RESEARCH PAPER

"I always seem to have been helping and caring for others": Reflections of a long-time enabling educator

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In this paper I use autoethnography to draw on aspects of my extensive experiences as an educator in the Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) pre-university preparatory course in order to examine some significant changes in the way enabling education in Australia has been conceived of and enacted over the past decade. Fundamentally, I seek to illustrate these changes by exploring how my own various encounters with students and colleagues have impacted and shaped me, and, in turn, influenced many of my philosophical beliefs and pedagogical practices. Upon providing a contextualisation portraying my predisposition to help and care for others, I proceed with a chronology of how STEPS, in which I have taught for 18 years, has been impacted, like other enabling programs, by economic, political, strategic and other imperatives, diluting the once content-rich and student-centred course to a more skills-focused, competency-based version. While I acknowledge the justification for such changes over the last decade, I convey the sense of disenchantment this has caused me as an enabling educator who places a strong focus on student care. I conclude with a plea to enabling educators to vehemently champion the uniqueness of enabling students in their educational institutions, and to ensure that planning and delivery of enabling courses forever foregrounds the students' many strengths, not their shortcomings.

Keywords: enabling education; autoethnography; pedagogies of care; relational aspects of learning; neoliberalism

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The two conflicting mentalities needed for good teaching stem from the two conflicting obligations inherent in the job: we have an obligation to students, but we also have an obligation to knowledge and society ... Our loyalty to students asks us to be their allies and hosts as we instruct and share: to invite all students to enter in and join us as members of a learning community ... We [also] have a responsibility to society—that is, to our discipline, our college or university, and to other learning communities of which we are members—to see that the students we certify really understand or can do what we teach, to see that the grades and credits and degrees we give really have the meaning or currency they are supposed to have.
(Elbow, 1986, pp. 142-143)

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Introduction

We live in dramatically changing times, most evident as I complete this paper amidst social, economic, and political upheaval while the fallout of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic redefines and shapes daily lives and livelihoods, prompting existential and other deeply profound questions. This cataclysmic diversion from the norm as we once knew it is forcing many citizens to examine long held personal perceptions about life and living, leaving many grappling with confusion and uncertainty in conceptualising a future that is doggedly dictated by the volatile present. In a far less dramatic way, this process of personal change is somewhat akin to the underlying aim of this article in which I use autoethnography to explore the changing nature of enabling education by examining my own experience of teaching in this field over almost two decades and how it has shaped me. I also explore how external factors over that time, more specifically during the past decade, have challenged my teaching philosophies and pedagogical practices in the Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) pre-university enabling course in a regional Australian university. I begin this paper with an overview of autoethnography, highlighting its salient features and then explain why I have chosen this methodology to foreground my story as a valid representation of one enabling educator's reality. To illustrate how various social, ontological and epistemological influences have shaped my teaching and teacher identity, I continue with a brief personal history that, in part, explains my natural inclination to care for others and 'fix things', and how this disposition persists despite challenging teaching environments.

In this paper I rely on my recall of teaching and other roles fulfilled over my 18 years as an educator, administrator, coordinator, supervisor and mentor in STEPS to portray some of the feelings and dilemmas I have experienced during that time. I particularly foreground aspects that enabled me to experience and demonstrate my true passion for teaching. I also seek to project the feeling of ambivalence I have regarding institutional change driven by broader economic imperatives over the last decade or so and how this neoliberal trajectory increasingly perplexes me. I hope to communicate the degree of frustration and tedium that I often feel in teaching roles of late that focus almost exclusively on a student's acquisition of skills, without ample time for meaningful contextualisation and internalisation of curriculum content. I also find myself ideologically challenged by institutional practices and protocols designed for undergraduate students that are imposed on enabling students, many of whom are absolute novices in the broader context of higher education. More frequently, I feel monotony in ensuring that my pedagogical practices are engaging and informative, fully knowing they are bereft of rigorous, meaningful, contextualised content. And, I feel a great tension between caring for students and preparing them for undergraduate studies, knowing that in many cases we are rushing them; I fear that we set them up for failure to satiate neoliberal ideals where an audit culture renders students as numbers, "highly individualized, responsibilized subjects" (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 248). I conclude with an analysis and reflection on my story, drawing out some of its implications for enabling education and its future.

