RESEARCH PAPER

Sentio ergo sum: Professional philosophy and personal identity in the making of an enabling educator

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The ethos of enabling educators is central to their work, but there are few accounts of how this ethos develops. This paper uses narrative enquiry to explore the development of one Australian enabling educator's professional philosophy through her construction of her life experiences and personal identity. Proceeding on the assumption that narrative is the most effective way to examine the richness and complexity of the interrelationship between personal identity and professional philosophy, this paper presents an autobiographical account of an enabling educator's journey from non-traditional student to non-traditional academic. Analysis of this narrative reveals that *feeling*, which the educator defines both as empathy and as the capacity to feel pain, is at the heart of the educator's construction of her self-identity. This personal quality is transmuted, in her professional practice, into a transgressive philosophy of care in which allowing the possibility of failure for a student is seen as central to building resilience, a philosophy which challenges and extends dominant constructions of the concept of care in enabling education. More broadly, the paper points to the importance, within the enabling space, of the presence of educators from non-traditional backgrounds with diverse life experiences, identities and philosophies.

Keywords: enabling educators; narrative enquiry; professional philosophy; personal identity; pedagogies of care

Introduction

Educators who work in the university enabling space are generally assumed to subscribe to something called the enabling 'ethos' or philosophy. For these lecturers, a commitment to the concept of widening participation in higher education is fundamental (Strauss, 2020), though it can take many different forms (see, e.g., the meritocratic, liberal and transformative approaches outlined by Burke, 2012; 2013). Little attention has been paid, however, to the ways in which individual educators develop an enabling ethos. Is it a personal orientation, a reasoned philosophical position, or something else entirely? Garrison et al. (2012, cited in Lisciandro, Olds & Jones, 2019) write that all teachers "have a tacit theory of teaching and learning as well as a philosophy of education, whether or not we ever articulate it to others or ourselves" (p. 1). This philosophy, conscious or not, underlies every choice a teacher makes in their professional capacity. It is grounded in what Milheim (2011) calls an educator's "positionality, referring to race, class, and gendered identity", as well as in their reflection on

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their teaching practice and "prior educational experiences", and their attitude to the exploration of "alternative viewpoints" (p. 1). In other words, it is deeply personal. As one widening participation professional explained in a UK study, "Everything I do in my job is influenced by where I came from" (Burke, 2012, p. 161).

This paper seeks to shed light on the nature of the enabling ethos by exploring the life-history of an enabling educator in a regional Australian university. In a first-person, autobiographical narrative, Flavia Santamaria tells the story of how she became an enabling educator, and, indirectly, how she constructed her own enabling ethos. Through her narrative, she creates a strong and resilient self from difficult experiences that are deeply connected to her positional identities as a woman in a patriarchal culture, a migrant, a mother and a scientist. From this powerful personal identity, her professional philosophy emerges as a challenge to, but also an extension of, the ethos of care that currently dominates enabling education (Bennett et al., 2016; Crawford, Kift & Jarvis, 2019; Motta & Bennett, 2018).

Methodology

The methodology for this paper emerged as a result of discussions between the co-authors, colleagues from very different backgrounds in CQUniversity's School of Access Education. Flavia is a scientist by training, with a PhD in koala biology and ecology; Ann-Marie is a humanities scholar, with a PhD in literature. Having discovered that Flavia was working on a memoir in her private life, Ann-Marie urged her to consider writing the story of how she became an enabling educator. Ann-Marie did not then know Flavia's story; she was proceeding on the assumption that the 'thick description' of biographical accounts (Geertz, 1973) has much to contribute to educational research (Hayler, 2017; Merrill, 2015). Her hope was that Flavia's story would be a way to begin to fill some of the gaps that Burke (2012) identified in our scholarly knowledge of those who work in the widening participation space. Flavia was happy to write an autobiographical account of the journey that had brought her to this particular place in life, but as a scientist, she was uncertain about the value of such an account in the scholarly arena. From a traditional scientific perspective, narratives are not objective, not independently verifiable, not generalisable; instead, they are mired in the specific and the personal. Proponents of narrative inquiry argue, however, that such objections are based on a false idea of science. For Freeman (2007), narratives are in fact more 'scientific' than some 'objective' methodologies because:

