important to this initiative as student attendance. Without this theoretical foundation, the intention of building on the existing strengths within the student body could easily be shifted to something easily viewed as merely a skills workshop or ‘things you probably already know’, unwittingly reinforcing a deficit approach.

Parallel to this realisation was the writing workshops which enabled me to be authentic to the process and space of equity and how I was trying to challenge the existing structures we work within. It was during this time that I was able to take the time to think about the importance of the orientation I was trying to provide for students, and engage deeply with theory to shape my understanding. One of the largest mental obstacles between me and academic writing was feeling a lack of solid connectedness to theory which underpinned my own practice. I felt the need to engage with both ‘experience’ and ‘theory’. As Weedon (1987) states: “While not denying the personal and political importance of experience [...] it is not enough to refer unproblematically to experience, why we need a theory of the relationship between experience, social power and resistance and what sort of theory can serve us best” (p. 8).

In reflecting on my own commencing journey to university as an academic, I recognised how my own lack of ‘hot’ knowledge sources (Ball & Vincent, 1998) contributed to my feelings of ineptitude and a strong sense of imposter syndrome. This theory encapsulates the rationale which underpinned my intentions with Starting Strong. Both Ball and Vincent (1998) and Archer and Yamashita (2003) argue that information provided to students about higher education can be analysed in terms of ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ knowledge. Slack et al. (2014) added a ‘warm’ dimension to this framework. Informal hot knowledge can best be described as ‘word-of-mouth’ knowledge gained from social sources such as family, friends, teachers and others. By contrast ‘cold’ knowledge can be understood as formal knowledge produced, in this case, by educational institutions such as schools, universities and governments. It is ‘objective data’ (Ball & Vincent, 1998, p. 380) and may appear in the form of official websites, course information pamphlets and league tables (Smith, 2011). As found by Ball and Vincent (1998, p. 382) this type of information is usually sourced and more readily decoded by the middle-class. Baker et al. (2018) suggest that warm knowledge sources are preferred by students from demographics well represented within enabling cohorts. It is here that I identified a clear problem with existing orientation information for students, specifically in widening participation cohorts.

As found by Smith (2011), in her study of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds in the northern suburbs of South Australia, students from these areas were more likely to access hot knowledge. This is in keeping with other research (see Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Ball & Vincent, 1998; Callender, 2006; Hutchings, 2006). ‘Hot’ knowledge is informal, socially embedded and therefore directly impacted by the access that people have to social networks. It is recognised that “locality, both geographical and social-structural, affects which of these different networks are available to different groups” (Smith, 2011). If students are accessing hot knowledge sources at university but have limited or no experience of higher education as their primary source of information, there is greater potential for gaps or misinformation in making sense of that hot knowledge. The analogy of a ‘grapevine’ is used here where information is sourced or passed through various social networks (Ball & Vincent, 1998). It logically flows that the networks students are connected to will impact on how knowledge is transmitted and decoded. As Smith (2011) outlines:

[...] for low-SES students from families that do not have transgenerational higher education experiences, relationships that increase their access to valuable hot knowledge, as well as creating opportunities for assistance in decoding important cold knowledge, may assist in making higher education feel possible, creating a role for them in the first act of a new script. (p. 176)

It is from this body of research that I further recognised the need to make the implicit explicit, and to embed this at a program level. Furthermore, by involving multiple academics that students would then see regularly in their classes, we created a large grapevine that students could draw on to further decode the hot knowledge they had access to. The workshop was not facilitated by an area of the university that students then had to make an appointment to see, or by Learning Advisers who were not involved in the program delivery. By making this a team effort, delivered by the majority of the academic team, we placed value in the knowledge we were transferring and the pedagogical structures available to support students’ access to that knowledge. By having the academic team attend and support each session, we created familiarity for and with the teaching team. By including sessional tutors, we reduced the division between casual and permanent staff. Whilst these knowledge sources could traditionally be seen as “part of the ‘cold’ officialdom of the institution” (Baker et al., 2018, p.

13), by not gatekeeping this information behind a digital blockade and having Starting Strong as a fundamental part of orientation for all students, we were striving to turn the academics as a knowledge source from cold to warm. Again through making the implicit rules and expectations of the new environment of university explicit through the creation of a warm knowledge source, the next step was to capitalise on the differing life-world habitus that students brought with them, to see this as an asset rather than any liability that may impact on their success.

