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RESEARCH PAPER

"I am an enabling success story": An autoethnographic narrative of an unskilled mother's foray into academia

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This paper follows the story of a young woman transitioning from secondary school through a series of unskilled jobs and the impact this had on her self-belief. Through an unexpected enrolment in an enabling course, the opportunity for growth in both skills and confidence impacted on her self-awareness and developed her self-efficacy through the discovery that she could successfully accomplish higher education study. Her achievements in higher education led to a position whereby she realised that she had accomplished something far greater than ever anticipated: she was an academic. As an enabling educator who had walked the same path, she found herself in a strong position to help others on their journeys to success. This story is mine. I am an enabling success story. This paper argues that enabling courses change people's lives, giving them hope for a better future. Enabling education takes students on a journey of self-discovery and self-awareness, building self-esteem and opening doors to vast opportunities. It further considers how a lecturer who herself comes from a low-socioeconomic background could go onto become a positive role model for enabling students from similar backgrounds.

Keywords: enabling education; student success; transformative learning; autoethnography; low socio-economic background

Introduction

I have been traversing a meandering journey through both enabling and higher education for the past 20 years, following numerous vocational paths in order to get to where I am now. The title of this paper begins with "I am an enabling success story". But this does not fully encompass the scope of my story; this has been a continuing success story that has transformed, not just mine, but many lives, over the last 20 years. So, let's rewind the chronological clock and revisit the past. The dialogue presented below draws on a model by De Vries (2012) to narrate a conversation between the Katrina of today and my younger self 20 years past. This story begins in 2000, the year I applied to study the enabling course Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) at a regional Queensland university:

Katrina 2020: I hear that you are thinking about doing some study? What are you going to do?

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Katrina 2000: Well, my younger sister signed me up to do this STEPS thing next year. It sounds like it might be okay. Actually, I have no idea what I am in for. I only went to grade ten so I don't know if I have the ability to even do this. However, this course will let me go on and study at university – that is if I pass all the subjects.

Katrina 2020: What a wonderful opportunity for you. It sounds interesting and a real challenge for you to pursue. What are you planning on studying when you finish STEPS?

Katrina 2000: Ummm, I don't know. I figure I'll spend next year doing STEPS and look around at the local uni to see what courses are available that I can study. My plan is to find something I can study in town because I have my husband and the two kids to think about, so I can't move. At this point, I just know that I do not want to be a nurse or a teacher. I have had enough of dealing with little kids from my nannying jobs.

Katrina 2020: I can appreciate that. What made you decide to undertake study at this point in your life? You will be 30 next year. Does it concern you that you are leaving it a bit late to start a university degree? How will your family cope with you studying? Are you worried about fitting study into your already busy life?

Katrina 2000: I actually realised that I don't want to be stuck working in unskilled jobs. At the moment, I pack shelves in a supermarket for a living and I have been seeing some really smart women in their 40s who have been dedicated stay-at-home mothers who have jobs packing shelves because they do not have any marketable skills. These women are all smart and very capable but being a good mother does not get you a decent job. I want to study while the kids are young and I can be around for them, then when they are old enough to go to school, and I can work full-time, I want to be able to get a decent job. Study seems to be the only way to do that. On top of that, I want to be able to help my kids with their schoolwork and I want to show them that hard work will get you places.

Katrina 2020: I understand that you want to see your life change for the better. However, how do you think you will go at studying at a university level?

Katrina 2000: I really do not know. I haven't studied for fifteen years since I left school at the end of Year 10 and I did not do that great. I only just passed most of my subjects. I did okay at Maths, but was not any good at English, so I do not know how I will handle all the writing that is needed at university. We just got a computer to use with my sister's embroidery machine, but I have not even sent an email or surfed the web or anything like that, so who knows how I will go with that stuff. The whole plan is to study hard enough to get through STEPS and then see what there is. So long as I can get a decent job at the end of it all so I don't have to spend my life packing shelves or cleaning toilets, that is all that I am hoping for.

