



RESEARCH PAPER

The identity conga line: How diverse lecturers perform the enabling dance

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Enabling educators occupy a somewhat ambiguous space on the fringes of higher education, as they help students prepare for university study. To explore the implications of this role, four enabling educators from diverse backgrounds wrote reflections about what it means to be an enabling educator at CQUniversity in Queensland, Australia, and how this role fitted or conflicted with their other ‘identities’. These reflective pieces were then collectively analysed for themes and connections. Two main themes emerged: the highly student-focussed approach of each educator and the impact of time-pressures. Within the first theme it was found that each of the authors sought to help their students by ‘going the extra mile’. To be more student-focused, the authors maintained more flexible contact hours; and while this had the positive effect of helping students, it had a negative effect on the educators in that it conflicted with their family time. The pressures on time were also created by the multiple roles that each author had to take on while working as an enabling educator. However, as the paper shows, the common desire to help students should be tempered so that educators achieve balance with their other identities.

Keywords: enabling education; emotional labour; teacher identity; collaborative autoethnography; pedagogies of care

Introduction

This paper’s overarching research question is two-pronged: what does it mean to be an enabling educator and how does this role correspond or conflict with lecturers’ other ‘identities’? Research suggests that enabling educators focus strongly on the affective dimensions of learning: enabling educators “inevitably contend with students’ non-academic challenges in the process of addressing academic growth, transition to the university environment (acculturation), along with attempting to build students’ resilience, confidence and effective study habits” (Crawford et al., 2018, p. 25). Each of the author’s ‘stories’ shows a different perspective on the conflicts involved in being an enabling educator, but this is to be expected with authors from such diverse backgrounds including differences in age, gender, sexual orientation, country of birth, education, and so on. Each story displays unique perspective on the research question with themes of the job conflicting with family needs, family support helping to make the job easier, the desire to go above and beyond in supporting the students, empathising with students’ needs and trying to make study a positive, timely and safe experience. While the four accounts were diverse, the analysis showed that for all four, being

an enabling educator involved doing as much as possible to help students and to provide them with a safe and supportive learning environment. A. Bennett et al. (2016) found that enabling educators “saw care as intrinsic to their sense of identity as a teacher” (p. 29). However, there were negative implications as some people felt that they were increasingly expected to be “always on call and infinitely flexible” today (Motta, Daley & Barker, n.d., p. 2). An important outcome from the analysis was that while there are benefits in the short term for the educators, in that they experience fulfilment in their role, there were drawbacks for each of them in doing so. All of the authors considered themselves to be early career enabling educators and, as such, the stories revealed some underlying tensions as they sought to achieve balance between professional and personal aspects of their lives. This is critical to the formation of teacher identity, as, according to Alsup (2006), not only is “teacher identity development ... an important component of learning to teach [it] involve[s] the integration of the personal self with the professional self” (p. 4).

Collaborative autoethnography methodology

The researchers in this project chose to employ autoethnography using a collaborative approach in order to identify commonalities and differences in their role-conceptualisations working as enabling educators in an enabling course at a regional Queensland university across three different delivery sites. A ‘story pot’ approach using collaborative autoethnography (CA) was adapted from Crawford et al. (2018) and Chang (2013) to explore the concept of enabling educator identity. Figure 1 visualises the steps involved in the story pot method through which “researchers-in-collaboration have the opportunity to verify interpretation of their individual experiences” (Crawford et al., 2018, p. 26).

