



EDITORIAL

Speaking for Ourselves

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The focus of this Special Issue is educators who work in the widening participation (WP) space in higher education: their experiences, identities, histories and knowledge. For the purposes of this issue, we are defining WP educators as those who teach in enabling programs and/or provide academic learning support to undergraduate students. Since the Bradley review of Australian higher education in 2008, there has been a rapid expansion of enabling education (variously known as transition, access, pathway or foundation programs) designed to provide alternative pathways to university for students who do not fit the traditional profile of young, middle-class school leavers (Lisciandro, Olds & Jones, 2019). Academic learning services have similarly grown as universities seek to support so-called non-traditional students in their studies. The educators who work in these programs are on the frontlines in implementing a worldwide widening participation agenda that seeks not only to make education more equitable but also to shore up the economic and social well-being of individual nations (Lisciandro et al., 2019). But though we have learned much about the non-traditional student over the past decade (see, e.g., Bennett, Uink & Van den Berg, 2020; Devlin et al., 2012; Habel, Whitman & Stokes, 2016; King et al., 2015), we know relatively little about those who educate them. Located “on the periphery of universities, in separate centres and outside academic faculties and departments”, these educators are likely, Burke (2012, p. 153) suggests, to themselves be constructed as ‘non-traditional’ by the academy. Within universities, she notes, the work of widening participation is often seen as lying “outside the main work of academic staff” (Burke, 2012, p. 155), an observation Strauss (2020) confirms in her recent investigation into foundation studies’ academics in New Zealand. Such educators exist “on the fringes of university culture” (R. Bennett et al., 2016, p. 217), and as a result are likely to find themselves “under-represented, un-noticed or misunderstood” (p. 219).

Among the things we do know about these ‘non-traditional’ educators is that they are overwhelmingly committed to the enabling ‘ethos’ (A. Bennett et al., 2016; Burke, 2012; Strauss, 2020), and to ‘care-full’ pedagogies that focus on building confidence and self-efficacy as well as academic skills (A. Bennett et al., 2016; Crawford, Kift, & Jarvis, 2019; Motta & Bennett, 2018). What this means for students has been, and continues to be, examined in the literature; what it means for their teachers is less evident. What does the enabling ethos mean to WP educators? How do they understand pedagogies of care? How do they enact, embody, and even challenge such pedagogies in their work? And what does the broader academic community have to learn from them?

This issue of *International Studies in Widening Participation* seeks to begin to address these questions by going directly to the educators themselves. Alexakos (2015) notes that teachers' knowledge is often dismissed as "too subjective, too idiosyncratic, too localized" (p. 2). For this issue, the editors specifically sought out the subjective, the idiosyncratic and the localised. For us, this is precisely where we need to begin if we are to understand the complex, multi-layered, inherently interpersonal and context-contingent practices of WP educators (see, e.g., Kreber, 2013, p. 866). Though education for WP has been around in Australia in some form since the 1970s (A. Bennett et al., 2016, p. 13), it is still a young field, and in many ways, in the context of traditional academia, a transgressive one. Thus an exploratory approach to research seems warranted, one that seeks to generate theories rather than to test them, to tell stories rather than to codify them. For this, autoethnography seems ideal. In exploring individual experience, autoethnography challenges traditional ideas of what counts as knowledge, bringing into the research space things that positivist methodologies have tended to exclude as too slippery or nebulous. Far from avoiding the subjective, autoethnographers embrace it, using "*personal* experience to create nuanced and detailed 'thick descriptions' of *cultural* experience" (Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013, p. 33, citing Geertz, 1973, original emphasis). By reflecting on and narrating their own experiences, autoethnographers are able to use them as "a means for understanding the reciprocal relationships of self and culture, communities, and social worlds" (Holman Jones et al., 2013, p. 26); the resulting recovery of "contingencies and experiences often disregarded" (p. 27) by other researchers was one of our goals for this collection.

The papers published here more than fulfil this aim. All draw on elements of autoethnography to explore aspects of the identity and work of WP educators, yet each has a distinctive form and focus. There is some remarkable writing across all nine papers, writing that blurs the lines between the academic and the creative, the scholarly and the personal, catapulting us into the lives and experiences of the authors. When we read scholarly literature, we tend to draw mainly on our intellectual capacities, leaving other dimensions of ourselves in abeyance; when we read a story, however, we engage "the thinking mind as well as what is called one's emotional side", bringing memory, feeling and empathy into play (Coles, 1989, p. 128). Indeed, according to Freeman (2007), through stories we are able to be faithful to "the whole person, the whole human life, in all of its ambiguous, messy, beautiful detail" (pp. 134-135). Many WP educators consciously embrace a whole-of-person approach in their teaching; it is not surprising, perhaps, that they should also gravitate towards a research method that similarly acknowledges the 'wholeness' of the person of the educator, embracing the affective and the personal along with the cognitive and the intellectual. The papers in this collection challenge what Ellis and Adams (2014) identify as the historical disregard, in much scholarly research, for "stories and storytelling", the "bias against affect and emotion", and the concomitant "neglect of the ways in which social positions (e.g. race, sex, age, sexuality) influence how persons research, write, read, and evaluate" (p. 258). In so doing, they expand the possibilities of knowledge.

