



RESEARCH PAPER

I'm hearing voices: A multivocal, autoethnographic study into constructing a holistic enabling educator identity

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Despite the proven efficacy of enabling courses for Australian students from non-traditional educational backgrounds, the contribution of educators to this success, particularly those who themselves inhabit diverse identities, has remained largely unexplored. This investigation uses an autoethnographic account of the author's own experience of working in enabling education in a regional university to examine the identity of 'Enabling Educator'. Drawing on creative writing techniques, the author presents a multivocal narrative exploring the intersections and boundaries between her personal and professional identities as a lesbian and academic. Inner voices are captured throughout the story to highlight the hidden battles of identifying with a marginalised group while simultaneously identifying as a teacher. Analysis of the story in light of relevant literature reveals that hiding an aspect of personal identity at work creates tension that can be detrimental to the wellbeing of the academic. Integrating identities in the classroom, however, not only alleviates stress for the academic, but also presents a valuable role model to students, promotes inclusion, and can transform students' lives. In an enabling course, where many students already feel marginalised, demonstrating that people with diverse sexual identities are welcome in higher education can be very powerful.

Keywords: enabling education; queer teachers; teacher identity; diversity and inclusion; equity; autoethnography; multivocal narrative

Introduction

Secrets, shame, hiding. In our highly evolved socio-cultural world, many of us have parts of ourselves we would like to keep secret. However, this can have implications for those around us, especially if we are in a position of power, real or perceived, as university lecturers are. When I first began working in higher education, I thought it was important to distinguish and delineate my personal and professional identities and keep them separate. I believed that this would make me better at my job as a mathematics and science academic in an enabling course in a regional Australian university. Through my own experiences, I have come to learn that identity does not lend itself to easy compartmentalisation; it is far more complicated than that.

In this paper, through autoethnography, I explore an aspect of my identity that has been one of my life's biggest secrets, my sexual orientation as a lesbian. Through narrative, I reveal the

incredible impact that attempting to compartmentalise my identity has had on my daily activities and interactions with others in my role. Using multivocality (Mizzi, 2010) as a methodology has allowed me to demonstrate within the narrative, the interplay between the parts of me that want to carry the secret and the parts that oppose being in hiding and yearn to be open. By constructing a narrative around these different parts of myself, I have been able to give form to the drama that characterises even the most ordinary, everyday enactments of identity when aspects of that identity are hidden or contested. I have also been able to explore, in fictionalised form, how I found a resolution that fits my circumstances, a moment when all of these neat compartments collapsed, and I realised they were unnecessary. In drawing out the significance of my story for the enabling context, I argue that there are many benefits, as a gay academic, to being able to acknowledge and become comfortable with all internal voices, and to integrate personal dimensions into professional identity. For the academic, they no longer have to carry the emotional weight of hiding. For all students, but in particular enabling students, the significance of having a role model, an academic who is ‘like them’, is crucial. This has been seen in other research focussing not only sexuality, but also physical differences, mental health issues, cultural or religious background, gender, socio-economic status, and so on. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that there are real risks for gay academics in coming out of the closet, and it is a decision each individual must make for themselves.

Methodology

As described by Ellis and Bochner (2000), “autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739). Autoethnography, therefore, allows for the complex nature of the self to be analysed and related to the ‘cultural’ or the context and society in which the author is situated. In this way, it was particularly suited to my research aim of analysing the interplay of my personal and professional identities in my work as an enabling educator. It is particularly relevant to a situation that already notes the complex nature of human identity and the inherent ‘multiple layers’ of individuals. This is also mentioned by Pillay, Naicker and Pithouse-Morgan (2016) who explain that this methodology allows the “fragmentary selves [to be] made visible” (p. 14). Autoethnographic studies can take many forms, but all begin with the experience and perceptions of the researcher—the ‘story’. My approach in this study was to write such a story based on my experiences as an enabling educator over approximately six years, which I then sought to analyse with reference to the literature in order to draw out evidence of the interweaving strands of my identity.

In writing my story, I drew on the practice of multivocality as described by Robert Mizzi (2010) as “providing representational space in the autoethnography for the plural and sometimes contradictory narrative voices located within the researcher” (p. 2). In a traditional narrative, each character speaks with a single, unified voice. In a multivocal narrative, however, the single character may speak with many voices, sometimes in harmony and sometimes in conflict. As Mizzi (2010) states, this methodology serves to “shed light on these narrative voices [as a] means to provoke a deeper understanding of the often silent tensions that lie underneath observable behaviors in the story” (p. 2). The voices (my voices) are inserted, or rather, insert themselves, throughout the story to explore those hidden thoughts as they occur. Alvesson (2003) describes this as “emergent-spontaneous” (p. 181) research where the author finds something “interesting [that] tells us something revealing about what goes on in a particular site” (p. 182). The voices are inserted in square parentheses on separate lines to punctuate the story. They often interject mid-sentence, reflective of the way thoughts often cut into actions. The story is a fictionalised representation of typical events that have happened over many years, but which exemplify my experiences as a lesbian and academic in enabling education. My hope

is that, as Mizzi (2010) suggests, “readers can learn vicariously through my experience and try to imagine themselves in the encounter” (p. 2).