Why use autoethnography?

In adopting an interpretivist ontology, like Sims (2019), I acknowledge reality as it is perceived by myself within a specific context. In this instance, it is the context of an enabling course in a higher education setting in regional Australia. I choose to use my personal narrative as data, assured by the knowledge that this methodology has become far more acceptable over the last few decades. Amongst other aspects, Clandinin (2007) attributes this to "a widening acceptance of alternative epistemologies or ways of knowing" (p. 7). Elbow (2000) asserts, similarly, that "expressive personal writing happens to be one among many registers of discourses we can use

for academic duty" (p. 317). He further explains that just because personal writing involves feeling, it does not omit thinking, nor does inviting "attention to self omit other people and the social connection" (Elbow, 2000, p. 317). As a teacher, my social identities inevitably shape and impact my work in both positive and negative ways (Brock et al., 2017) and autoethnography has allowed me to interrogate my own experiences of teaching in STEPS over an extended period through first-hand accounts. I have used my personal experiences as illustrations of cultural experiences, making these familiar for both insiders and outsiders (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2010). In choosing this methodology, I acknowledge Fuller's (2018) assertion that autoethnographic writing is "reliant on the author's memory, which may be flawed, is definitely subjective, and presents the interpretation and perspective of the author, rather than an objective, neutral account" (p. 57). However, autoethnography allows me, the researcher, to describe my own position within the research (Pitard, 2017) and convey my own truth rather than make assertions about hard facts (Grant, 2010). My lived experiences are my own, and as such, "they have credibility from that personal standpoint" (Klinker & Todd, 2007, p. 477).

Subjectivity is a strength of autoethnography, and as a program facilitator providing students from a 'care' experience with personal support whilst they were in undergraduate studies, Fuller (2018), like myself, found that access to and interpretations of first-hand accounts of students' experiences shaped her practitioner experiences. A first-hand account of my teaching experiences may, too, help other teachers in analysing their own experiences. As Hamilton, Smith and Worthington (2008) contend, privileging the self in the research design can contribute to our own understandings about teaching and teacher education.

Autoethnography is also useful in attempting to make sense of one's place and purpose in a rapidly changing higher education context. Like teachers in Hernández et al.'s (2010) autoethnographic study of the process of professional identity construction of scholars in higher education, I too have experienced tension as I have analysed my resistance to directives to adopt changes in my academic roles at the behest of institutional imperatives. Autoethnography has allowed me to interrogate my feelings about this conundrum, and to acknowledge and accommodate what Ellis et al. (2010) refer to as "subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist" (p. 2). The opportunity to relay my reality authentically and honestly as an enabling educator is thus permitted. And, while a criticism of autoethnography is that it is "tainted with accusations of narcissism and self-aggrandizement" (Coffey, 1999, cited in Klinker & Todd, 2001, p. 179), my use of the methodology was quite the contrary. It enabled me to explore my predisposition to help others and how this has been shaped and misshaped by the constantly shifting landscape of higher education in Australia.

I never really aspired to be a teacher

People's stories have always interested and intrigued me, not only in terms of how their life narratives have played out, but in the contextual minutiae that have shaped their stories. I'm a far better listener than talker, and while I have always vigorously sought answers to many questions, I don't always perceive the obscure, and my tendency to probe people for more information can sometimes be irritating to them. As second oldest of eight children, I recall my young life being interminably entwined with caring and 'fixing' roles associated with my six younger siblings. That is how many big families in Australia operated in the 1960s, and in ours, it was the 'big' ones' (four oldest) helping and taking a great deal of responsibility for the 'little ones' (four youngest). Furthermore, growing up in a family business at the hub of a small rural town meant I was regaled with a variety of colourful anecdotes by both flamboyant and

ordinary characters who frequented our store for groceries, newspapers, mail and conversation. After the school day, my responsibilities included serving customers, stocking shelves, pricing goods, and numerous other tasks. Upon reflection, life was full and busy but that was all I knew.