Katrina 2020: STEPS is going to be the beginning of a long but very rewarding journey for you. I can tell you now that although this will take you a number of years to accomplish, your life, and the lives of those around you, are about to change for the better. Your younger sister will go on to study Beauty Therapy and succeed in this endeavour. Your mother will complete STEPS with you and go on to accomplish an Associate Degree in Multimedia studies. In addition, because you take this step, your older sister will be inspired to undertake university studies, become a qualified Primary School teacher and go on to teach in the STEPS course. Your husband will also undertake STEPS in 2004 and later enrol in Secondary Education to be a Manual Arts teacher. Your oldest daughter will complete STEPS and enrol in an Occupational

Therapy degree, while your son will enrol in an Engineering degree. In addition, various nieces and nephews will also undertake STEPS and follow different career pathways.

The impact on your own life will be far-reaching. You will be able to combine study with having another two children. Even though it will take you nine years to complete your first degree, a Bachelor of Informatics majoring in Multimedia, you will do it and accomplish a GPA of 6.83. Your dedication will pay off. You will be able to work in town as a Graphic Designer before accepting teaching roles at the University in both Digital Media and STEPS. However, you will not stop there. You will continue to study, completing a Graduate Certificate in Adult Education and a Master of IT majoring in Mobile Application Development. This is a life-changing step and one you will not regret!

My story

One evening, over a few drinks, I was conversing with an enabling colleague about my life experiences. I shared the many and varied roles I had undertaken as a young woman before becoming a lecturer teaching across two different departments. My colleague commented that I was an enabling success story. This was an epiphany for me, because in my opinion, all I had done was study and work like everyone else around me in order to support my family. I had not considered myself a 'success story'.

My story is not unique. Thousands of people have a similar story, especially those who grew up in a regional town. When I reflect on my high school years, I recall barely passing school. I left after grade ten because that was the expectation if you were not smart enough to go to university. Unbeknownst to me, this mindset had been passed down from generation to generation. My parents both left school when they were young to work and they had a strong working-class mentality. My sisters and I were encouraged to work hard, because my parents were practical people and they believed that we could do or be anything we wanted to be. However, their mindset was that you needed to get a job, work hard and build your way up. My father had a trade and worked in the same job for 40 years before being retrenched. My mother had been a registered nurse until she stopped working to have children, and went on to work unskilled jobs on farms and in the retail industry. In my era, this was the norm for me and many of my friends and we never questioned its validity.

After leaving school at 15, I moved away from home to work as an administrative assistant. Admittedly, I was not great with grammar and punctuation, and made a lot of typographical and other errors. Consequently, my employer double checked everything I did to the point that I felt that she might as well have done the work herself. This continual second guessing lowered my confidence and shattered my belief that I could undertake a simple role such as administration. This started a spiral of shame and humiliation as my employer transitioned me from administration work to housework and babysitting. Subsequently, this job only lasted 12 months as we both agreed that it was not working out. I had just failed at my first job. My next endeavour was at a local tourist attraction where I cleaned and showed tourists around. However, the week before I turned 17, I was laid off as I was told that I was not working fast enough. I later learned that I was replaced with a 15-year-old and I felt this may have been because their rates of pay were lower than mine. Again, I was left feeling that I was not good enough.

As I reflect on those years, I acknowledge that I was not the most energetic teenager and I did not aim very high. I went through the motions of school and work because I was told that I had to. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life, and I was only working because it was

expected, not because I had a passion for the jobs. Following the tourism job, I worked on a farm packing tomatoes, but after six months of this, I realised I needed to train for something, or I would be left in a dead-end job. This was my first realisation that in order to progress myself, I would need to do something about it. No longer was I content to go with the ebbs and flows of life. I needed to step out of my comfort zone and do something that would help me transition into a better career. At that point in my life, I enjoyed being around children, but did not think I was smart enough to be a teacher. I moved to the nearest major city and completed a short course at a Nannies College. I was fortunate to receive my first posting as a live-in nanny; work I would do for the next five years. However, I discovered that a nanny was basically a glorified housekeeper with low pay and long hours. Whilst I loved the children in my care, I knew that this was not a long-term career. I worked for three different families over this time period and when my final employer reduced her paid work hours to spend more time at home with her children, I was left without work. This was my impetus to move back to my hometown and look for a different career. Again, I realised that I needed training in order to change my career path so I started a course at the local TAFE institution in carpentry, as I enjoyed working with my hands and being creative. I left the carpentry course when a traineeship opportunity came up to do furniture upholstery. I thought this would be the career that would give me a solid job with decent wages and good hours. However, after six months, when the traineeship money from the government ran out, the business laid me off. They said they did not have enough work coming in for me to continue, and yet again I was left feeling that I was not good enough. It was at this point that I gave up. I took on several menial, unskilled jobs such as cleaning and packing shelves because I had no confidence in myself. I had come to believe, and accept, that this was my lot in life.