> they often emerge from a *true,* rather than a false, scientific attitude, one that practices fidelity *not* to that which can be objectified and measured but to the whole person, the whole human life, in all of its ambiguous, messy, beautiful detail. (pp. 134-135 [original emphasis])

Things that are too difficult to measure—the interplay of thought and feeling when learning a new concept, for instance, or the complex relational currents between teacher and student in a classroom—may be simply ignored by science, as too nebulous to be documented. This means that such vital but resistant realities as "reflexivity, the complex nature of subjectivity and agency" (Scutt & Hobson, 2013, p. 18) can easily become invisible. Narrative can bring these complexities back into the scholarly conversation. As Scutt and Hobson put it, storytelling is a way to say things that are "unsayable" within "traditional quantitative methodologies" (p. 17).

Moreover, personal stories are never simply personal; as second-wave feminism has taught us, the personal is political. The stories told by an individual inevitably shed light not only on themselves but on their social and cultural contexts. As Gagnon (2018) writes, speaking of her

experiences as an illegitimate child, "my lived experiences, my identity and my story are tied inextricably to the larger political and social worlds that construct, define, misrecognise, and limit me" (p. 564). Personal stories are thus not only significant in themselves, as a rich account of individual experience that is irreducible to any other, but also as "a source of insight into cultural experience" (Ellis & Adams, 2014, p. 254). Furthermore, by exposing constraints that might otherwise be invisible, accounts of personal experience can function as "a form of social and cultural critique" (Moriarty, 2014, p. 1).

Once we had decided to proceed by means of an autobiographical account, Flavia wrote her story to the prompt: "How did I get here?" After reading Flavia's draft, Ann-Marie identified aspects of the story that needed further clarification, and Flavia made minor revisions. We then had to consider whether to treat Flavia's story as 'data', mining it for themes to be clustered into codes in the classic qualitative analytic approach, or to present it as an artefact in its own right, including it in full alongside a reflective analysis. We agreed that one of the benefits of the use of stories in the social sciences is that they provide what Green (2015) describes as a different way of knowing—something she argues is much needed in higher education research. The experience of reading a story, like that of encountering an art work, is quite different from that of reading an academic analysis. As Coles (1989) explains, reading a story entails a "mix of heightened awareness and felt experience" that engages us in a very different way to reading analytical text, enabling us not just to gather facts but "to encompass in our minds the complexity of some lived moments in a life" (p. 128). Analysis presents us with propositional knowledge, while stories enable us to participate empathically in other lives (Barone & Eisner, 2012). While 'translating' a story into a form of propositional knowledge through analysis can be useful and important, it can also be an impoverishment, confining the story's meanings within a specific interpretive frame. Accordingly, we decided to present Flavia's story to the reader in its entirety, without mediation, as well as drawing attention in an analytical reflection to its significance for our knowledge of enabling educators.

Despite our passion for stories, we do not take a naïve approach to personal narrative in this paper. Our research practice was informed by a constructivist framework which holds that in telling a story about oneself, we are also creating that self in language (Freeman, 2007). As McKendree (2010) explains, "A reciprocal relationship exists between story and identity in that identity influences the story, but is also informed by the story that is being told" (p. 591). The storyteller shapes, creates and even changes their identity in the process of telling the story. In Burke's (2012) words:

> Through the telling of stories about ourselves, we actively produce our identities through an assemblage of the memories and experiences we reconstruct in the telling process. Identity is constituted through these narratives, in which we remember certain episodes or events that give meaning to our narrative and sense of self. (p. 55)

Telling a story is a way to "lay claim to an identity", as Maclure (1993) contends, knitting together "the disparate dimensions" of our lives into a coherent account that is "always bound up with values and with action" (p. 320). The story recounted in this paper thus not only reveals Flavia's identity and her philosophy but actively contributes to their creation. It is followed by Ann-Marie's analysis, which draws out some threads deemed of value for more discursive forms of knowledge.