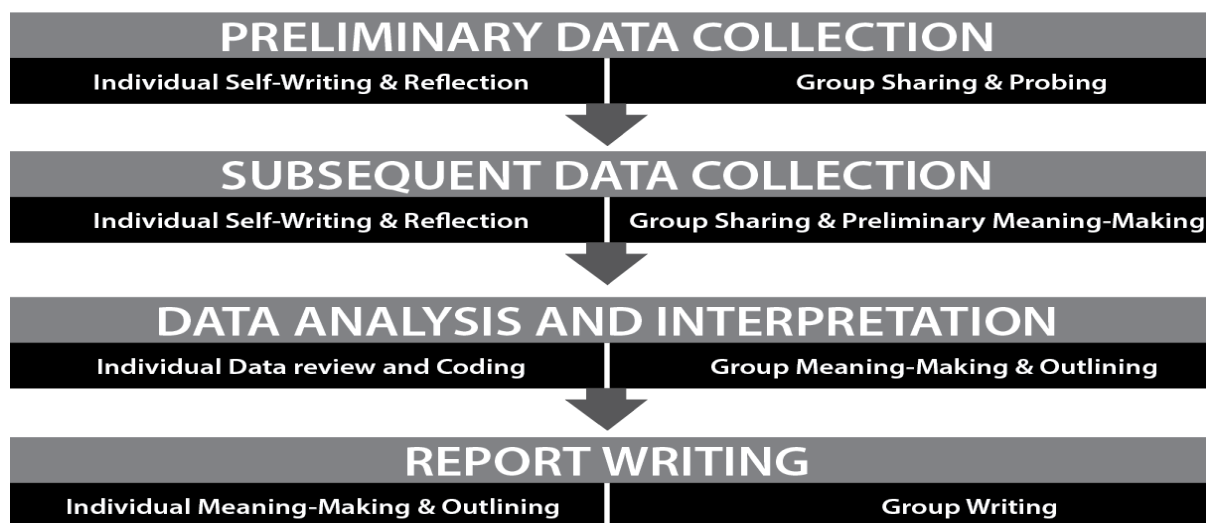


Figure 1: Story Pot Methodology (adapted from Crawford et al., 2018)

An advantage of CA is that the authors were also participants, which allowed access to researchers’ innermost personal thoughts that usually would not be available to other researchers. For this reason, in autoethnographic and CA research, subjectivity is seen as an advantage instead of a disadvantage (Foster et al., 2006). Due to the collaborative nature of the analysis, there were opportunities for the author/researchers to verify interpretations of their stories (Crawford et al., 2018) which is also an advantage. This combination of solo and group work is illustrated in Figure 1. The researchers, like Ngunjiri, Hernandez and Chang (2010), found that it was an interactive process as steps were repeated as needed to enhance the data and analysis.

The data generated by the story pot, consisting of the four individual first-person reflections on what it means to be an enabling educator, was analysed using thematic analysis (Kidder & Fine, 1987) around the main theme of enabling educator identity to identify dominant or reoccurring themes. This story pot was initially analysed by the authors individually, as suggested by Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2016). Group discussions were then used to further code/characterise the results of the initial analysis into larger themes/categories.

For this project, four early career university lecturers came together to tell their own story. Each author was asked to write about their experience as an enabling educator and how it corresponded or conflicted with their other identities. All of the authors are lecturers in enabling in the Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) course in a variety of teaching areas, including chemistry, maths, physics, computing, academic writing and preparatory skills.

Story Pot

Louise's story

I sank back in my chair and sighed. The conference was fantastic but I was exhausted. I got to stay at another nice hotel and meet lots of like-minded people with the same passion for enabling students. At the conference dinner I hit the dance floor with a couple of colleagues and before we knew it we were following the musician with an African drum in a conga line (yes, you read that correctly and no, I wasn't drunk!). I had so much time on my hands without having to look after my kids. But despite the social element, there was a serious side. It was the first conference I had attended where I presented research. The research centred around mothers and single mothers in enabling. I had a research team and two of us presented separate parallel sessions on our research project. Both sessions were very well received and I was really surprised to have two members of the audience approach me afterwards and enthusiastically ask if I would like to collaborate on some similar research. I knew I had a large teaching load in Term 1 so I let them know I would be in contact. A little voice in my head was saying "don't take on too much" and another voice said "you won't be promoted anytime soon so yes, take on more!" But what about my family? There are only so many hours in the day.

I have come from a high school teaching background and I am still experiencing a bit of culture shock around the world of research. Teaching is one thing, but research is yet another thing to fit in around the thousand emails, phone calls (including upset students), unit coordination, marking, visits to the doctor, kids homework and activities, and the barrage of other family commitments. My children are currently 6 and 8 and my stepdaughter 12, and they do take up a lot of my time which of course is well worth it. However, when they get sick, a spanner gets thrown in the works and even with some assistance from my family, I tend to do the lion's share of the child-rearing and housework. My husband doesn't always understand the time I need to spend on the computer to get the job done and although in a parallel universe I would happily turn it off for the weekend, I rarely do. I know many of my students work a lot on the weekend and appreciate extra help outside of hours. I'm used to working as efficiently as possible to fit in some extracurricular activities and family commitments which means my work is far from 9-5, but my students tend to enjoy the weekend feedback and early morning/late night answers to emails.