The turning point in my life occurred in October 2000. At this point, I was married with a toddler and a new baby and was on maternity leave from my job packing shelves. My sister attended a celebration ceremony for her sister-in-law, who had just completed an enabling course called STEPS. My sister, who was also on maternity leave, thought that this would be a great opportunity for us to improve our lives as STEPS was designed to prepare non-traditional students, who would not otherwise be eligible for higher education, for entry into university studies. She signed us both up for the following year. This was a game changer for me. As it turned out, my sister got a job before the start of term and could not start STEPS. Instead, my mother decided that she should try to enrol in her place and she was accepted. In 2001, the year I turned 30, I started my higher education journey alongside my mother. I had never surfed the web, sent an email, nor formed a grammatically correct sentence to write an academic essay. This was all beyond my ability. It felt like an intimidating undertaking, but I decided that if I could get through STEPS and continue on to undergraduate studies, I could study whilst my children were young. I had my family's support. My husband supported me every step of the way and my parents were willing to help with babysitting. The most calming aspect of this decision was that mum and I were going to do this together. We could help each other throughout the journey.

STEPS turned out to be a life changing experience for me. The teachers were lovely and very supportive and I found that I loved the subjects. Together, my mother and I completed STEPS and I managed to achieve High Distinctions for every unit. Wow, I was actually smart! I realised that I had the potential and the capacity to undertake a degree. I knew it wouldn't be the same as STEPS and that it would be more intense, but I was up for the challenge. I even had thoughts that maybe once I had finished my degree, I could teach in STEPS. I could see how this career would be not only enjoyable but also uplifting.

Deciding on my career path was my next undertaking. I knew that computers were 'the way of the future' and had found myself enjoying what I could do with them. I had also enjoyed the challenge of mathematics in my STEPS studies so I started my undergraduate studies in Information Systems. Within the first term I discovered that I did not enjoy studying Information Systems, as I couldn't see value in it for me. Consequently, I decided to change to a degree in Informatics as this incorporated Maths and IT and had enough minors and electives to tailor the degree to suit my needs. Whilst completing my first-year subjects, I enrolled in a unit Introduction to Multimedia and discovered the pure joy of Photoshop and web design. I found that I enjoyed this unit so much that it was the impetus for my next major decision that steered my future career direction. I decided to minor in Multimedia. Whilst the probability of local work in this field was limited, it was at this point that I decided that I needed to enjoy the subjects I was doing; otherwise, I would not finish my degree. Therefore, I decided to follow a pathway that I would enjoy rather than worry about what I would do for a job after I finished. Nine years later, in 2010, I completed a degree of a Bachelor of Informatics with Distinction. In addition, I was able to celebrate alongside my mother as she also graduated with an Associate Diploma in Multimedia. The biggest revelation I had was around my capacity as a student. I achieved 24 High Distinctions and four Distinctions throughout my undergraduate studies. To top this off, the year I graduated, I achieved an award for the highest GPA in the School of Education and the Arts. I firmly believe that my marks were due to a lot of time and dedication, but these grades also represented to me that I was intelligent and capable: a fact lost to me through my young adult years. However, I still did not have the faith that I would be able to succeed in the Multimedia industry as I knew that it took me hours to hone my assessments to a high standard, and the past had shown me that industry prioritises speedy outcomes.