Flavia's story: *Sentio ergo sum*

It is an incredible experience to be here; here is a good place where people like me, just like me and everyone else, get to grow emotionally and mentally; it's a place where everyone can fail and still succeed, because there is no success without failing, I know that! My place is CQUniversity in Rockhampton and my school is the School of Access Education. Here, I am a lecturer of Computing Skills and Introductory Chemistry in the Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) enabling program and a Computing Academic Learning Advisor. My students are mostly adults of different ages and very diverse education levels. For most of them, university would be just a chimera without a program like STEPS. They have the opportunity to work towards personal success, something that many of them have not experienced during their sometimes very difficult lives and upbringing.

So, how did I happen to be here? How did I become an enabling lecturer, and did I really become one or was I always one? This is my story.

Certainly, I didn't know anything about the enabling 'philosophy' before I started this journey at CQUniversity, and I am still learning. I was born in Rome, Italy, the first daughter of a relatively wealthy family. My upbringing was fairly normal considering the period and the culture of my original country. My parents were quite liberal, despite their Catholic beliefs. Rome is big and there is room for freedom, and freedom I had.

I wasn't a great school student. I don't have many great memories of my school life during primary and help myself to remember using photos. My teacher used to say that my writing was like "zampe di galline" (chooks' feet). Now I know that I couldn't see where the lines were; it was all blurry, with or without glasses (my vision never reached 20/20, far less than that). So, my school experience started literally 'crooked'. I didn't like mathematics; well, actually, I did like it, but I didn't get it. I had this incompetent teacher who always organised algebra competitions; my brain doesn't work like that, it just freezes if you ask it to compete, it needs time to focus, I am very normal. This teacher hated me because I cried every time I lost the competition; I needed time to understand.

In secondary school, I was very thirsty for knowledge, very curious, especially in General science and Biology. I also loved helping others understand; I wanted to see my friends achieve, and for that, I was there to assist. I used to help my younger sister too—not that she was interested in my helping her, but I was there for her. And this is something I discovered: not everyone is ready to learn, but we need to be there when they are, we need to push them gently, believing that they can do it.

Once at my Catholic all-girls school I had a huge physical fight with a terrible bully who every single day told me that I was ugly and stupid, and teased me about my glasses. She was much taller and stronger than me, but I was tired of her bullying. After that fight she stopped annoying me. I learned a lesson: move on, build resilience and just face life because it's never going to be easy. Instead of complaining, keep moving on.

When I finished school, I knew in my heart that I didn't want to get married straightaway and have children and do just that with my life. I knew because I saw my mother and she was just living, not growing, I wanted to grow, I wanted my brain to learn. I wanted to be a veterinarian, I always loved animals. But my parents just wanted me to get married and have children. My mother even complained that I was getting old and that it was going to be too late.

In Italy, in those times (and please don't think I am prehistoric as I believe it was very similar in Australia), women had to be beautiful, looked after, fashionable and keen to get married and leave home with a husband. I was none of that: I was not interested in fashion, I wasn't this great beauty like my sisters, and I definitely wasn't keen on marriage. I pushed to get what I wanted, and finally my father agreed that I could move from Rome to Perugia to study. It was a total failure, I came back after ten months because I didn't want to lose my boyfriend who was in Rome. So I left my passion for Veterinary Science in Perugia, but I lost my boyfriend anyway. So now what?

I decided to enrol in a biology course in Rome as an alternative. It was good, heavy at times, but my passion for the study of nature took my hand and led me through the course one step at a time. My mother kept hammering me that all this study was too much, I was going to be blind soon: "Are you sure you want to continue studying this hard?" She was happy when I passed my exams, but her emotional involvement in my study was quite small. Between her and me it was psychological warfare. But the more she insisted, the stronger I became, and my resilience was building up. I learned to rely on myself. I am not going to claim that nowadays students shouldn't seek help, but I think that they should not become reliant on external help. They should have dreams, strengthen their belief in their own ability and become more resilient. Dependence can be overcome, resilience can be taught. Life is difficult, and we need to help both children and adult learners grow strong in the face of life's obstacles.