After writing the story, I analysed it with reference to literature relating to sexual identity among academics and literature on the needs of enabling students, seeking to make explicit the connections between my own experience and the wider socio-cultural context of enabling education.

Story—A day that started like any other...

I kiss my wife goodbye.

“Have a great day, my gorgeous wife”, she says.

[Conservative: That still sounds funny! ‘My wife’. What do others think when they hear that? Must be careful.]

[Advocate: You fought for the right to say it, so say it!]

My hands are on the steering wheel, but my brain is already thinking about what I have to do when I reach the office. Emails, appointment, class, training after lunch, and then an online class.

[Organised: That’s right. Each activity neatly compartmentalised and allotted just the right amount of time.]

The car grinds on the gravel in the carpark, and then I turn it off and all is quiet for just a moment. It is hot already, and I feel sweat beading on the back of my neck.

[Pragmatic: Oh get out of the car already! What are you waiting for?]

[Anxious: Um, oh, I guess just ensuring you have your ducks in a row?]

[Pragmatic: Well wouldn’t it be easier in the air-conditioning? Considering you will insist on wearing long pants in the middle of a Queensland summer!]

[Organised: Wearing the same thing every day is sensible, and makes mornings superefficient. But I agree, you need to begin this day.]

I grab my lunch box tin and my satchel and head into the building.

“Love your lunch box”, someone comments. “What’s on there? Cartoons?”

“Thanks, yeh, I love it too”, I reply. “They’re stickers, I put them on myself”.

“Oh, how lovely, hehe. Must keep going”, they said, sounding ingenuine, and it seemed to be a very quick exit.

[Professional: Yeh, a bit silly for a work lunch box, don’t you think?]

[Fun: What’s the harm in a bit of fun? Makes you smile, doesn’t it?]

[Professional: But for work?? Seriously??]

The relief of the air-conditioner is immediate and I fish my key out of my pocket. It is dark until the fluorescent light buzzes into life. It illuminates all the certificates of participation and statements of attendance on the cork board, and the whiteboard with last week’s maths problem on it. Everything seems to be in its usual

[Fun: boring]

[Professional: proper]

place. While my computer boots, I take my lunch to the tearoom, and do the usual morning greetings down the corridor. “Good morning!” and “Happy Monday!” I am countered with,

“What’s so happy about a Monday?”

[Pessimistic: Nothing.]

[Fun: Everything!]

“Oh no, do you have a big week?” I say to the unhappy chappy.

“Just the normal life of an academic. You know. Students not doing what they should, marking overload, four hours of teaching straight ... just the usual stuff”.

“Um, yeh, I do know what you mean”, I say.

[Fun: Don’t let them pull you down!]

[Polite: Acknowledge and move on.]

“And I’d probably better get on!”

The next door and the next greeting.

“Did you have a good weekend? What did you get up to?” they say.

[Conservative: Don’t bring too much personal stuff to the workplace.]

[Anxious: Better respond, say something benign then deflect.]

“Ah the usual things, cleaning, washing, grocery shopping. What about you?”

I am regaled with tales of children and the ‘oh so funny’ things they did.

[Polite: Smile and nod, smile and nod.]

I hope my face does not betray my lack of interest, as I say, “How interesting! But sorry, I have an appointment shortly, so best get ready”. Finally I make it back to my office and my emails. Right, settle myself into the ‘academic brain’. Some of the messages are advertising workshops, some are random, but the majority are from students. I am a lecturer in the enabling course here at the university, and the students are

[Pessimistic: needy]

from non-traditional backgrounds. Queries such as ‘can I change my study plan?’ or ‘what do I need for nursing?’, or ‘who do I contact about scholarships?’ are easily answered and I do so quickly and proficiently. I have been doing this job for six years, and have the knowledge in my head. Other questions, such as ‘what’s Moodle?’ or ‘where do I find the textbook?’ are more

[Pessimistic: annoying]

challenging to deal with while keeping a cool head. They really should know this by the second week of term ... did they not come to orientation for crying out loud?!

[Professional: Remember to check the reply to make sure it sounds pleasant before hitting send.]

Then the final sort of emails are ‘I can’t do question 7 on this week’s sheet. Where does the multiply sign go?’ These are my favourite emails: maths questions. This is the nitty gritty of my job, and the part I like best. I love maths, I have a whole degree in physics and maths, and a PhD in engineering. I launch into a very long explanation.