I firmly believe that my role as a mother helps me with my role as an enabling educator in terms of being caring and empathetic towards the students. I know many of my students need extra support and guidance, and I strive to go above and beyond to help. I tend to reach for the phone instead of returning an email when a student sounds particularly distressed. The stories

I have heard are diverse, sometimes not out of the ordinary, but other times, heartbreaking. Many of my students are pursuing higher education against difficult odds—financial, personal and academic. For some students, school was a very negative experience and coming back to it as an adult is fraught with many obstacles. Helping them in the first few weeks of term takes extra time and patience but it certainly pays off in the end. I enjoy helping students from diverse backgrounds and love the feeling when students ‘get it’, settle into university life and increase their confidence towards their studies.

During the conference I spoke to several people about their PhD studies and knew this wasn’t for me for now (but wouldn’t it be fantastic?). Honestly, I just can’t fit in such a big study load at the moment due to my full-time teaching and family commitments. However, I am comforted by the fact that my job quite simply changes lives. Even for those students who don’t make it through the course, the upskilling is beneficial in their careers and even helps them assist their own children with their schoolwork. This makes them proud of themselves and, of course, I am always proud of them.

Katrina’s story

I am a wife, a mother of four, a student, an enabling educator, and an undergraduate lecturer. I am also to a lesser degree a seamstress, a jewellery artist and self-taught musician. I wear colourful caftans and colour my hair purple. Each of these characteristics and identities blend together to define who I am and most of the time they blend together beautifully, but as with everything in life, at times, there is conflict. The time taken for work and study conflicts with my role as a mother and wife. How can I be a good mother and be there for my children’s school events when I need to be available to teach classes? I miss sports days and awards afternoons, as I can’t just skip class. As a result, I am left feeling that I have let my children down by not supporting them at school.

In a typical university term, I teach undergraduate classes in the evening so that I can fit both undergrad teaching and enabling teaching into the week without them clashing. This means that my husband must watch the kids and cook dinner those evenings. To fit study around my work schedule, I study on the weekends. This means that my family spends a lot of time without me as I am hidden away with my computer trying to get yet another assessment completed or studying for yet another exam. On the evenings I don’t teach I can be found sitting at the computer answering emails and prepping for classes the next day, again, missing spending time with my family.

At the end of each term, I stop looking at my computer every night only to turn around to find my family have their own lives that run without me. I look around on the weekend thinking we can go spend family time together and find that my family has adapted to not having me there and are not that interested in going for a drive with me. This leaves me asking myself: “Have I taken on too much and is it worth all the time spent away from my family?” Yes, I am providing for my family, and the extra evenings spent preparing for class makes classes better for my students. The studies I undertake will help me to keep up with technology and become a better educator and move up at work. But, is it worth the lost time with my family? Being an enabling educator means going the extra mile to help your students and brings with it the need to be available to your students when things aren’t working for them. These students come into university without the knowledge and skills to undertake undergraduate education and so have a higher degree of need. This means evenings spent replying to the weekly activities, so the students receive feedback before they commence their assessment tasks. It also means answering emails on a Sunday night when assessments are due.

Yes, there is conflict between work, study and my family's needs, and I need to make my family my priority and manage my time to fit work and study around my family's needs where possible. That said, I am lucky. I have a supportive family who understand why I work and study and who work with me rather than competing with my other obligations. They understand that what I am doing will make our lives better and at the same time help others to follow their potential and become who they want to be.

Gemma's story

Ding! There goes my email ... again. It's 8pm, I'm sitting on the couch, watching TV, playing some trivial game on my iPad, when the Outlook app chimes and a note appears at the top of the screen. I love this. I don't even have to move or interrupt my play and I can immediately see who it is from and the subject line. But then my mind starts processing.