I have always had a thirst for knowledge, sense of adventure and a keen sense of curiosity, which were satiated somewhat when through providence, fate and sheer dedication to study, I was able to study teaching immediately upon finishing secondary school. Due to the 1970s reformist ideals of the Whitlam Labor government in seeking greater social justice in higher education (Willans, 2010, p. 14), I was awarded a means-tested Commonwealth studentship to study either secondary teaching at a Melbourne university or primary teaching at teachers' college. This was quite fortuitous, really, as I had never aspired to a teaching career. I chose the second offer and studied primary teaching. Perhaps becoming a teacher was in some ways my destiny, the confluence of fulfilling caring and 'fixing' roles in my family, actively participating in a busy family business, and my ability to easily develop a rapport with most people. The main discourses (Gee, 2005) of my upbringing and family, my formal educational opportunities, the community in which I was raised, and the social and cultural mores of the times conspired to shape the 'early' me, providing the bedrock of my professional identity that influenced and intuitively guided my early teaching philosophy and pedagogies and, in many ways, continues to do so.

When I commenced primary teaching, I took to it like a duck to water. However, it was not long before my need for novelty led me to seek out teaching positions across a range of age/grade cohorts and in interstate and international contexts. Time passed and the arrival and rearing of my two children saw me weave in and out of teaching for a period. Over a decade, the Diploma of Teaching bestowed upon me in 1976 was upgraded with a Bachelor of Early Childhood, followed by an Environmental Education Masters. Then, due to a series of events, challenging at the time but eventually proving advantageous in many ways, after several years teaching students in early childhood, primary and secondary classrooms, I commenced teaching adults in a Commonwealth funded pre-university preparatory program at a regional university, STEPS, and it did not take long for me to realise that I had found 'my place'.

Jumping in at the deep end

Enabling education is aimed at those students who have not completed formal secondary schooling and need to build skills, knowledge and confidence to commence tertiary studies. As the first institution to offer enabling education, the University of Newcastle's 1974 goal for enabling education was to facilitate access to higher education for those who for "economic or social reasons, were previously excluded or marginalised" (May 2004, cited in Willans, 2010, p. 14). This social justice goal permeated enabling education in Australia until the Bradley Review of Higher Education in 2008 adopted a more strategically driven plan for higher education. This policy was propelled by economic imperatives to ensure a more knowledgeable, educated workforce that would productively contribute to the nation (Willans, 2010). STEPS, which was established in 1986, is offered free of tuition fees for those students aged nineteen years and over seeking access to university. Teaching in STEPS challenged me and my teaching practices in new and exciting ways.

Having taught many age cohorts across a variety of national and international contexts, I had assumed that teaching in one context was pretty much the same as another. How naïve I was! Jumping in at the deep end, I commenced teaching in STEPS in 2003 when the program was in its sixteenth year. I was immediately intrigued by the philosophical underpinnings and

pedagogical activities that, amongst other things, explored links to major cultural and social movements of eras past. Listening to my learned colleagues I felt like a student myself, engaged in discussions about stimulating topics such as the Cartesian split, quantum physics, reductionist materialism and mechanistic linear thinking. I became immersed in new knowledge and broadened my vocabulary, learning tenets of andragogy and adult learning principles. I grappled with various conceptions of transformative learning theory and explored the mind-body philosophy of Descartes and Cartesian Dualism. I was exposed to wisdom from the Gang of Three (Socrates, Plato and Aristotle) and de Bono's parallel thinking, and explored the social and economic impacts of the Industrial Revolution. I had only ever touched the periphery of such topics in the past, but they permeated the curriculum content in the literacy subject in which I taught, and I thoroughly enjoyed new learning, self-discovery and professional development. In retrospect, I feel somewhat embarrassed that my knowledge of certain topics was as limited as it was, but I recognise that I thrived on new knowledge, and still do.