There are risks involved in writing about one's own life, particularly in an academic context. As Pelias (2013) puts it, "To share personal aspects of my life leaves me open to the evaluations of others. I am available to whatever constructions others may make of my disclosures" (p. 388). It is no coincidence that several of our contributors have written about the difficult task of embracing vulnerability; the autoethnographer is, as Holman Jones et al. (2013) write, a deliberately "vulnerable subject" (p. 24). We want to acknowledge the courage of our contributors in being willing to accept this risk and speak with openness and honesty about dimensions of experience often withheld from scholarly work. We also want to draw attention

to the power of such writing (Pelias, 2013). Our contributors' willingness to be vulnerable gives their work a depth and richness that will hopefully prove generative for other researchers.

Though the papers in this issue are all quite different, it is possible to identify overlapping constellations of ideas and attention. Three papers use stories to explore the identity of the non-traditional educator in enabling education. Gemma Mann's innovative narrative captures the many conflicts associated with bringing her lesbian sexual identity into the workplace and classroom—and points to the rewards, for both educator and students. Katrina Johnston vividly depicts the journey of a working-class woman from non-traditional student to enabling educator, and the webs of interconnection and transformation she has spun. Flavia Santamaria and Ann-Marie Priest examine the teaching philosophy of an educator who found her way to enabling education and academic learning support almost by accident, but whose experiences as a migrant and a mother foreground the resilience that informs every aspect of her work.

A further three papers explore the self-identification of the enabling educator as a caring person, and the centrality of this identity to their conception of both themselves and their work. The 'story pot' generated by Katrina Johnston, Gemma Mann, Louise Mullaney and Brijesh Kumar provides shifting perspectives on the seeming imperative, within WP education, to adopt an ethic of care, and the different ways in which this ethos plays out among different educators. In her reflective paper, Andrea Hogg analyses her experience with burnout to demonstrate that without institutional support, a commitment to the identity of the caring teacher carries significant risk. Julie Willans reflects on the complex relationship between her personal and professional identities as she charts an institutional shift, over a period of some two decades, from a holistic approach to enabling education to a more instrumental one.

Vulnerability is a central theme in two papers that explore the relevance of this concept not only to enabling students—who must be willing to risk failure if they are to succeed—but also to educators. Trixie James examines moments of perceived failure in her own academic career, and her struggle with imposter syndrome, to draw out the potential for transformation inherent in embracing vulnerability. Jenny McDougall reflects on the many ways in which not only students but also educators are vulnerable in their daily work of teaching and research. She suggests that holistically oriented support structures are needed for academics and students alike to foster authenticity, creativity, and personal growth.

Caroline Henderson-Brooks' paper similarly explores the anxieties and sense of powerlessness that can surround aspects of enabling teaching practice in her study of the affective dimensions of marking. Her reflection on and analysis of her own experience of marking student assignments make visible the emotional labour that inheres in this often undervalued element of teaching.

In the Student Voice section, Tara Beare's story demonstrates the transformative power of enabling programs such as Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) at CQUniversity. Tara's paper outlines her journey from a very non-traditional career choice as a locomotive driver to studying for her "dream job" as a nurse. Like many enabling students, she thought of herself as "dumb" at school and incapable of going to university, and saw STEPS as giving her the opportunity to 'test the waters' and challenge herself academically. Capturing the distinctive voice of students such as Tara, as authors in their own right rather than just subjects in a research study, helps to shed further light on the transformational nature of enabling. Her insights add an important dimension to the papers included here, giving a student

perspective on the educator role and testifying to the value of non-traditional and diverse educators acting as role models in these marginalised spaces in higher education.

In our Call for Papers, we wrote that we sought to foster what Cunliffe (2018) called a ‘scholarship of possibilities’, one that would produce “different ways of seeing, being in and generating knowledge/knowing about our world” (pp. 1430-31). The nine research papers in this issue abundantly demonstrate precisely this type of scholarship. Together, they begin a new conversation about education for widening participation, one that starts with the experiences and identities of educators themselves, but extends to students, institutions and the wider society. We look forward to the continuance of such enlightening, and enlivening, conversations.

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