Who is it from? Should I read it? Should I answer it? I can't help myself. I know it is from a student and is about the maths subject I teach. Hmm. Two minutes go by and I finish the level. OK! I go to the app and read the email. She is struggling with a question on the assessment. My gut says it is a fairly straightforward email answer, but my brain says that it is not due for two days. I decide to leave it until tomorrow, and I go back to my game.

Ding! Here we go again! This time it is a student who has an emergency and wants to know if they can cut back their study load. It sounds serious, and they sound panicky. This time I choose to answer. I grab my laptop, look up their study plan and compose the email. I know it is late, and maybe I should wait until tomorrow, but I hope I can help that student sleep better tonight. I know it would be weighing on my mind if I did not answer until tomorrow, as I can really feel the student's concern. I care for their well-being, and maybe sometimes take that on board a little too much.

That is the compromise. On the one hand, I will feel better, and I hope the student will feel better if I respond quickly. On the other, I wonder if I am contributing to the unrealistic expectations of the students that they will receive answers so quickly. I do not make these decisions lightly. Therefore, I make sure I say in the email that this is out of the ordinary, and in my weekly communications reiterate that answers may take up to two working days to receive.

I know I am a little out of the ordinary too. I have a lot of free time in the evenings. I am married, but our children are no longer at home. I also love learning, and value the educational experience and really want everyone to have the opportunities I did. I think that had a lot to do with having a strong support system around me, especially my parents. These students are enabling students from non-traditional backgrounds and I am all too aware that they may not have this support system at home and want to provide as much support as I can, emotionally AND academically. It is also clear that if I have time to play on my iPad, then it is not interrupting me or my family to simply answer an email. I realise, however, that very few of our enabling course lecturers have this luxury. Hence, I am very aware of my actions, and why I am leaving the maths email (and many more) for tomorrow.

Ding! There goes my email again!

Brijesh's story

I am a migrant from a third world country where education was considered as the only way out. If I had not received a scholarship in grade 12 to study grade 13 in New Zealand (NZ), I

don't know where I would be right now. After completing my university education, I went back to my country of birth and taught at the medical school for nine years. It was interesting times with coups, institutional politics, development of programs, and so on. The one thing that did not change was the fact that I loved interacting with students. Being a medical school, we had some of the 'best' students and I enjoyed challenging these students. Honestly, most of them would have succeeded with or without me given their educational capability.

On the other hand, we also had some low socioeconomic status (SES) students from various Pacific Island nations. Over the nine years that I spent at the institute; I realised the joy I would experience when these students succeeded. I still remember a student who two years after graduating thanked me at a function for being fair and more helpful than what he expected. This really stunned me as I had not done anything out of the ordinary. From this point onwards, I made a conscious effort of making myself more readily available to students—both time wise as well as personality wise. I guess I was trying to make sure that the playing field was fair for these students. Looking back, this is probably the first time I wanted to be an enabling educator and my value of treating people like you want to be treated was cemented.

I left the country after nine years as I had achieved what I had wanted to, and career progression would have meant a role with dramatically reduced student interaction. I think I knew that I wanted to work in the enabling field but did not have the opportunity, so I went on to work in research labs for the next few years.

After stints in Scandinavia and NZ, I came to a realisation that my passion was not conducting research in a lab. As luck would have it, my wife was offered a job at CQUniversity. I followed her shortly to this beautiful part of Australia and I had fantastic colleagues in my first role as an enabling educator. My belief that everyone can be successful at university was further strengthened. I have been at CQUniversity for two years now and I strongly believe that a student with the drive and dedication provided with appropriate support will be successful.

I love teaching maths in the STEPS program. This is a unit that several students dread usually because of their previous experience with maths. I had realised that just knowing the content was not going to make me an effective teacher. Boosting students' self-confidence / giving students personal attention / performing in front of the class / being relatable are all things that I work at. Doing this for 12 hours a week can be exhausting but it makes it all worthwhile when students succeed. On a more personal note, my role as an academic or enabling educator is made so much easier due to the support provided by my wife. As my wife is an academic, she understands that this is not a 9-5 job and happily takes on additional family responsibilities when I am busy and bring work home. If I did not have such a supporting partner, accomplishing my professional role would be challenging. There are times when my role as an enabling educator runs into conflict with developing good friendships outside academia. This might be because both my wife and I value education and family life. When we are not doing work-related activities, we try to spend more time helping our kids do their homework and partake in recreational activities as a family. As a result, not much time is left to socialise with others.