I revelled in long teaching weeks in STEPS, juggling emotion-laden classrooms composed of students from a veritable melting pot of socio-economic, cultural, religious, demographic and other backgrounds. As they grappled with changing dynamics related to their emerging student identities, alongside identities associated with their other life roles, emotions often ran high. Compounding this were tensions between students, each with their own unique characteristics and experiences embroiled in manifestations of what their return to formal learning was like. However, because they shared their stories with me, I really felt like I knew my students, not just their academic abilities, but as people with complex lives and associated challenges and accomplishments beyond the STEPS classroom. My assumptions about their vulnerability were challenged as I watched many persist in the face of adversity, demonstrating resilience and determination, debunking my presumptions about their inability to cope. I was mindful that cognitive, mental and physical challenges were experienced by many as they came to more fully embody their student identity, and I was overjoyed for those who reached their goal and transitioned into university. I also acquiesced with those who chose to discontinue STEPS and instead fulfil other life directions. And there were those I sympathised with when, for one reason or another, their best laid plans to complete STEPS did not come to fruition.

My students' experiences and insights enriched my teaching, and as I watched their transformation as learners, I too transformed as an educator. I quickly appreciated that adult learners bring a multitude of knowledge, experiences, emotions and life skills to the learning environment, many of which they often trivialised. In teaching this unique cohort of learners, I came to realise that my life had been one of relative privilege, and that I had to ensure that this would not negatively influence my teaching, opinions of, or interactions with my students. I came to more fully understand the complexities and competing discourses mobilised by my students as many struggled with negative emotional baggage from their past educational and other life experiences. I was privy to the rich tapestry of my students' lives and experiences, and I was sometimes humbled by what they disclosed to me about personal, social and economic matters and life situations that I knew little to nothing about. My white, middle class background was frequently juxtaposed with the tensions experienced by many of my students as they grappled with social and cultural barriers that often problematised their very participation in higher education. On many occasions, I consciously downplayed what I perceived to be my social advantage, and instead offered anecdotes of my upbringing in a large family, often referring to the significant financial challenges my family experienced when my father's illness prevented him from participating in paid employment.

I felt I came to know my students well through the many roles I fulfilled in STEPS. The comradery between my students and me, enhanced by my role as STEPS Campus coordinator, was personally satisfying as I felt I was making a positive difference in the lives of many. However, I often felt emotionally and physically drained as I listened to their woes, wiped their tears and shared the upheavals they were experiencing in their personal lives. The 'open door' policy embraced by my colleagues and me encouraged 'outside class time' discussions with students, and their frequent visits often provided us with a window into their lives, challenges, rewards and dreams. I enjoyed this 'human' side of my teaching but often felt somewhat of an impostor in my students' lives, being at a loss regarding how to best advise them about issues I had no experience and very little knowledge of. Forty-year-old B told me that her partner would leave her if she continued STEPS; C shared that her husband had burnt her STEPS books and threatened separation if she continued in our program; V asked me for advice about terminating an unwanted pregnancy so she could continue her dream of studying. Other students shared personal experiences of homelessness, domestic violence, abuse, hunger and mental health issues. Being exposed to such intensely personal information weighed heavily on me at times, adding to my own physical and emotional challenges associated with juggling family, study and paid work responsibilities.

Many of the social and other issues my students experienced were unfamiliar to me, and despite being well travelled, open-minded and relatively liberal in my worldviews, I could not authentically identify with them. In my childhood, I experienced love, safety and encouragement to explore my personal potential, and while I sometimes reflected on the frustrations of being part of a big family with little extra money for frivolities such as the latest fashions, interstate school excursions and other extra-curricular activities, I always appreciated my stable, loving upbringing and the many opportunities I had (and still have). However, the emotions elicited when I shared in my students' lives imprinted these encounters on my mind, allowing me to recall and reflect on poignant details, an aspect Ellis et al. (2010) consider as foundational to autoethnography.