[Academic: Make sure it is thorough.]

[Fun: Keep it light and interesting.]

[Enabling Educator: Now, be complete, but not patronising. Don’t dumb it down too much. But you can’t assume anything either. Show each step just in case. But remember the student is an adult. Can you relate it to the real world? What was the background of this student? You could look that up. Put lots of words. Oh, but not too many. Maybe dot points, to be clear.]

In the end I reread the email and am happy with it. I have also been doing this for six years, and have a well-used pattern. It often involves writing on paper, taking a photo with my phone and emailing it to myself and copying it into the email. It is hard to do maths on a keyboard! And ... send! Just in time, too, as I hear someone outside my door.

[Organised: You aren’t ready. Quick, find the student record!]

[Polite: Don’t leave them waiting!]

“Good morning, you must be Ann”, I say. I just had time to glance at my calendar and catch their name as I stood up. “Come in, please sit down. I’ll just look up your details”. I am quick to find the right page and skim the online paperwork. “The good news

is, you have passed the testing, and so we can accept you into the course!” There is a very loud sigh as Ann relaxes back into the chair.

“I was so scared I was too dumb to get in”, she says.

And so ensues the usual conversation, of which I have had literally hundreds, around why that is not the case and what the course is all about. I ask her all sorts of questions about her background, her plans for the future, her family, her work situation, transport arrangements. She is a single mother of two children, but they are in primary school, and so I say how I have made sure our classes are only during school hours.

[Organised: Which is no mean feat to accomplish! If only they could arrange babysitters. It won't be like that in undergrad!]

Ann is working, Wednesdays and Fridays. I explain, however, that is not going to be feasible as there is a good chance she will have classes on Wednesdays,

[Pessimistic: so suck it up princess]

but, hang on a minute, yes, if I put her in group A, there are no classes on Wednesdays so I'll make a note of that.

[Enabling Educator: Yes, you can work it out like that, and look at her, she is so keen, and she is a single mother, she would need the work. If you can accommodate this, then you should make every effort to do so.]

By the end of half an hour, I know all about her life, probably way more than I ever thought I would need to.

[Professional: And she knows nothing about your life, as it should be.]

[Conservative: She doesn't need to know anything about your life.]

Ann leaves happy with a study plan and new-found confidence. I lodge the paperwork in the system, done and dusted. What is next? Twenty-five minutes until class. OK, switching the brain over to 'teacher brain'. What

[Fun: cool]

activities can I do with the students today? On the plan is trigonometric functions.

[Academic: Follow the textbook.]

[Fun: Boring!!!!]

Sine and cosine waves. I should start with the standard graph, add in the features and build it up through examples.

[Pragmatic: Sounds very doable.]

[Fun: What the??]

Or ... I know, I have a slinky somewhere in a box. I can find it.

[Fun: Now THAT sounds excellent!]

[Enabling Educator: Bringing in hands-on activities is an awesome way for students to 'see' the maths, and has just the right amount of 'play' for them not to be scared off by the algebra involved. Remember, they are still a bit freaked out by algebra.]

The class goes AMAZINGLY! The students are so engaged with the slinky. It is then so easy to translate it to the whiteboard and then into an equation. I must remember that for next time. They hardly want to leave the classroom, but I need a break, and I need to eat!

“Anyone eating?” I randomly call along the corridor.

“Yeh, but first can you please help me find a form?” my colleague requests.

[Pessimistic: Here we go again. It's always ask you. Don't they know how to do anything?]

[Pragmatic: Well, you do know how to help ... so just answer the question.]

Turns out it is simple to find if you know where to look, so I show her. She hits print and shuts the window. I see her wedding photo on the desktop, and let my gaze linger for a moment.

[Anxious: Look away! Don't get into a personal conversation!]

[Polite: Too late, she's seen you looking, say something.]

"A new photo of you and your husband? I don't think I've seen that one before".

"Yes", she says, "I am rotating through them. Everyone puts wedding or child photos on their computer, so I thought, why not".

[Conservative: Why not? I'll tell you why not. Because *you* can't put a photo up, that's inviting nasty comments. Besides, work is not the place to be pushing the 'gay agenda'.]

[Advocate: And why not? You push it sometimes. Why is it only limited to when it is deemed 'appropriate'?]

[Anxious: Oh come on, let's just quit this conversation and go to lunch.]

"It's a lovely photo". I smile, hoping I hide my anxiety around the subject.

"Do you have your wedding photos in your office?" she asks.

[Pessimistic: Dang! Hid that anxiety a little too well, perhaps.]

[Anxious: Oh no! How do I deal with this? She knows you're gay, she knows you're married, but it is way too long an explanation about why you are not sharing photos in your office.]