Results and discussion

These stories from the four educators show their willingness to help their students as much as possible, despite this 'extra' work creating time pressures and at times conflicting with their other identities. In analysing the stories, the questions of what it means to be an enabling educator and how the role relates to the authors' other identities were considered and common

themes were explored. Two main themes were identified. The first theme being that each author is highly student-focussed in their approach as an enabling educator. The second theme is the time pressures involved and how it impacts on their other identities. These two themes appear to be in contradiction; hence the stories clearly demonstrate a tension for each author in creating a single identity as an enabling educator. When analysing the stories in light of relevant literature, it is clear that the identity struggle is common amongst teachers, particularly when students are from non-traditional backgrounds. In the stories, being highly student-focussed created large emotional demands and time pressures on these four teachers, and yet there seemed to be some element so alluring about this that it kept them going, sometimes to the detriment of themselves or their families. This dilemma is explored in the discussion which follows, along with potential resolutions, even though they are not yet fully realised by these four educators.

Student-focussed approach

The authors were all highly student-focussed in their approach as an enabling educator and this focus on students showed up in a variety of ways. Each author was willing to go out of their way to help students in different ways. This was seen in Louise, Gemma and Katrina's willingness to adapt their hours to be more flexible and student friendly. Gemma, for instance, identified so strongly with a student's emotional needs and commented that if she could help the student to sleep better that night it would not weigh on her own mind. This care fuelled Gemma's need to answer her urgent emails outside of work hours to help alleviate a lot of stress for students. Indeed, this focus on students is prevalent in the literature around teacher identity. McNaughton and Billot (2016) found that academics' values around "care for students" was "key to authentic identity" (p. 647); however, this had a down side if they encountered students who were "completely disengaged" (p. 652) which made them feel responsible, lose confidence, and ultimately affected their professional identity. This was particularly true with academics who work primarily in the development of literacy and numeracy. R. Bennett et al. (2016) found in this area, teachers have been quoted as saying they feel like they are taking on "unusual teaching responsibilities ... such as *surrogate mothering*, *miracle working* and *mending a broken system*" (p. 221) [original emphasis].

For the four academics, teaching into an enabling course presents particular challenges similar to what R. Bennett et al. (2016) identifies. Katrina and Louise felt that being an enabling educator meant that they had to go the extra mile as those students had higher needs. Louise took a hands-on approach by calling students rather than just emailing them when they were particularly distressed and noted that many of the students had diverse backgrounds and had faced difficult situations, which would mean that they would require extra help. This positioning demonstrated that she recognised that the students were at risk of being disengaged. She aimed to give such students extra time and patience, especially in the first weeks of term when it could be overwhelming for them. Moreover, she has seen it pay off at the end of term. Gemma noted that her students may not have had a strong support network as many of them came from "non-traditional backgrounds" and she wanted to support them both "emotionally AND academically" as much as she was able. Hockings et al. (2009) discusses how "teachers' beliefs about students influence their identities and pedagogic practice" (p. 484) and stress the importance of considering students from diverse backgrounds when developing teacher identity. They found that many teachers were aware of students from non-traditional backgrounds, were inclusive of different approaches to learning, and valued individual needs. The non-traditional background of students in enabling education has been well-researched (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2014; Bunn & Westrenius, 2017; Lisciandro, Jones & Geerlings, 2018; Willans, 2019). Enabling students are more likely to be from low SES backgrounds or

minority groups, and/or have not succeeded in previous, formal educational settings, in particular a school environment, and are at particular “risk of withdrawing from the course” (Seary, Willans & Cook, 2016, p. 4). This withdrawal could be for various reasons but has often brought about a loss of confidence and even shame (Burke, 2017). Enabling or bridging/access courses were funded by the Australian government to give pathways for these students to gain the knowledge, skills and confidence to re-enter formal education (Pitman & Trinidad, 2016). The fact that enabling courses have been extremely popular and successful (Pitman & Trinidad, 2016) alludes to the notion that perhaps the identity of an enabling educator is something unique. Motta and Bennett (2018) write about the ‘caring’ environment of enabling education that embraces individual students and offers a safe and positive space for learning.