After some years teaching enabling students, my natural curiosity and inner drive challenged me to dive deeper. I had noticed significant personal transformations in the ways many of my students perceived themselves as learners, and my curiosity about this multi-dimensional process impelled me to discover more. Encouraged by my peers and satisfying personal ambitions, I embarked on a PhD journey to research what I was constantly observing in my teaching. I immersed myself in critical pedagogy and agonised over multiple conceptions of transformative learning theory as espoused by theorists such as Jack Mezirow (2000; 2003), Patricia Cranton (2002; 2003), John Dirkx (2001; 2006), Ed Taylor (2007; 2008) and others in the dynamically changing field. Stephen Brookfield's (2001; 2002; 2005) critically reflective practice invited me to examine my assumptions in framing the pedagogical approaches I embraced. I became intensely familiar with the Hero's Journey, a metaphorical framework that underpinned many of the pedagogical and philosophical practices in STEPS. Premised on the work of renowned mythical psychologist Carl Jung and the power and similarity of stories and myths across multiple contexts, cultures and civilisations, the Hero's Journey was adapted by Hollywood screen writer Christopher Vogler (2007) to create twelve stages that could be used to map any personal journey. This framework, spiral in nature and not necessarily formulaic, was foregrounded in STEPS, providing a metaphorical structure to assist students in normalising personal trials and tribulations associated with their enabling learning journey. The fundamental message was that often, the more personally difficult the life journey, the more individually enriching and illuminating it can be. Looking back, the relevance of this metaphorical framework in the STEPS context was profound, not only in terms of my teaching

practices and the student learning experiences I observed, but in its application to my own life. Not only did my students examine and change their perspectives on themselves as learners, their world and those around them, but inevitably, so, too, did I.

Winds of change

During my first decade teaching in STEPS, face-to-face teaching allocation per unit comprised eight hours per week, and most students completed the then four compulsory units. Life was extremely busy for me, my students and my colleagues. I prepared pedagogical activities, fulfilled responsibilities associated with my role as Campus coordinator, led the literacy support area for undergraduate students, researched my teaching, learning and scholarship, researched and wrote papers for publication and conference presentations, worked on my doctoral studies and much, much more. My students were busy juggling their study commitments over either a twelve- or twenty-six-week period and there was little downtime for anyone. However, there were many benefits. For one, STEPS was offered for only two out of three terms with a very limited online offering, ensuring we were not required to teach for three terms. Most students had ample time for the cognition of new knowledge and more hours were able to be dedicated to teaching and a deeper exploration of the curriculum. Students were provided with textbooks free of charge, those eligible received Commonwealth funding, and the completion of STEPS was signified with a *Certificate of Completion* or *Certificate of Participation* at an annual ceremony. This event was attended by university management and teaching teams, students' family members, and invited members of the public. Students played a key role in organising and presenting it, many articulating emotively about the significant impacts that STEPS had had upon their lives and those close to them. The ceremony was a poignant depiction of the trials, tribulations and triumphs faced by many students during their time in STEPS, a public acknowledgment of their often significantly transformed selves.

What appeared to me as a unifying aspect of STEPS then was that apart from those attending night classes, all students were enrolled in four units over one or two terms, most were on campus for up to 24 hours per week, and most finished STEPS at the same time. They were all on a similar trajectory. The 'open door' policy embraced by most staff meant that students were often found chatting to teachers, dropping in to have work checked, submitting assessment, asking questions and generally engaging with one another outside the classroom environment. There were conversations and discussions, laughter and comradery, and at times, the division between students and teachers was virtually imperceptible. It was simply, quite often, a group of animated adults engaging in thoughtful dialogue, building a community of learners. Of course, this is only my perspective, but we appeared a very homogeneous group, united by the common experiences in STEPS and the unfolding journey each term. In dealing with the ups and downs, challenges and rewards, it often felt like we were one big family—students and staff together. As could have been expected, this convivial and even utopian space was to change, as new economic imperatives became the underpinning framework for Australian higher education in the twenty-first century.