[Advocate: Maybe it's time you should! Go on. Be brave. Do it. Do it.]

"Um, well, good question. No ..."

"You should! I'm sure you have a lovely one of you and your wife".

[Anxious: NO!]

[Advocate: YES!]

[Pragmatic: You could put it there on your monitor, and when there are students in your office, you'll have windows open anyway, so it will be covered and you won't have to be concerned.]

"I might just do that. Thank you for the

[Pessimistic: bad]

idea".

We head to lunch.

The training I have after lunch is actually something I run. It is training on how to be a good support 'ally' or 'friend' for students and staff who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex, etc – the Ally Program. Staff and students voluntarily sign up, so I know they are

[Anxious: nice]

[Pessimistic: at least not going to be discriminatory]

interested and willing to engage with the program. I deliver the program which I created, via online web chat, about once a month to four or five participants. They have already done online training, and so come

[Pessimistic: knowing what they're in for]

[Conservative: with a like-minded attitude]

with some prior knowledge. Time to change to my 'training professional' brain, and I set up my office in readiness. The training involves a lot of work around terminology and common definitions

[Conservative: a safe, academic topic]

with an exploration of meanings, before a discussion of how different people experience different identities.

[Anxious: With absolutely NO mention of personal experience.]

[Professional: Of course, this is a professional space after all.]
Finally there are some practical role plays to put skills into practice.
[Conservative: All made up, totally fictitious.]
[Advocate: Way to go!]
By the end of two hours, I'm exhausted
[Professional: from keeping it professional and scholarly]
[Conservative: from hiding certain aspects when conversation gets a bit
'too close to home']
from all the talking, but it's worth it and everyone is so grateful that the university has
such a program. I feel vindicated in running the program.
[Advocate: Of course you should!]
[Conservative: But don't force it outside the sphere of voluntary
participation.]
[Anxious: That would be too scary! You're not up for that.]
[Advocate: Oh stop being a yellow-belly!]
I barely have time to flip to 'academic brain' and reply to half a dozen of the twenty-
something new emails,
[Professional: But of course you do have time, as you can't keep students
waiting.]
[Pragmatic: It's only been two hours, they can wait a little longer.]
[Enabling Educator: Just pick the ones that sound most urgent, where the
student is the most stressed, and reply to them now. The rest can wait, if
they sound like they'll be OK. You have given them a clear expectation
that emails may take a couple of days to respond to, so be realistic.]
before I have to be online again, in my 'teacher brain' for a maths Q&A forum for my
class. But it is fine, as I know the content so very well, it will be no worries. I log into the
session, the camera bursts into life, and I see three other faces looking back out of the
monitor at me. I also see my own image, and what is that?
[Anxious: Oh crap!]
I was so engrossed in my emails that I have forgotten to take down the very large, very
colourful, very prominent, rainbow flag on the wall behind me!
[Advocate: Haha! You secretly wanted to leave it there! Woohoo!]
[Conservative: Don't worry, no one knows what it is for.]
"Hey!" one of the students' faces erupts in a grin. "Fantastic pride flag you have
there!"
[Anxious: Oh crap!]
[Conservative: Don't worry, no one knows how it pertains to YOUR
personal situation.]
"Oh, yeh", I stumble over my words. "I forgot to take that down from my previous
session, sorry about that."
"What's to be sorry about?" the student is still beaming. "It's awesome of you to
have that there".
"Well, that's good that you think that. It's from training for the Ally Program",
and I explain very briefly what that means.
"You should have it there all the time", he says. "Makes me feel safe. Whenever
my boyfriend and I go out, we look for businesses that have the pride flag, so we know
we'll be safe".
[Advocate: See! I told you so.]
[Anxious: Don't mention anything. Don't say it ...]
[Advocate: But you know you want to!]

[Professional: Don't get off topic!]
"I know what you mean!" I say.
[Anxious: You said it.]
[Advocate: Yes! That's the way!]
"My wife and I do the same thing".
[Professional: What??? Why bring that into a maths class??? This is not the time or place!]
[Advocate: But you can do both.]
"My aunt does the same thing", another one of the students adds in. "But she also looks for the trans pride flag, you know, the blue, pink, white one?"
[Professional: So ... off ... topic ...]
[Advocate: But such a great conversation! Everyone is opening up.]
[Academic: And look at how engaged they are, this might hang over into the maths lesson if you're lucky.]
"Yes", I continue, "I do know that one, and I have it here, just not up at the moment".
[Professional: It's gone, the maths is just gone.]
[Advocate: Shush!]
"You should put it up too. I know my aunt would like that".
"I just like the colour", the third student pipes up, "and if it is good for these other two, then I think that is wonderful! The more safe spaces the better!"
The first student comes back on.
"I never thought I'd get anywhere with education ever again. After the bullying I had at school, I hated school, and totally flunked out. But this is so different. I don't feel like an outcast and I think I can actually do this course. Thanks doc!"
[Advocate: Total WIN!]
[Anxious: But it's opening you up to nastiness!!]
[Advocate: But you are strong enough to deal with this. You are, and you know it.]
[Professional: Boundaries??]
[Enabling Educator: What an epiphany! You are actually a better example, leader, role model and enabling educator when you embrace all aspects of your identity! Who knows how many students are in the same position as this young man. Who just need someone to stand up, stand out, be proud, and not just teach them maths, but do so while being true to themselves, and actively embodying inclusion.]
Tonight, I'm walking into my house, and I envelop my wife in my arms. I feel so much more complete. I feel so much more my whole self.
"Did you have a good day?"
I laugh.
"I had the best day ever".