While I was still studying, I met my future husband and we moved to England. My first daughter was born and I studied with her on my lap or when she was asleep, and cooked with her in a pouch. I slept very little. I was travelling back and forth to Rome with my daughter to do my exams, leaving her with my mother-in-law while I was sitting my exam, then travelling back to England to start again. In Italy, we didn't have all the help that students have now, at least in Australia; there were so many of us, and we had to either swim or drown. I swam. I had to get there, I had dreams, I wanted to be me, neither a mother nor a wife, just me, despite the lack of support from my husband. It was the end of 1990 when I graduated: I made it.

When we went back to Italy, we started preparing the documents to move permanently to Australia. In the meantime, I was working as a research assistant and having more children. I had wanted to move to Australia since I was 8 years old. Do you remember Skippy? He started my dream. Those beautiful hopping creatures, the wonderful pure environment: Australia was my destination since I saw the television show, *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo*. But it also seemed to me that Australia was a less-corrupt country, where women could have more opportunities and were less discriminated against. I knew that, if I wanted my children to have a better life with more opportunities and a brighter future, I had to move. My husband was also very enthusiastic, so we did.

After moving from Rome to Melbourne with my three children, two dogs, my husband, and my honours degree in biology (of which I was very proud), my personal life started crumbling. I had no family in Australia, no emotional support. I was the one who had obtained permanent residency for my family to migrate, but it was my husband who got the jobs working in computer systems. This meant I was home looking after my family. I wasn't happy; I adored my children, but I needed more, I needed myself. My passion for all-things-biology, from the smallest cell to the giant whales, was my driving force.

When you move to a new country, you dream big. You think that life will be smiling on you; that everything will be so different, so much better; that all these opportunities will fall at your

feet. You think that you will be part of *that* group, *that* culture. They, the citizens of your new country, will embrace you, they will be one with you. After all, we are all humans, similar body shape, similar aspirations, similar dreams. Is it true, though? I am not sure anymore. It is a bit like having children: you think it will be all roses and beautiful flowers, just love, but then reality strikes, and you notice that it is hard work to get there. And yes, your children will be the best thing that ever happened to you, but they come with a big price tag: your own development, your own future, your passions are on hold. You are a woman after all.

I tried to get a position as a biologist at a university, sending out hundreds of applications. Some universities would reply, some simply ignored me, but the outcome was the same: no work for me. I thought that my English was quite good; after all, it was at proficiency level when I applied for my visa. I couldn't have been more wrong. Australian English is not pronounced as mainland English is and I had to learn to listen carefully. And then all those idioms, like "Bob's your uncle"—to which I would reply "No!" So, the wall was very high, and I had to move forward. I needed to upskill.

I applied for a PhD to do research into koalas at the former University of Ballarat. My husband did not support me. At the beginning, he was nice, he wanted children just like I did. But then it was too hard for him. He was becoming extremely aggressive with me and my children. To him, my PhD was just a pastime, just as my work in Italy as a research assistant had been; his job, instead, was the real thing. His aggression increased and I asked him to go, to leave us alone. So I was broke, I didn't have a job, and I had three children and two dogs. It was so hard. I mentioned resilience earlier: the harder the circumstances, the harder I would fight. This is how I see life, a continuous moving forward.