The stories demonstrate that these academics show genuine care for their students and their success. Gemma noted that she herself loves to learn and would like to see everyone else have access to the same opportunities she did. With Brijesh, his care was seen in his desire to boost his students’ self-confidence, give them personal attention and by being relatable himself. This concurs with Motta and Bennett (2018) who found that “a humanising relationship between teacher and student” (p. 640), creates an environment where the students feel welcomed. Their ‘pedagogies of care’ recognises that the students’ minds are both cognitive and emotive, they think and feel, and the above evidence shows that our educators have incorporated this understanding into their practice. It also agrees with the findings of Walker and Gleaves (2016) who found that having “a relationship at the centre” (p. 69) of interactions between teachers and students is beneficial for their study experience and success; they also discovered that many higher education teachers feel “compelled to care” (p. 69). As a result, educators were “working to support students at all hours and times; finding ways to facilitate student learning” (Walker & Gleaves, 2016, p. 70). Indeed, this is similar to the findings in this study that our teachers do not work usual office hours.

Their heavily student-focussed approach did have some negative impacts, Katrina and Louise commenting that being available for their students outside of traditional working hours left them feeling that they were not spending enough time with their families. Furthermore, Brijesh commented that teaching in academia made it harder to have an active social life away from work, particularly due to having a partner who is also an academic. Gemma also noted that while she had the freedom during her home time to check emails and go out of her way to help students, she was aware that many other lecturers did not have this availability. Therefore, she aimed to only respond to urgent emails so that students became used to lecturers responding during work hours, and prevent students having unrealistic expectations of their lecturers.

Walker and Gleaves (2016) note that the need to be student-focussed can lead to exhaustion and have detrimental effects on the academic. Our educators appeared, on the surface at least, willing to negotiate their time even at some personal expense, because of the empathy they felt for the students and the recognition that non-traditional students may need different timeframes (Bennett & Burke, 2018). There is, however, evidence that this had caused additional emotional stress. Katrina was “missing spending time with my family” and Louise also asked, “what about my family?” It has been noted in the literature that caring for students increases the emotional labour demands on teachers. While it is recognised that teaching is generally associated with emotional labour (see Kinman, Wray & Strange, 2011), Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006) argue that “performing caring teaching involves a significant amount of emotional labour” (p. 121). They acknowledge that “caring is an ambiguous term”, but that it “emphasizes receptivity, relatedness and responsiveness” (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006, p.

122). Caring becomes emotional labour through “emotional strain, anxiety, anger, and disappointment” (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006, p. 123). In turn, this could result in “burnout and emotional exhaustion” (Chang, 2009, p. 193) and negatively affect teachers’ mental health (Gray, Wilcox & Nordstokke, 2017). The teachers who wrote the stories may not quite have reached emotional capacity yet, but the literature shows that something has to change to prevent burnout in the future.

Impact of time pressures

The second main theme identified was that of the time pressures involved in being an enabling educator. Multiple aspects expected in the role of enabling educator such as lecturing, unit coordinating, professional development, research and the extended help given by each of the lecturers to their students added to the time pressures evident in all of the stories. These time pressures were also the main negative impact on personal and family time. Meanwhile, Louise reflected that the role required more than just teaching; research, family commitments, emails, phone calls and unit coordinating all contributed to the workload. She has primary school aged children whose needs, she shared, took up a great deal of her time and if they were sick, or if other out of the ordinary things happened, she had even less time. Crawford et al. (2018) have examined the unique situation of labour demands in enabling education. They connected the demand to identity, noting that “an enabling educator is akin to a juggler, holding many roles in the air. We are simultaneously educators, social workers, and university employees” (p. 25). There have also been many studies around the time commitments and work hours of academics, in particular due to the effort to support their students (see, for example, Archer, 2008). Archer (2008) states that some people see this as a “badge of honour [and received] a huge amount of satisfaction [from] working really hard” (p. 275).