Analysis

When I began writing this story, I only knew I wanted to document a typical workday. The story basically wrote itself, in one, fairly short sitting. As with other narrative writing experiences I was 'in the zone'. I did not plan the story, and I certainly did not plan the voices. The names of the voices just 'came to me' as I wrote.

The voices and identity

There were more voices than I expected, which indicates the complexity of my inner world and I discuss them in order of appearance. Conservative was quite determined not to reveal my sexuality. Advocate was in direct opposition to conservative, urging me to come out. While similar, Organised was about efficiency whereas Pragmatic seemed to be a bit more cynical and no nonsense. Anxious was especially nervous about revealing personal aspects of my life. Professional and Fun often played off against each other, with Professional becoming quite defensive as Fun seemed to have more power. Pessimistic was very negative, assuming things were going to go wrong at every turn. Polite spoke specifically around being nice to other people. Academic seemed a little conservative, wanting to play by the rules. The final voice was Enabling Educator, who did not appear until about a quarter of the way through the story. This was a very rational voice, and seemed to be talking from a position of much experience. It spoke quite lengthily but also competently, and in full sentences each time. It was also the last voice to speak, wrapping up the story with finality and authority.

In analysing and reflecting on the voices that appeared in the story, I realised that they did not match the actual identities that had become apparent. There were far fewer identities than voices. Voices could be associated with multiple identities, but also overlapped and interwove with the identities. Five identities emerged in total. The identity with the most impact on the story was a very personal identity, that of being a lesbian. This identity is the one that the voices are fighting over keeping hidden and was a predominant feature of the voices' comments. Three further identities were role-based identities: mathematics teacher; Access Coordinator; and Ally Program trainer. These identities are all task based and confidently inhabit the workplace. Lastly, the voices through the story show the development of a more encompassing identity—that of Enabling Educator. This identity is different because it includes all other identities, embodying the possibility of bringing my whole self to work, including parts I may have felt needed to be kept secret.

The lesbian identity in higher education

In the sections of my story revolving around my lesbian identity, the strongest voice is Advocate whose comments are quite inspirational and encouraging, pushy even. However, Anxious and Conservative are also very dominant, and when taken together, their combined force is stronger than that of Advocate. These latter two voices, always urging caution, reflect the reality of the workplace culture of higher education, which, as the literature shows, tends to be hostile to gay and lesbian academics.

Being openly gay or lesbian has been shown to potentially negatively affect career progression. Batten et al. (2018) discuss studies that showed academics experience discrimination in the areas of hiring and promotion (see also Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009). Orlov and Allen (2014) also cite “the potential for lower teaching evaluations” (p. 1026) as a career-impacting result of being openly non-heterosexual. They state that “heterosexist norms reduce coming out in the classroom to a discussion of ‘sex’ [and it] has been equated with advocating for unconventional sexual behavior [which is] inappropriate and unprofessional [for] educators” (Orlov & Allen, 2014, p. 1026). Alsup (2006) also discusses personal aspects of identity in her study of trainee teachers, noting that one participant who “identified herself as a lesbian ... struggled with the idea of ... being accepted in the ... classroom” (p.65). This trainee teacher was not only concerned about the students but also feared that “the other teachers and administrators ... would not accept her” (Alsup, 2006, p. 65). In my story, the Anxious and Conservative voices seem to be all too aware of these dimensions of discrimination, and made concerted efforts to have me suppress my lesbian identity in order to protect myself. Even the

Professional voice counsels me against being open in the classroom, judging that, in Orlov and Allen's (2014) words, any discussion of sexual identity is "inappropriate and unprofessional" (p. 1026).