I met a man who shared my research interests and we married. Together, we worked as a team to raise my three children and the one we had together. Meanwhile, I was struggling with my PhD. My initial PhD supervisors were sexist, and very unhelpful, and I was moving through my research project very slowly, as I still had young children to look after. In addition, I had to work on my English, I had to learn to present at conferences, I had to limit the movement of my hands (very important for Italians to express themselves), and I had to learn to write in scientific English. It was all a nightmare. But then, two new supervisors were selected to replace the others. Two women, two incredible people who walked with me and helped me along the way. I also worked with a woman at the language centre at the University of Ballarat. She advised me on sentence structure, connecting paragraphs and so on. The help I received from these women and from my husband was amazing. I finally finished, a bit later than expected, but I did it—we did it.

For some years, I worked as a research consultant, but eventually I went back to university and became a secondary teacher. I loved the work, and finally I was earning enough to meet our needs, and could spend my time with my children after school. Today, my husband and I have great jobs and my children are happy adults, despite life's peaks and troughs.

I am a firm believer in one's own inner strength, the power of self, the power of dreams. I believe that if you really want something, you will get there. It is not easy, nothing is; life is not the flowery path that I thought it would be. It is hard and the pitfalls are terrible. You feel lonely at times, you feel that everyone around you has got it better and that you are surely the only one suffering. But no, you are not, and you are just one of the millions of people out there, desperate to get a bit of sunshine. You will, if you believe in yourself, if you are strong enough to have a focus point, a target, if you seek help, if you swallow your pride.

"Cogito, ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am) is a famous statement made by Descartes in 1685, to which Nietzsche responded: "*Sum, ergo cogito*" (I am, therefore I think). These statements have stayed with me for years, since I studied philosophy at school. But, to me, these statements reduce us to thinking machines, and alienate us from feeling the pain of others, from being receptive to all creatures' pain, including struggling humans. *"Sentio ergo sum"* (I feel, therefore I am), this is what my motto is. As long as I can feel pain and compassion, empathy for others' pain, I am.

I think this is it: I feel. This is why I am here, teaching in an enabling program and working in an academic learning support centre. I feel the pain of those who want to reach a place in the sun, of those whose life has been less than perfect, of those who had to stumble before they could move forward, of those who believe that drugs are the solution to their problems, of those who have realised that only they can help themselves, of those who can swallow their pride and ask for help.

So, what can I do for my students? How am I an enabling educator? Some people think that enabling lecturers should take on the role of mother to their students, but this is not my way. I am not maternal in the common sense of the word. I don't feel pity for my students, I don't feel sorry for them. I am quite tough in my views, but I care so much. I care because I want them to achieve what they believe is impossible.

For me, there is a connection between teaching in an enabling program and riding horses. I ride horses using the so called 'natural horsemanship' system which rejects abusive training methods and aims to develop rapport instead. Horses are herbivores and very sensitive animals who can be easily injured, mentally and physically. To train them, you need to apply pressure but release it well before they feel pain. But, when horses have been treated badly by humans, they are highly sensitive to pain and they bolt; they want to run away, away from pressure and potential suffering. Students who have experienced hardship are very similar to sensitive horses; they either fight or flee, but they won't bear the pressure. Biologically, humans are caught in the middle; they are omnivores, meaning that they are both hunters and gatherers. This gives them the power of destruction (fight) or the power of safety (flight). I often reflect on my own life; did I fight or flee? As an enabling educator, my goal is to help my students to flee from danger but also to fight for what they want, for their dreams, their aspirations. I truly believe that when you have been down, right at the bottom, there is only one way you can go: up.

Reflecting on one's own experiences is at times challenging and painful. So much baggage to carry, so much that is unknown still to come. But reflection is also a way forward. Reflection should make one stronger, not weaker. Even when reflection brings pain, it can also be the beginning of something beautiful.