It is here that my own discipline knowledge of organisational behaviour theory led me to explore Cable, Gino and Staats' (2013b) strengths-based approaches to enculturation which they term 'onboarding', albeit in a manner influenced by recognition of the increasing privatisation, commodification and marketisation of education in Australia. Whilst the idea of building on existing strengths or life-world habitus is evident in education research, it also features increasingly in literature in the field of management with the rise in the concept of moving employees from 'orientation' to 'onboarding'. Commonly used in Human Resources processes at the beginning of employment, 'onboarding' is a form of organisational socialisation where employees acquire the necessary skills, knowledge and behaviours to become effective organisational 'insiders'. It was this which connected strongly with my intentions of the Starting Strong program and linked closely back to my own experience of commencing at the university. Onboarding differs from 'orientation' in its recognition of the multiple identities that employees bring to work. Recent research encourages fostering a strengths-based approach with a focus on socialisation that encourages people to express their personal identities, rather than socialisation focused on organisational identity or training (Cable, Gino & Staats, 2013b). This outlined version of onboarding underpinned my rationale for developing Starting Strong to 'make the implicit explicit' for enabling students. Additionally, the metaphoric association of the word 'onboarding' draws connotations of the commencement of a journey, fitting with the narrative approach. These similarities between forms of organisational socialisation and university student socialisation have provided another lens with which to view the neoliberal impacts of operating within a twenty-first century Australian university with an inevitable focus on employability. Such macro-environmental factors add further complexity to the role of both academic and student in this space, sharpened in focus in areas of widening participation.

Unsettle – Recognising and sitting within the discomfort

When I first came to Newcastle for the CEEHE writing program I was confident in the belief that I had a strong idea and a clear understanding of what it was I was going to write about. I was also eagerly anticipating being paired with a mentor.

I have data from over 500 students which has shown to be a key indicator of student retention within our enabling program. I think that this research could be beneficial to exemplify how this kind of initiative could be embedded across Australian universities. (Extract from personal communication with mentor, 3 May 2019)

The introduction of a critical friend in the form of writing mentor changed this entire process. Through our conversations and her gentle yet deep questioning, I quickly realised that in wanting to write about this survey data I was conforming to my own perception of the 'good student' as an academic writer. I had dutifully brought my data, and, more secure in my own student identity than my academic writing one, thought that by participating in the writing program I would diligently travel to Newcastle and report on an initiative that had (anecdotally

at least) revolutionised the commencement of the widening participation program I work within. In short, I was trying to prove myself. Like the students my initiative was designed to embolden, I was back at the beginning of forming another of my own multiple identities (Scanlon, Rowling & Weber, 2007).

I just had my first mentor meeting. She was incredibly generous in what she shared about working alongside other people in their writing process, and how she enjoys the intellectual challenge of grappling with the ideas and the theory. She is willing to meet with me on a regular basis which is amazing, maybe I will be able to write a paper at the end of this after all. She doesn't seem convinced on the survey data angle though but told me to explore it further. (Journal entry from workshop 2, CEEHE Writing Program, 14 May 2019)

Across the course of the year in our multiple conversations I was encouraged not just to rely on the written words, but also what I was speaking as a form of data. “*You’ve captured that really well, write that down*” became a common phrase within our discussions as my mentor responded to my passionate outbursts while I slowly linked these to the theories I had identified. As my confidence grew, I was empowered to jostle with aspects that formed areas of discussion or confusion, made possible through the development of a secure space we had created as a mentor/mentee partnership. As the protagonist in my own Hero’s Journey, my own ‘meeting the Mentor’ moment had enabled me to ‘cross the threshold’ and face the trial of writing in my own voice (Campbell, 1949).

Our regular discussions outlined a deeper underpinning to what I was trying to achieve. A deep emotional connection to my own feelings of fear and inadequacy as I fostered my own academic identity was a key motivator. My intention was then to reduce this inevitable challenge for students who perhaps had different resources to draw on or for whom no hot knowledge sources existed for them to turn to for accurate information. Our conversations uncovered the potential of exploring the role of the educator within this initiative, and that this might be more representative of my passion for the project. With the encouragement of my critical friend, I was emboldened to write this auto-ethnographical piece. With her guidance I was challenged to tackle writing about the importance of educators both understanding and discussing the theory that underpins enabling pedagogy when creating such interventions into widening participation programs.

Grapple – Recognising the ‘facepalm’ moments, and doing something with them

Facepalm (verb): The act of dropping one’s face/forehead into one’s hand. Usually accompanied by a “thunk” or a cry of “D’oh!” (Moondog, 2004)

I like to think that we all have ‘facepalm’ moments, where our response to something is either so obvious, banal or insensitive that we (hopefully) realise our folly and there is no alternative but to enact the facepalm. Alas, this reaction is not always immediate, often striking instead on reflection, when the possibility of correction has passed. In addition to this personal horror is the shared facepalm, when we witness others having these moments and silently wish for them to recognise their error and correct themselves. Instead, for the existence of power relations, industrial relations or just being a nice human relations, we are instead forced to stand there and enact this facepalm in our mind’s eye. An example:

OK guys, so you all know what you’re doing when it comes to the workshop so just blitz through. (Starting Strong meeting, June 2019)

It would be easy to think “Oh, we just put on an academic skills workshop” and then everyone will be fine. Cue the facepalm moment. Starting Strong is more than that. Any initiative designed to be *inclusive* should be underpinned by an understanding of the structural constraints that, through reinforcing, instead make things *exclusive*. Having a fundamental understanding of the habitus that students bring with them and the strengths they already possess is a valuable and often discounted first step in any such initiative, which without, reinforces the monological banking-style of higher education that “positions the teacher as expert and the students as an empty vessel, lacking knowledge” (Burke et al., 2016, p. 24). Problems with this approach are not just recognised within the realms of higher education. As Cable, Gino and Staats (2013b) outline:

When newcomers are “processed” to accept an organisation’s identity, they are expected to downplay their own identities, at least while they are at work. But subordinating one’s identity and unique perspectives may not be optimal in the long run for either the organisation or the individual employee because suppressing one’s identity is upsetting and psychologically depleting. (p. 24)

The recognition of these facepalm moments, specifically in terms of recognising when we turn such an initiative into a ‘process’ is key in limiting the potential of the reproduction of structural inequality.