In 2006, part-way through my degree, I found work in a local printing business where I worked my way from being the front desk casual to become the main graphic designer. In 2013, three years after I graduated, I applied to the local university to teach as a casual tutor in the Digital Media course, teaching into the multimedia degree, which I did whilst working as a graphic designer. I found that I really enjoyed teaching and in 2015, decided to undertake a Graduate Diploma in Secondary Education with the goal of teaching multimedia subjects at high school. As I reflect on that year, I wonder how I accomplished what I did; I juggled parenthood (with four school-aged children) and a marriage, working a 30-hour week as a Graphic Designer, teaching two units in Digital Media and studying two subjects in the Graduate Diploma which included completing two practicum teaching days each week at one of the local high schools. Mid-year, I was approached by the University to take on a six-month contract, teaching and coordinating the Digital Media course. I knew this would be a great opportunity, so I took a leap of faith, and gave up my position at the printing business, knowing that if it did not lead to continuing employment, I would still have the teaching degree to fall back on. A few months after completing the contract in 2016, partway through my Graduate Diploma, I applied for a role as an educator teaching computing in the STEPS course.

Here was my dream job. Fifteen years earlier, I had the seed of an idea planted in my mind when I was studying STEPS. I could see a future where I was that teacher in STEPS: the one who was supportive, who inspired her students to go beyond what they thought they could do and help them find a love for learning like I had done. Now, here I was, sitting in an interview for this very job. I wondered how I was going to share how passionate I was about the position. My nerves were palpable. During the interview, a panel member asked about my thoughts on the difference between teaching in the undergraduate arena and teaching in STEPS. While I would come to realise that there are some people who think that enabling educators are not 'real' academics, I had no such reservations. My response was easy: teaching STEPS was so

much more important to me than teaching at the undergraduate level. I realised the prestige was not there as an enabling educator, but I have never been in this for the accolades. Receiving the phone call to say that I was the successful applicant was one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life. My dream job had come to fruition.

As an educator in higher education, I had come across students who entered university straight from high school—the so-called 'typical' or 'traditional' student (Devlin, 2017)—and I had found that many had an innate belief in their ability to handle the rigours of university. Furthermore, I noted that many did not have other obligations in life, and study was their only priority as they were still living at home and had family support. However, in STEPS, many students came from a more working-class background, and did not have the same confidence in themselves. Additionally, they were generally mature-aged and faced the challenges of working and raising a family whilst they studied. As I think about these students now, I see a strong similarity between them and me back in the year 2000. I can relate to many of these students who find themselves in dead-end jobs or are stay-at-home mums who left school without completing their senior certificate because they did not think they were smart enough. In some cases, they had to drop out of school because of financial circumstances. Many of these students do not believe that they have what it takes, but, like me, they enrol in STEPS to try to make a better life for themselves and their families.

From my own experience, enabling educators do not just teach students. My STEPS lecturers enabled me to see past the 'can't' and inspired me to achieve more than I realised I had the potential for. They challenged, motivated and supported me throughout my journey, and were always willing to listen if I had concerns and encouraged me to keep trying. I am now proud to call myself an enabling educator as I am in a position of influence whereby I can nurture students' belief in self and challenge them to achieve more than they thought they could. I see my role as holistic as I don't just teach the skills they need to enter university; I aim to challenge, inspire, motivate, support and at times, just be a friendly listening ear.

I am proud to claim that I am an enabling success story. I am not embarrassed by my past as I realise that each aspect has made me the person I am today. It is through my experiences, as painful and discouraging as they were, that I learnt to overcome challenges and those experiences have made my success as a learner and then educator so much sweeter. I am an enabling educator and am honoured to be one.

Why autoethnography?

This story of my life's journey could be understood as a metaphoric 'rags-to-riches' tale, but more in the sense of an 'enriched' life through education rather than actual wealth. It is the story of my transition from a working-class background to becoming an academic. I have used an autoethnographic approach based in narrative to allow the full story to be told. Taber (2010) suggests that combining autoethnography and narrative methods can help an author overcome methodological challenges that standard ethnography brings. She argues that research methodologies are continually evolving and the use of an autobiographical/narrative mixed methods approach pushes the boundaries of the more traditional methods when exploring in a more personal, in-depth, reflexive manner. When I shared with my family that I was writing about my educational journey, my son asked if I was writing an autobiography. I explained to him that I was going to use an autoethnographic approach to this paper. The definition I gave him from my own understanding was that autoethnography is not writing an autobiography to tell one's life story but is a more reflexive approach where the personal story is told and then it is broken down and analysed until a deeper understanding becomes evident. As a

methodology, autoethnography is about conducting research in order to build knowledge and create transformation within society. Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis (2014) explain that:

> The goal of autoethnographic projects is to embrace the vulnerability of asking and answering questions about experience so that we as researchers, as well as our participants and readers, might understand these experiences and the emotions they generate. (p. 39)

Campbell (2016) notes that autoethnography is both a method and methodology that takes the personal experience of the researcher and uses it as the data. This experience is analysed to make sense of the cultural experience through self-narrative. Adams et al. (2014) remark that many autoethnographers start with a personal story that they feel needs to be shared and, in the sharing, analysed so it can be "understood more fully, deeply, and meaningfully" (p. 47). These personal stories typically discuss the author's experience with their changing identity, sometimes from the perspective of an epiphany (Adams et al., 2014), and aim to reflexively analyse that experience. They often illustrate cultural knowledge and describe experiences and practices from that cultural perspective. They are also designed to evoke a response from the reader (Adams et al., 2014). Adams et al. (2014) note that "most autoethnographers write to help others and to make life better, and, given the use of personal experience, explicitly seek to reach audiences both inside and outside the academy" (p. 44). This is true of the purpose for this autoethnographic paper, as I share the aspects from my life that highlight my cultural background and consider how the changes I have experienced may, in fact, benefit others. Writing from the perspective of those inside moments allows me, as an autoethnographer, to describe my experience in a way that an observer would not be able to and gives depth to the story (Adams et al., 2014).

Why this story?

On face value, the message in this story may seem to be one of self-aggrandisement. However, that is not the core purpose of sharing this story. The main message is that enabling education can be a powerful source of social change, affecting not only the individual but society more broadly. Fagan and Albright (2014) found that the "ripple effect" (in the sense of impact of educational opportunity) from enabling graduates on their families and communities was greater than that of more traditional students. Anecdotally, looking at my own family I have seen many ripples as a result of my engagement in enabling studies. I watched my mother, who left school after failing her junior year, complete an associate degree, and my sister follow us into study, going on to become a teacher and subsequently a university lecturer. I watched my daughter, after 12 months of moving from one unskilled job to another, undertake STEPS, and saw her confidence bloom as she completed the course with Distinctions. She now has plans to undertake Occupational Therapy so she can help others get through the hard times in their lives. I am now watching my husband, who was retrenched from his job of more than 20 years, engage in a teaching degree 35 years after leaving school, armed with the belief that with the knowledge he gained from completing STEPS, even a 'dumb tradesman' can succeed academically. These and many other similar stories show the transformative potential of enabling programs not only for the student but for their families and communities. Research shows that for people from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds, there are still significant barriers to attend higher education, let alone achieve their goals (Devlin et al., 2012; Habel et al., 2016; Bennett et al., 2020). Yet, my story shows that a woman from a working-class background can flourish and thrive within a middle-class academic setting and help others in the process. Although barriers may still be there, my progression into the higher education

sector, specifically enabling, has positioned me in a role where I can be a role model for working-class people making this leap to higher education.