Ann-Marie's reflective analysis

Personal identity

When I read Flavia's story, I was both charmed and moved. As a narrative, it has its own beauty and power, emanating from a startlingly authentic voice. As a story, however, it is a tale of bitter struggle. Indeed, the thing that struck me most powerfully in Flavia's account of her life history is the resonance with the histories of so many of our enabling students—something she acknowledges at the very beginning of her story when she says that at CQUniversity, she works with "people like me, just like me". Enabling students are, by definition, non-traditional. The 'traditional' university student is defined as someone who enters university directly from

school (see, e.g., Davis & Green, 2020, p. 2; Habel, Whitman & Stokes, 2016, p. 16). This hypothetical young Australian successfully completes Year 12 with his age cohort (the default gender of this hypothetical student is male), receives an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) that gets him into the course of his choice, and goes to university, where he studies full-time, living at home with his supportive parents or in accommodation provided by them, with no dependents, and working a few hours a week for spending money. By contrast, non-traditional students are likely to be mature-age, to be self-supporting and/or have dependent children, and to come from low socio-economic backgrounds. They may be migrants or refugees with first languages other than English making learning more challenging. They may have caring and/or financial responsibilities that make it difficult or impossible for them to prioritise study. As Habel et al. (2016) point out, they often embody "multiple sites of disadvantage" (p. 49), which can mean that taking on university study at all demands considerable "agency and tenacity" (p. 8).

Flavia herself was a non-traditional student. When she first went to university, she was going against the wishes of her family, who felt that it was not necessary or suitable for women to get a university education. She struggled with a lack of emotional support as well as with the seeming impossibility, as a woman, of reconciling her desire to have a partner and children with her desire to have a life of her own. When she returned to study, she was a mature student with a husband and baby. The negative impact on female students of having caring responsibilities for young children is well documented; for example, in a UK study, Moreau and Kerner (2015) identify sleep deprivation, depression, isolation and poverty as effects of the conflicting demands of parental caregiving and study, while in the US, Lynch (2008) notes that high numbers of PhD students who are also mothers drop out of their program. Burke's (2012) research with non-traditional students found that "women's negotiations of their identities as wives, mothers and students ... caused pain, fragmentation, contradiction and the tight regulation of the women's (hetero)sexualized identities in the home" (p. 55).

Once she moved to Australia, the stresses Flavia experienced as a mother and PhD student were compounded by her migrant status. Testa and Egan (2014) find that far from adapting to students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD), universities generally expect such students to "adjust to and adopt the discourse of dominant culture" (p. 240). Indeed, curriculum design often "implicitly negate[s] CALD students' cultural identities and experiences" (Testa & Egan, 2014, p. 240). This kind of negation is strikingly evident in Flavia's description of having to learn not to use her hands for emphasis when she speaks. The symbolic weight of such a requirement is difficult to overlook; the sense that she needed to change something about herself that was both deeply cultural and profoundly personal was a clear signal that she was not acceptable in her new environment as she was.

Flavia's story also documents financial struggles throughout her doctoral studies, especially after the breakdown of her marriage, and hints at the personal trauma associated with domestic violence. These are all dimensions of non-traditional student experience (Bennett, Uink & Van den Berg, 2020; Habel et al., 2016), and serve to underscore Flavia's underlying identity with such students. They also, arguably, characterise her as what we might call a non-traditional academic, someone whose path to academe has not followed the supposedly traditional route that goes directly from school to honours degree to doctorate to academic position. Burke (2012) notes that those who work in the widening participation space within higher education may find themselves being "constructed as 'non-traditional' and even marginal in academic spaces" (p. 153). Certainly, like the widening participation professionals Burke (2012) identifies, enabling educators tend to be situated on the fringes of universities, "in separate

centres and outside academic faculties and departments" (p. 154; see also Strauss, 2020). For Burke (2012), however, this 'outsider' positioning is a positive, as "academic practices are tied up with the values, identities, epistemologies and perspectives of hegemonic and privileged social groups (e.g., middle class, white racialized and (hetero)masculinized)" (p. 155), which is one reason why universities can feel so alien to people from outside this charmed circle. The presence of educators with different backgrounds, values, identities and perspectives can help to transform higher education spaces, potentially making them far more hospitable to people who might otherwise feel they don't belong. Indeed, Burke and Whitty (2018) emphasise the importance of recruiting educators from "diverse cultural backgrounds" at all levels, in order to ensure that non-traditional students will encounter teachers with personal experience of their "lifeworld knowledge and hidden injuries" (p. 277). From this perspective, Flavia's personal identity, as it emerges from her story, makes her the perfect bridge for non-traditional students seeking to move from the world outside higher education to the world inside. She has first-hand experience of the social, cultural and economic factors that can mean that one person sails straight into university while another does not. Furthermore, she is a living witness that it is possible to overcome daunting and even overwhelming disadvantage to thrive in higher education.