Additional to career impacts, openly gay people also endure direct experiences of discrimination. Bilimoria and Stewart (2009) found discrimination such as "everyday slights, harassment, intimidation, fears, exclusion and discrimination [are] experienced by LGBT faculty, including tokenism, stereotyping, increased visibility and scrutiny, isolation and boundary heightening, difficulties in the classroom ... and constraints on choices of scholarship" (p. 86). In my story, Anxious and Conservative attempted to heighten the boundaries between my personal and professional identities, well aware of past negative experiences. Even as the Ally Program trainer, the Professional voice was attempting to avert potential tokenism and stereotyping by keeping it 'scholarly' with no mention of personal experiences.

Gay and lesbian academics working in transition or enabling education face further dilemmas specific to this context. Bennett, Hill and Jones (2015) note the difficulties that may be faced by gay and lesbian academics in classrooms "where the majority of students come from national, cultural or religious backgrounds that hide, deny, condemn or criminalise queer identities" (p. 709). In their study, 'Jane' taught short courses to help international students adapt to the culture. According to Bennett et al. (2015), she put herself "into a culturally sensitive closet" (p. 712) to "ease the process of cross-cultural adjustment, as acceptance of homosexual identities is not a global attitude" (p. 716). In contrast, in the same study, 'Robert' identified as a gay, Aboriginal man and he taught into an enabling course for Indigenous students. While he benefited from the cultural power both of being a 'man' and a 'teacher', he chose to be open about his sexuality as he believed his "openness around [his] sexuality is a useful means to building acceptance of nonheterosexuality within Indigenous cultures" (Bennett et al., 2015, p. 712). He chose to use his personal identity as a way to advocate for positive change. In my story, the Advocate voice was pushing strongly for me to take a similar position to Robert, but Anxious, Conservative and Professional were all pushing back, warning me of the risks around being open with my students about my sexual identity. My voices were telling me that the students were unlikely to be accepting of homosexual identities due to the conservative nature of the regional town in which I work despite being predominantly not from international or Indigenous backgrounds.

Reflecting on the conclusion of my story, choosing to affirm my homosexual identity to my students also resulted in affirmation of their identities and of others in their communities, and had additional benefits for my students. This is borne out by the literature. Batten et al. (2018) show that while "heteronormativity [was] found to be pervasive among all students, regardless of their attitudes towards sexual minorities" (p. 12), their own research reveals that "disrupting heteronormativity is highly beneficial towards achieving another goal of education; namely, that of decreasing prejudice and promoting social equality" (p. 13). In my story, outing myself as a lesbian to the students provided that disruption to heteronormativity, allowing some of them to feel comfortable enough to open up about their own situations. This provided a more equitable environment, promoting discussion. Batten et al. (2018) also present "empirical evidence that being open about sexuality in the classroom has no [negative] impact on student learning or performance at the university level" (p. 13). The evidence from my story certainly shows no negative impact, and demonstrates the positive impact of easing students' own boundary heightening.

Another benefit for students was that openly gay academics can become an avenue of support. Gibson and Meem (2005) found “queer students seem to us much more likely to be positively predisposed to like us. They seek us out, coming to our offices with the assumption that we will be available for conversation about their personal lives” (p. 7). Orlov and Allen (2014) also found that students appreciated the support offered by an openly gay academic in their own “coming-out struggles” (p. 1042). My story demonstrates via Organised and Enabling Educator speaking with ‘Ann’, the new student, that I am competent and confident in a pastoral care capacity. Pessimistic, however, highlights potential underlying issues of either not being so caring or not having the time to take on this role.

Openly gay academics are also able to be role models for students, as Advocate and Enabling Educator agree at the end of my story. Gortmaker and Brown (2006) stated that “having LG [lesbian and gay] role models on campus encourage[s] students to come out” (p. 607). Morrow (2012) and Orlov and Allen (2014) had similar findings, with students looking to non-parent, authority figures as role models. Pobo (1999) also found that gay teachers could be role models for gay students, but that this could be both negative and positive. One negative is that if the academic is closeted, it reinforces the stereotype that gay people should be silenced. There is a terrible risk with this position: “The isolation many teenagers and young adults feel as they confront their own sexuality can be crippling and lead to suicide. These young people are dying of silence” (Pobo, 1999, p. 2). To counter this in a more positive way, Pobo (1999) believes “some students could gain much by knowing openly gay teachers” (p. 2) as they are people “to whom a student can speak” (p. 3), and therefore “lives can be saved” (p. 2). It is this conflict that is played out with Advocate against Anxious and Conservative. I recognise that my internalised struggle was the same struggle that many students experience, including self-loathing and feeling unworthy. As Advocate said, however, I have “fought for this” and I am “strong enough to deal with this”, and I do believe that I could be an effective role model and maybe even save lives.