The relative anonymity and lack of status of STEPS within the broader institution (typical of enabling education across the sector) that we alternatively bemoaned and valued could not save it from the rhetoric of accountability, efficiency and reductionism. The Bradley Review of 2008 established economic imperatives to be realised through widening participation, as part of the commodification and massification of higher education (Willans, 2010). My own university implemented a new corporatised approach, adopting a neoliberal, managerial culture. Such a philosophy focuses firmly on "outcomes, performance assessment and results" (Fraser, 2018, cited in Sims, 2019, p. 1), and as evidence of this, a 2011 external review of seven existing

enabling courses offered by my university resulted in the formation of one unified course, STEPS. The rationale was that this course would incorporate the best aspects of all previous enabling offerings. Consequently, curricula across eleven STEPS electives and one core unit were refreshed and streamlined to cater for both on-campus and online students, a logical step to take.

To appease an underlying institutional goal of improved student retention, an Access Coordinator (AC) was established on each campus offering STEPS. This role entailed daily management of the Academic Services Unit of which STEPS was a part and provided a central location for students to access advice and/or pastoral care, particularly those at risk of withdrawal. Additionally, online diagnostic testing was introduced to ascertain student readiness, and an individualised study plan was established based on the requirements of the student's projected undergraduate course. An individual interview with the AC was held during which the student's appropriate study load was devised. No longer were students compulsorily required to complete all four units in one or two terms; instead, on-campus and online options were offered, or students could study via both modes. They could now elect to study anything from one to four units per term across one to six terms (though their eligibility for Commonwealth government funding remained contingent on their full-time enrolment, three or four units and other personal aspects). Students had to purchase their own STEPS textbooks/study guides, which would soon be made available only online for downloading or printing. Students no longer had one common completion date, so most regrettably, the graduation ceremony was abandoned.

Staff now had responsibility for online as well as on-campus classes, so the extra student load and lack of time meant that idle chats with students along the corridor virtually disappeared, and office doors were frequently closed to student visits. It seemed that many of the personal, relational aspects were sucked out of STEPS. No time for chat. No time for teaching content because teaching contact hours were cut in half, yet assessment regimes were still dictated to and defined by a twelve-week term. The institutional justification was the need to prepare students for university in a new decade, an era offering online management systems as the panacea for good education. Certainly, the reach of STEPS was vastly extended, affording learning opportunities for students living in rural and remote areas, students with disabilities or caring responsibilities, students who worked full-time, had families to tend to or whose work was defined by 'fly-in, fly-out' patterns of engagement. Although dependent on good access to a computer and the internet, the full gamut of students was catered for, a great advancement in many ways.

The inevitability of change

Maintaining the currency and efficacy of STEPS has inevitably necessitated modifications, additions and refreshes to curriculum content. Delivery modes and methods, administrative practices, study mode options, patterns of student engagement and expectations, and student cohort composition have also been modified. Change, as the saying goes, is the only constant in life, evidenced in higher education in Australia and abroad by significant transformations in funding models, course development, delivery methods and mechanisms, and student expectations, engagement patterns and competencies. I have judiciously watched strategic changes occur in STEPS and I am cognisant that changing expectations and practices in higher education are politically and economically driven, the consequences of which are both important and inevitable. After all, up-to-date technologies, pedagogically sound teaching methods, and relevant curriculum content are all important hallmarks which shape and are shaped by higher education as it endeavours to be responsive to contemporary times. However,

I lament the loss of STEPS as an enabling course espousing a dedicated delivery model that allowed students ample time and focused tuition to more fully explore curriculum content that contextualised learning, to process fresh information and apply new knowledge about themselves, others and their world in meaningful and relevant ways. Currently, teachers are more pressed for time than ever before. Students are busier and less inclined or able to put their studies ahead of other responsibilities. Neoliberal accountability systems and processes dictate a broad range of associated punitive practices in the institution that focus heavily on numerical evidence to relay student engagement/disengagement. Once, the academic writing unit in which I taught placed a strong focus on contextualisation, allowing for exploration of the historical factors that shaped the social, economic and political trajectories of recent centuries. A strong focus on pre-writing activities purposefully encouraged students to gain confidence in writing by narrating their life experiences through storytelling, poetry, text and reflective journals. This approach was underpinned by acknowledgement that for many students, long periods of time had elapsed since they wrote for expressive purposes, if at all, and many had reservations about their ability to write. They simply needed to practice their writing.