Professional philosophy
In her study of professionals in the widening participation space, Burke (2012) notes that those who have "personal experiences of being positioned in and through social inequalities" are likely to have a "passionate commitment" (p. 159) to widening participation. For them, it is much more than a slogan because they have experienced the transformation educational opportunities can bring in their own lives. Moreover, they have experienced at first-hand how inequitable the exclusionary discourses of academe can be. She quotes an interview with Sarah, a manager in an 'elite' UK university, who explains that her own experiences had shown her that success at university was:

> nothing to do with [...] innate intelligence, it's largely to do with background, and I feel really, really, strongly committed to that, so I think that's a kind of general overarching [...] ethos that I feel that spurred me to work in widening participation. (p. 160)

Flavia's story shows a similarly strong connection between her personal identity and her professional philosophy or 'ethos' as an enabling educator. In her story, she constructs her identity through the narration of a series of pivotal personal experiences, beginning with being bullied as a child. When she fought back, she learned a lesson that, in retrospect, would seem to set the pattern for her life, writing: "move on, build resilience and just face life because it's never going to be easy". Later, when her mother brought psychological pressure to bear on her to get her to give up study, she resisted and broke free. When she had children of her own, she found her time and her passions harshly curtailed, but she refused to give up on her determination to have a life of her own. When she moved to Australia, hoping to be embraced by her new country, she could not find work in her field, but she persisted, eventually finding a way into the profession she loved by enrolling in a doctorate. When she struggled as a PhD student, she swallowed her pride and asked for help: from a language advisor, from her supervisors, from her new life partner. Every disappointment, every disillusionment, was countered, and ultimately completed, by a tale of picking herself up, dusting herself off, and returning to the charge, each time overcoming difficulties and growing stronger.

From these experiences, she constructs her personal view of the world: that life is hard, and to survive you have to be willing to fight. "It is not easy, nothing is; life is not the flowery path that I thought it would be", she writes. "It is hard and the pitfalls are terrible". Nevertheless, it is possible to overcome all difficulties "if you believe in yourself, if you are strong enough to have a focus point, a target, if you seek help, if you swallow your pride". Her philosophy as an enabling educator is deeply rooted in this perspective. Since life is difficult, full of unanticipated obstacles, the most important thing an educator can do for their students is to show them that they are strong, that they can survive, that they can achieve things they may not even dream of. Students should understand that while they must seek help, they should not become solely reliant on others. Instead, they should use the help that is offered to "strengthen their beliefs in their own abilities and become more resilient". This conviction underlies the choices she makes on a daily basis in her interactions with the students she encounters as an enabling educator.

The philosophy of care
Nevertheless, Flavia's story poses a kind of implicit challenge to what is currently, perhaps, the most dominant philosophy of enabling education: the 'pedagogies of care' set out by Bennett et al. (2016), Motta and Bennett (2018), and Crawford et al. (2019). In their study of enabling students and educators at the University of Newcastle, Bennett et al. (2016) found that "care-full approaches are foregrounded in enabling pedagogies, including the emotional labour of care and connection" (p. 28). This includes "demonstrating authenticity, empathy and respectfulness", "making one's self seem 'human', approachable and relatable", and being willing "to 'go the extra mile' for students" (Bennett et al., 2016, p. 39). Indeed, these enabling educators saw care as "intrinsic to their sense of identity as a teacher" (Bennett et al., 2016, p. 39). The educators in Bennett et al.'s (2016) study also identified a downside to this identity, however, with many noting that "their care labour was not valued" (p. 41) more broadly in the institution. Motta and Bennett (2018) go further to argue that care is a quality that tends to be undervalued, partly because of its historical association with women, and that the sectoral standing of enabling education itself suffers from this association. Koster (2011) makes a similar argument in relation to the broader university context, pointing out that "emotional work", which is more likely to be done by women than by men, is usually seen as "the least important aspect of the pedagogical role, where lecturing is more important than pastoral work and research is more important than lecturing" (p. 74). She quotes a senior female academic's observation that women get "trapped into the caring roles"; they are the ones "looking after the students and doing the student liaison, and looking after the difficult ones and the lost ones ... [while] the male gets on and writes the paper that gets him the promotion" (Koster, 2011, p. 74).