At a time when enabling courses are once again under threat from new funding regimes that prioritise maximising fee income (Norton, 2020), this is an important message. Enabling courses or programs, such as STEPS, are central to the success of non-traditional students at university. My story demonstrates that such courses have the potential to bring about transformation for the students involved. Willans and Seary (2012) comment that "personal change is a well-recognised outcome of students' participation in STEPS" (p. 1). Moreover, students are "empowered to identify ways to overcome personal obstacles, reach beyond their comfort zones and recognise ways in which perceptions about themselves and others had changed" (Willans & Seary, 2012, p. 10). The process of undertaking an enabling course such as STEPS can be a transformative experience for those involved. Mezirow (2003, 1997) was a leader in this field and crafted what he called Transformative Learning Theory. Mezirow (2003) believed that transformative learning happens when someone is faced with a disorienting dilemma and must re-evaluate their views in order to fit this dilemma into their personal worldview. When personal perspectives are changed to those that are more wide-ranging, discerning, and self-reflective, transformative learning can be said to have occurred (Mezirow, 2003). As I reflect on my story, early in my life I believed that I wasn't a very capable student and that the only work I was skilled to do was in dead-end jobs that didn't inspire me or make me even want to go to work. This was my disorienting dilemma and combined with the fact that time and again I was left to believe that I was too slow or not good enough, and as a result, I had a low sense of my worth and my ability. When undertaking the STEPS course, my worldviews were challenged, I was taught how to think critically and be more discerning, and without realising it, my self-efficacy was developing through the successes I was having learning and applying content. Enabling courses are, by their very nature, a conduit for transformative learning, as they challenge the students through various disorienting dilemmas and, consequently, provide opportunities for critical thinking and broadening worldviews. These opportunities allow students to relate to others going through the same transformative development and gives them the chance to act on new perceptions (Mezirow, 2003). When I started in STEPS, I had no idea of what career path I wanted to take, and certainly had never considered that I would reach a standard where I could teach at a university level. Back then, my singular goal was to get a 'decent job' that would support my family. However, through my transformative process, I slowly began to realise the potential within me so that when opportunities arose, I had the confidence to step up and be considered as a worthwhile applicant. My individual transformation had a flow-on effect to those around me, so that over time the wider community also experienced the benefits of the widening participation agenda in higher education, which includes not only social inclusion but also the economic gains of a better-qualified workforce (Bradley et al., 2008).

As my story has shared, I grew up in a working-class home where my parents valued hard work. As a young person growing up, university was not on my radar or that of my siblings, as there was more value placed on finding a job and setting ourselves up for the future through employment. This is an example of what Devlin et al. (2012) calls 'sociocultural incongruence', and for me, it was an enabling program that first allowed me to negotiate the "differences in cultural and social capital between students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and the high socioeconomic status institutions in which they study" (p. 7). Consequently, I believe that part of my role as an enabling educator is to act as a role model for working-class people who want to have this same opportunity but are scared or uncertain about moving out of their comfort zone. Though there is not yet much research on the impact

of an enabling educator's sociocultural background on their students, I want to suggest that the presence of educators from low SES backgrounds in enabling programs may help to make university a more welcoming place for non-traditional students. White (2014) suggests that teacher diversity is important and students respond better with teachers with whom they can identify. Duckworth, Thomas and Bland (2016) argue that "expanding the diversity of the teaching profession" (p. 272) could be a way to widen participation in higher education. Educators from a low SES background find themselves in a position to "become advocates" in their areas, which may help to close the higher education participation gap while improving "academic awareness" and creating a fairer system of education (Duckworth et al., 2016, p. 274). Egalite and Kisida (2017) believe that teachers with a similar background will be able to present new material in a more culturally relevant way. Moreover, it can also be argued that students are inspired by role models they can relate to (Murphy, Brown & Singh, 2017). Additionally, there is a large body of literature to show that if students from non-traditional backgrounds are to succeed, they need help to adapt to the university environment as, historically, higher education has not been organised in a way that will meet diverse student needs (e.g., Benson et al., 2013; Cocks & Stokes, 2013; Devlin et al., 2012; Habel et al., 2016). For students to succeed in their studies, they need to adapt to working within an unfamiliar institutional context and to understand how to meet the expected requirements of that institution (Benson et al., 2013). One of my roles as an enabling educator, therefore, is to act as a mediator and support person for other working-class people who want to make this transition. My experience as an educator suggests that having a lecturer who can understand their situation and help support them through this undertaking, makes a huge difference in their capacity to succeed.

Conclusion

This paper is not intended to be about the success of one individual through enabling education, but rather the many success stories that this one story represents, and the ripple effects of each one in the wider community. Enabling courses are designed to build self-confidence and develop self-efficacy in their students, helping them to broaden their worldviews and learn to be more discerning. As educators also play a key role in challenging class-based assumptions about capability, it is my hope that as a woman from a working-class background who was able to flourish and thrive within the middle-class academic setting, I may be able to continue to help others do the same, regardless of the barriers that exist; and continue they do. My story is a testament to the power of the widening participation agenda, and the impact of enabling courses in bringing about social transformation. Enabling courses, in my experience, allow people to achieve their dreams and so much more.

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