There was a strong link between empathy in each of the stories and the reasons for the time pressures. Empathy was certainly a positive aspect of an enabling educator identity, for both these staff and for their students. Each lecturer empathised with their students and that empathy led each one to aim to do more for their students; whether it be by putting extra time into their lessons or providing extra support to students when an assessment was due on a Sunday night, and being available to check emails on the weekends so students could get feedback in a timely manner. This empathetic approach was instrumental in creating time pressures for each educator. Louise commented that she knew that many of her students needed extra support and guidance and she tried to go above and beyond to help them, calling them when they sounded particularly distressed. Katrina noted that the time taken for work conflicted with her role as a mother as she could be found sitting at the computer answering emails and preparing for classes most evenings.

Do the positives outweigh the negatives?

There are clearly both positives and negatives to the experiences of the four enabling educators. The analysis raises the question, however, as to whether the positives outweigh the negatives. One potential answer as to why these educators are willing to deal with the negatives can be found within each of the stories: a sense of personal fulfilment. Louise found that helping students from diverse backgrounds was rewarding and she loved when they had an ‘aha’ moment of understanding, as she wrote, when they “get it”. Louise also noted that watching students as they gain confidence and “settle into university life” was another joy of being an enabling educator. She noted that her job “quite simply changes lives” regardless of whether students go on to further tertiary studies. Louise expressed this satisfaction when students became “proud of themselves” and consequently she was proud of their efforts and

achievements in return. Brijesh, although he acknowledged that enabling education could be gruelling, noted that it is worthwhile when students succeed, in particular the joy he felt when talking about the success of low SES students. Katrina was happy that she could help others to follow their potential and Gemma felt better when she could help.

It is well researched that a happy academic is a productive and effective academic (Duncan, Tilbrook & Krivokapic-Skoko, 2015; Martin, 2011; Riddle, Harmes & Danaher, 2017). This notion is in concurrence with Crawford et al. (2018) who discuss “witnessing students’ transformations” where “bearing witness to students’ growth, revelations, and turning points in their enabling courses ... emerged as a protective factor” (p. 30). Furthermore, these educators were actually involved in the transformation, as evidenced by positive student evaluations, and so it was “rewarding and a privilege” which gave them a “deep sense of purpose” (Crawford et al., 2018, p. 30) and which “enables a more effective ‘carrying’ of the emotional labour load” (Crawford et al., 2018, p. 31). Furthermore, a study by Loonstra, Brouwers and Tomic (2009) demonstrates that “existential fulfilment” or “perceived self-efficacy” (p. 752) was effective against burnout. In higher education, Flecknoe et al. (2017) found that academics with an education focussed position “wrote about the fulfilment of seeing the ‘light switch’ moment as students understood a concept, and commented that ‘the time spent interacting with students was the aspect of [their] work that [they] loved most” (p. 4). Even Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006) who write about the emotional labour of teaching, found that a caring relationship “may be a source of professional satisfaction for teachers” (p. 123).

It is important, however, to note that all of the authors of this paper considered themselves to be early career enabling educators with a similar tenure status and common attitudes toward student support, and this could be seen not only to impact the findings, but to influence the degree of burnout they may have already experienced. That this ‘existential fulfilment’ was maintaining their high levels of empathy and resilience to time pressures at the time of writing their stories, does not necessarily mean it is sustainable, or even justifiable, in the long term. Archer (2008) found that more experienced academics negotiated pressures and “maintained boundaries ... through a discourse of ‘boundaries and balance’” (p. 276) but younger ones were more resistant to this boundary setting, opting more for measures of “self-protection” that did not interfere with their student-focussed work, but also unfortunately did not reduce their long hours.

The potential to achieve a balanced identity

Each author believed that being an enabling educator changes lives and all were willing to provide extra support to make this happen, and yet it is evident that achieving balance in life is desirable. These stories showed the need for the educators to have emotional balance between work and family, but also provided a clue to achieving this balance by using the support from within their own families. There was also the need to set students’ expectations around that need for balance to alleviate time pressures.