On a lighter note, Pobo (1999) says that in his field of English Literature, being ‘out’ in the classroom could allow “more intelligent and interesting classes” (p. 2). This is attested by Orlov and Allen (2014) who found “every participant felt their teaching performance was enhanced by being out in their classrooms” (p. 1033). Indeed, in my story, it was in a mathematics class where the climactic discussion ensued. The voices of Professional and Academic said that sexuality has nothing to do with the classroom, with Professional lamenting that I’m “so off topic”, that “the maths is just gone”. On the other hand, Academic acknowledges that the students were very engaged which is actually a good thing, because even if it is not about mathematics, that enthusiasm may carry over to the classroom.

Another issue with staying quiet about sexual orientation is the mental exertion and emotional labour involved in trying to keep it secret. Hence, a benefit of being open is to relieve that stress. Orlov and Allen (2014) argue that “teaching from within the classroom closet can lead to feeling inauthentic, disingenuous, dishonest, encumbered, and stressed” (p. 1026). Bennett et al. (2015) agree, asserting that “lies and secrets burden us and cause stress” (p. 715). In an extensive study on the matter, Giordano (2016) provides evidence that “concealing sexual orientation has been highly correlated with negative psychological and physical well-being” (p. 7). This is evident in my story in some specific ways, for example, the corridor interactions with my colleagues, and the question of displaying my wedding photos. There was always an element of second-guessing myself in every conversation and this was brought out vividly by Anxious, Conservative, Professional and even Polite who just wanted to “move on”. Giordano (2016), however, reported that “coming out has been linked with higher psychological well-

being and greater quality of life, reports of less stress, higher self-esteem, and increased positive affect” (p. 19). My coming out in the story was as much a “total win” for Advocate and myself as it was for the students.

When dealing with marginalisation issues, individuals must weigh up the risk/reward for themselves, and consider their own situation (Jiménez et al., 2019). Universities have a way of espousing inclusion, but I have found that actually modelling diversity and inclusion unfortunately does not come from an ‘institutional level’ and depends on the willingness of individuals to put themselves out there and be vulnerable. In the beginning part of my story, I was reticent about showing vulnerability, whether with colleagues in sharing tales of the weekend or “opening up to nastiness” from students. In the end, however, I accepted vulnerability when voices like Professional were told to “shush” by Advocate and also when I spoke about “my wife” to students. Nevertheless, despite the best institutional protections, being vulnerable can still be potentially harmful for an academic. This is especially so in the area of sexual orientation where discrimination is still bordering on acceptable and legal (note the Australian Religious Freedom Bill, see Lowrey, 2020).

Benefits of authenticity for both educators and students

My story dramatises my decision to be open with my students about my sexual identity, and thus to begin to embrace the totality of my identity—a move that Jones, Kim and Skendall (2012) frame as ‘authenticity’; a feature of identity that the literature suggests can be positive for the individual educator, for their colleagues, and their students. Hiding facets of an identity can bring difficulties as a teacher. In her autoethnographic studies, Alsup (2006) states “there is evidence of contact between disparate personal and professional subjectivities for [a] developing teacher, who must negotiate conflicting subject positions and ideologies while creating a professional self” (p. 6). It was reflection through narrative which showed me that as the events of my workday unfolded, I made a choice about how to deal with the ongoing tensions, and therefore how I developed my authentic, professional self.

An engaged and empowered educator does more than simply fulfil the role of teaching, as outlined by Motta and Bennett (2018) in their work on pedagogies of care. Teaching in an enabling course is further complicated when dealing with students from non-traditional backgrounds because of the diverse nature of the cohort. As Gray, Wilcox and Nordstokke (2017) point out, there is a “growing trend toward inclusive education [which] require[s] teachers to have specialized knowledge and confidence” (p. 204). Again, a holistic teacher, one who is able to bring their whole self to the classroom, will be in a better position to manage the stress that this can cause, and “provide the emotionally supportive relationships students require to thrive” (Gray et al., 2017, p. 203). Burke (2017) agrees, arguing that it is essential that “discourses of equity focus on the importance of developing pedagogical practices that enhance students’ sense of ‘belonging’ and ‘connection’” (p. 431); instead of isolating students from ‘diverse’ or ‘different’ backgrounds in “boxes” (p. 439) stereotypical of these differences, she states that teachers need to “recognize difference and work against shame” (p. 440). Although governments can attempt to legislate for inclusion through various initiatives and policies (Southgate & Bennett, 2014), and institutions can espouse values of inclusion, in reality it comes down to individual teachers to foster inclusion, by creating a safe space, and thereby actively enhance the experiences of the diverse students in their enabling programs.