Flavia explicitly opposes herself to the caring model of enabling education. She insists that in her teaching, she is not "maternal in the common sense of the word". "Some people think that enabling lecturers should take on the role of mother to their students, but this is not my way", she explains. Instead, she is "quite tough" in her attitude. Yet her story makes clear that she sees herself as a caring person. She records that even as a child, she liked to care for others by helping them to learn, tutoring her sister and her friends. From this early experience, she distilled a lesson she still values: that "not everyone is ready to learn, but we need to be there when they are, we need to push them gently, believing that they can do it". She goes further, however, putting her capacity to experience emotion at the centre of her being: "I feel, therefore I am". What she feels is both "pain" and "compassion" for other sentient beings. Empathy is at the heart of who she is, deeply embedded in her sense of self and her ethos as an educator. Her description of enabling education as somewhat like managing traumatised horses is full of

tenderness. Nevertheless, in her enabling ethos, caring manifests as toughness. Only by pushing students, she believes, can she help them "to achieve what they believe is impossible". For her, allowing a student to fail can be a form of caring if it teaches them that, as she herself has learned, you can "fail and still succeed". How this philosophical stance is embodied in Flavia's teaching practice is not addressed in her story, and may be something to explore in future research. What is clear, however, is that her focus is on building strength and resilience in her students, mindful as she is from her own experience that their journey through higher education may well involve "significant change, trauma, disruption and social stigmatisation" (Habel et al., 2016, p. 49).

Conclusion

In working on this project, Flavia and Ann-Marie were not oblivious to a seeming paradox in the roles they assigned one another: Flavia, the scientist, was charged with the creative work, while Ann-Marie, the arts scholar, took on the analytical role. Yet there is, of course, no reason why a scientist should not create art, nor a storyteller revel in analysis. Such stereotypes, like our preconceived notions of non-traditional students or enabling educators, are inventions that rarely serve those they seek to define and constrain. Gagnon (2018) writes that within higher education, stereotypes based on "identity categories, such as class, race, or family background", lead to "misrecognition" (p. 573), a painful and isolating experience for the person being pigeonholed. Personal stories, in their inescapable specificity, work against such stereotyping. Flavia's vivid narrative turns labels like "single mother" and "mature-age student" into three-dimensional experiences, painful but powerful. Her story helps us to see enabling educators as complex, embodied subjects, irreducible to simple categories. At the same time, it demonstrates that who we are—or, at least, how we conceive of ourselves, how we construct ourselves in writing—is essential to what we do. As Zinn (2004, cited in Lisciandro, Olds & Jones, 2019) writes, "our life beliefs lay the foundation of our educational philosophies" (p. 5). Flavia's experiences have informed her philosophy, and her philosophy informs, and is interpenetrated with, her pedagogical practice as an enabling educator. We have argued that Flavia's own experience of being a non-traditional, and thus marginalised, student is a powerful basis for her work with enabling students who often themselves feel marginalised. Furthermore, her reworking of traditional models of care adds a new dimension to our understanding of the ways in which enabling educators may care for students. Finally, the fragment of autobiography she has shared brings to vivid life the reality that for some, getting an education can be the fight of their lives. In each of these ways, Flavia's story expands our knowledge—both propositional and sentient—of the work and identities of enabling educators.

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