Katrina, Gemma and Brijesh all stated that their jobs were made much easier due to the support they received from their families. Louise commented that her role as a mother worked well with her role as an educator as it helped her to empathise with her students but spoke of bearing “the lion’s share of the child-rearing and housework” which made things difficult for her. Katrina found that her family benefitted from her career as an enabling educator as it had given her the skills to help them and provide a good role model to her children.

It was noted that while being student-focussed could be positive when it helped students, it could also be negative as this approach could create unrealistic expectations from the students. Gemma identified that there was a compromise between helping the student and contributing “to the unrealistic expectations” that students gained from receiving answers straight away. In her story she stated that she included in the email reply to the student that she had responded swiftly as the situation was out of the ordinary, and other less urgent email enquiries may take up to two working days for a reply.

The literature shows that the nature of ‘academic identity’ is complex and ever-changing (Bennett, 2017), and therefore may take a while to develop. Part of the development is the aim to achieve balance. First, there is a need to reduce the toll of emotional labour within the formation of identity through “the constant work of negotiating the self; how they see themselves” (Hockings et al., 2009, p.483) and second, is teachers balancing student expectations, or, “how others see them” (Hockings et al., 2009, p. 483). R. Bennett et al. (2016) agree that “academic identity is formed through negotiation” (p. 218). They acknowledge the need to “explore ... tensions between managerial and professional work ideologies [to find] balance” (R. Bennett et al., 2016, p. 218). McNaughton and Billot (2016) present identity as a developmental process towards achieving balance: identity is “ongoing cognitive, emotional, and moral work, involving the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of personal and professional identities” (p. 644) noting that identity can often be “fragmented” (p. 645) until balance is attained. Moreover, the complex nature of identity formation is highlighted by Hockings et al. (2009) who point out that in the context of higher education this formation involves a balancing act due to negotiating “conflicting demands of membership of several communities (e.g., research, professional, managerial, teaching, family, etc.) into one identity” (p. 484).

As Archer (2008) found, it is possible for academics to “resist the seepage of work into their personal lives through boundaries ... [that were] constructed through their involvement in other activities and interests [including] relationships with partners and families” (p. 279). It appears from our stories, however, that there is a necessity to account for the perceived neediness of the students, and for the academics to see that creating balance does not necessarily mean the students will unduly suffer, and may, in fact, become a more well-rounded student for the experience. It is also important for academics to realise that delaying the provision of support will not diminish their sense of existential fulfilment, and that balance is something to be worked at.

Conclusion

This paper used collaborative autoethnography to detail the stories of four unique enabling educators and their perceptions of how their role as an enabling educator fitted in with the other roles in their lives. From their stories it was discovered that each author possessed multifaceted and competing identities. Many commonalities were identified in their stories which could be related to having similar tenure in the same access program at the same university and this extends to similar attitudes of care towards their enabling students. As the stories represented the personal feelings of each author, the findings are very subjective; however, due to the nature of the autoethnographic methodology, this subjectivity is regarded as a positive aspect as it allows the reader to access each author’s personal thoughts in a way that most quantitative and qualitative research does not.

Each educator showed a student-focussed approach both to their stories and their identities. This student-focussed approach, however, had the negative effect of creating time-pressures as

each one dedicated extra time to provide their students with a more engaged, positive and safe learning environment. Emotional labour demands were also found to be present. Despite these demands, each educator believed in the positive impact they had on students. The authors also spent time outside of official work hours in order to be there for their students, thus creating conflict with their other identities and responsibilities. That said, having the identity of ‘caring teachers’, created positive impacts for both themselves and for their students, the latter being important for enabling students, and which might foster better retention in their enabling program. Furthermore, it could be suggested that the enabling educators in this study bolstered their own existential fulfilment by using these pedagogies of care to make themselves feel better by helping others. It is, however, recommended that lecturers be aware of the issues that the time pressures and empathy can create, and how it could swiftly lead to feeling overwhelmed. Consequently, we have shown the need for academics to work to create a work/life balance in order to avoid the stress and fatigue that can lead to burnout. A potential avenue of future research could be investigating the level of student care in relation to the length of time as an enabling educator, and whether or not duration of teaching impacts on teacher empathy.

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