Now I know it’s the end of the session and you’re all tired. [...] You have probably done a whole lot of this before, so we’ll speed through it. [...] You guys know this already. [Cue the slap sound from the back of the lecture theatre.]

I wrote the quotes above from the back row of the lecture theatre during Starting Strong in 2019. Without the opportunity to stop and reflect on what I had been doing and connecting with the theory that underpinned it, these statements would have sailed by without further reflection. Yet as I looked at the sea of heads in front of me on that hot afternoon and felt a subtle shift I recognised that we had just erred.

*It was as if there was this almost imperceptible change in the room. Like the work we had been doing on trying to rid ourselves of a deficit approach had been suddenly shattered. And it **wasn’t** intentional, it was because there was a desire to connect with the students, but it was just misguided. What if people **haven’t** done a whole lot of that before? All of a sudden the content has been devalued and worse, feelings of inadequacy or ‘I should know this’ arise. As for being tired, this is tiring sure, but do we need to make learning a drudgery? Maybe I’m overreacting, I’m not sure. It just seems like the chance to make the ‘cold’ knowledge ‘warm’ in that instance suddenly had the opposite effect. (Journal entry from workshop 3, CEEHE Writing Program, 22 August 2019)*

Interrogate – Crossing the return threshold

Despite the best efforts, am I still reinforcing the structural inequalities within Higher Education? Is the good intention having the opposite effect? (Journal entry from workshop 4, CEEHE Writing Program, 6 November 2019)

As I have grappled with the questions in this paper, the more I have turned to the theory, the more I have felt at pains with the idea that I am preparing students for employment from the

first day of their university study. Creating an intervention that allows students to better enculturate into existing structures furthers the increasing privatisation, commodification and marketisation of universities in Australia, which is not only seemingly reinforced by the institutions themselves, but also the aspirations of the students they serve. The Starting Strong initiative, or indeed any intervention which intends to build capacity of students to be 'good' arguably better prepares students to slot into existing discourses and structures, strengthening these rather than challenging their existence or creating change.

It is at this point that as an academic working in widening participation it is easy to feel like the work of enabling education is even more undervalued than before. Particularly if we are getting better and better at making students from equity groups 'fit' the dominant structures, by using the tools and skills to negotiate the mainstream hegemonic discourse of the neoliberal institution. An additional difficulty is the desire of enabling students to enculturate into the dominant structure in order to be an 'organisational insider' to some degree. This in no way suggests that they desire to rid themselves of their own authentic experience, but it would be difficult to argue that anyone, including commencing university students, would not wish to feel that they fit into a new environment so they can thrive. What this process facilitates however is a lost opportunity to reshape these environments rather than these environments restructuring for their inhabitants so they can better recognise, celebrate and embed the diverse experiences and identities of students and staff.

By interrogating my actions within this initiative and reflecting on my vulnerability I hope that I have emboldened others to do the same. One of the key reflections across the year of being involved in the CEEHE program was the opportunity for time and space to evaluate my own practice, perspectives, approaches and attitudes. The neoliberal institution does not only impact on its students. Increased performativity, competition and the self-isolation of the academy can tend to limit such opportunities for time and space. Carving this time out is critical. As the literature around what it means to 'be and do' enabling education (Bunn, 2019) increases, there is an opportunity here to not only outline the differences in this approach, but the commonalities that make this best practice so that it can be more widely disseminated. This furthers the work of Burke (2012) who argues:

It is thus seen as imperative that teachers drawing on participatory pedagogies acknowledge the importance of helping all their students to gain access to the practices and epistemologies that have the greatest social and cultural legitimacy and power whilst simultaneously critiquing, problematizing, interrogating and unsettling those very practices and epistemologies. (p. 186).

With time, and a strong understanding of the theory which underpins the work of widening participation and how our actions impact on the structures we work within, we have the possibility of slowly shifting this hegemonic discourse.

It is here that a new 'call to adventure' arises. It is my hope that the learnings here can help to inform and instigate institutional dialogue between educators within widening participation programs and across higher education. The inclusion of an orientation workshop which fosters a connection to student identity and belonging to the institution, whilst making implicit knowledges and cultural norms explicit does not belong only in widening participation programs. Rather, opportunity exists to smooth the transition to higher education for all students by recognising their diversity and strengths, building their capacity to develop and challenge these capitals and subtly impacting on the dominant discourses of institutions. As

educators who assume the role of the mentor in our students 'Hero's Journey', there is an ethical responsibility shaped by the context we work in. Within this structure there is scope for us collectively to acknowledge, unsettle, grapple and enquire to make change by elucidating these unwritten 'rules of the game' for every Hero who answers the call.

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