Duckworth, Thomas and Bland (2016) propose an interesting solution to this issue by “providing strategies to promote the wider engagement of teachers from diverse communities” (p. 265). They believe this is because teachers often do not see the “hidden linkages between

scholastic aptitude and cultural heritage” (p. 264) if they themselves are not from a minority or disadvantaged background. Worse still, teachers may “pathologise them in deficit and derisive ways” (Willans, 2019, p. 55). Duckworth et al. (2016) conclude that “expanding the diversity of the teaching profession is, however, an important way in which HE institutions can contribute to the overall goal of widening participation” (p. 272). If a teacher embraces their own diversity, and brings all facets of their identity to the classroom, not only are they helping themselves, they are also helping to break down barriers to participation for students from non-traditional backgrounds.

In my story, the voice of the Enabling Educator showed that this identity embodied the characteristics necessary for widening student participation in higher education. Enabling Educator says:

Who knows how many students are in the same position as this young man. Who just need someone to stand up, stand out, be proud, and not just teach them maths, but do so while being true to themselves, and actively embodying inclusion.

The lesbian identity and autoethnography

Coming out is not simply an issue for an academic in the classroom. Since autoethnography is inherently autobiographical (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), there is the likelihood, and even necessity, to reveal personal details, even though this might expose a “vulnerable self” (p. 739). Mizzi (2010) himself cautions of “the overwhelming intensity of emotions” (p. 11) the methodology can evoke. Bochner (1997) agrees, for him it can even raise a “moral question over both my personal and my academic lives” (p. 420). As Brogden (2010) admits, “the autoethnographer, by laying bare some aspect or aspects of her or his being is offering a story and taking a risk” (p. 370). This is especially so when revealing details “outside the norm”, “uncomfortable”, “out of place” for a presentation on academic identity that are “sometimes (perhaps often times) silenced or hidden” (Brogden, 2010, pp. 370-371). When I wrote this story it was 2020 and I had been openly identifying as a lesbian for years. The actual story, however, was set at an earlier time in my life, when I was younger and still grappling with my identity. At the time of writing this paper, Advocate won over Anxious and Conservative nearly all of the time, and Enabling Educator was a very well-rounded, rational voice. Yet, in thinking about publishing this article to the wider academic world, Anxious and Conservative are again niggling in the back of my mind.

Bilimoria and Stewart (2009) report that LGBT faculty members experienced “devaluation of scholarly work on LGBT topics” (p. 86). Gibson and Meem (2005) found “colleagues we talk to at conferences tell us that they are encouraged (read ordered) not to be out as queers on campus, and that they are discouraged (read forbidden) from doing academic work in the area of LGBT studies” (p. 8). My Advocate voice is heartened that Gibson and Meem (2005) themselves found that their “identity as a lesbian academic couple earns us a kind of political and professional capital. Our scholarly collaborations have been extraordinarily fruitful” (p. 7). Therefore, Advocate, has, once again won and I am willing to be vulnerable.

Despite the warnings of difficulties in sharing sensitive stories (see Sheridan, 2013; Valentine, 1998; Vickers, 2002), Sheridan (2013) points out that “the workplace presents a platform for the presentation of selves at work, [and this] can lead to discourses on the preservation of an ‘authentic’ or ‘real’ self in the hegemonic workplace” (p. 569). For me, that was being a lesbian in the heteronormative environment of a university in a regional town. Sharing this

autoethnographic piece as evidence in this paper has led to a more authentic identity which ultimately benefits both academics and students.

Conclusion

Analysing and coming to terms with my multivocality, especially in revealing my personal identity of lesbian, has been at times unsettling and confronting, but it was also liberating. I recognise that the autoethnographic style brings inherent risk in revealing the personal, and also that I risk my scholarship not being taken seriously. However, I believe the wider relevance of this project makes the risk worthwhile. “The recognition of both personal and professional nonunitary subjectivities ... resulted in the richest, most reflexive teacher identity” (Alsup, 2006, p. 182). I believe this is something from which many prospective or current teachers would benefit.

I have presented my own marginalised identity as one example but it is relevant to many identities and marginalised groups. My story dramatises my experiences, and traverses my journey of ‘coming out’ as a lesbian academic. Both the story and the supporting literature presented here show the tension involved in hiding an aspect of personal identity at work, and also the benefits to both academics and students of acknowledging and integrating all aspects of self-identity in the higher education classroom. This results in a more authentic teaching and learning experience. Being authentic is particularly essential in the role of an enabling educator. The students in their classrooms may have believed or, worse, been told that higher education was not for them and so for many, academics are more than simply teachers; they are role models and carers who have the ability through the nature of their position to transform students’ lives.

On my experiences of the process of autoethnography, I will end with Brogden (2010):

Tout compte fait [i.e., altogether], perhaps this approach to autoethnographic research isn’t so destabilizing after all. Perhaps accepting an invitation into instability, and dwelling there, can create altered spaces for coming to know, coming to be, as academics, which may in turn alter the ways our multiple, shifting, temporal identities come to produce, and be produced, and where crisis, like life, makes different things possible. (p. 375)

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