While I am fully aware that change is a constant, the STEPS writing units in which I now teach are largely skills-based, content having been diluted or entirely deleted. Virginia Woolf reminds us that we write, not with the fingers, but with the whole person, yet to me that is not recognised anymore. In keeping with an ideological discourse of neoliberalism, it often feels that teaching in an enabling course is more about 'bums on seats' than anything else. The course does purport to suit those students wanting knowledge, skills and confidence to successfully enter university; thus, teaching a bank of generic skills to prepare students for university is now seemingly our raison d'être. As a result, quantitative measurement is placed above other facets of student engagement and success in order to satisfy institutional imperatives. This is reflected in the masculinised vernacular of higher education that reduces students to customers and treats their engagement or disengagement as mere quantitative information - attrition, clients, retention, articulation rates, satisfaction scores, and so on. These are not unimportant measures as part of a broader approach to assessing institutional success, but such yardsticks have come to dominate the protocols, practices and goals of enabling education in the neoliberal institution, rendering relational aspects unimportant. Relational aspects matter in STEPS, underpinning and entwined with what we do in so many ways, as highlighted by Motta and Bennett's (2018) foregrounding of the importance of feminised discourses in their explication of pedagogies of care and associated subjectivities. Similarly, Walker and Gleaves (2016) emphasise the value of the relational nature of teaching and raise questions about how teachers foster such aspects despite institutional policy that adopts a somewhat conflicting discourse.

Widening participation has changed many aspects of the traditional university. At CQUniversity, due to financial, geographic, personal and social necessity, many students prefer online study and fewer students engage in person. Increasingly, on-campus STEPS attendance is dwindling, students preferring to access online resources in their own time. Study, family, work and other commitments compete for a STEPS student's time and gone are the days when boisterous students debated and laughed in the courtyard outside my office window. Students assign little time for this often trivialised but vitally important socialising and deconstruction of new knowledge. As they follow their tailored study plan, on-campus students often do not even know the names of their classmates, many of whom they infrequently meet. In introducing more flexibility into STEPS, unforeseen barriers have arisen in terms of creating and sustaining a community of learners working towards a shared goal. Student focus, it appears, has become very individualistic and self-centred, at the expense of a more collective, community emphasis.

Teachers, too, are pressured to do more with less. It is not that they no longer care about their students—they simply do not have as much time to care.

In reflecting on my own teaching experiences in STEPS over almost twenty years, while I highly value collegial relationships and comradery, I miss the feeling of being part of a community of learners, in which, alongside my students, I too am a learner. I struggle with a sense of boredom and lassitude as increasingly, the acquisition of skills is divorced from rich content and context, and I feel disheartened by my quiet disengagement where many of my students have become mere faces in the crowd. I lament that many of my students will perceive the acquisition of pragmatic skills and competencies as the sole prerequisite to undergraduate study, rather than being drawn into a transformative learning journey. I worry that they miss the benefits of more profound, contextualised knowledge, largely sabotaged by time restraints that have necessitated decontextualised learning. I fear the academic status so persistently sought and achieved by STEPS staff and the broader enabling education sector will become devalued as curriculum becomes more competency-based. Enabling courses in other Australian universities may well experience similar challenges as lack of time and resources dictate a pedagogical focus on the mere acquisition of skills at the cost of meaningful, contextualised learning and the time needed to optimise it.

Have we now lost our compass?

As I conclude this paper, I reflect on Holman-Jones' (2005) belief that autoethnography positions research and writing as "socially-just acts" (p. 74) with the capacity to change us and our world for the better. I like to think that I have participated in acts of social justice, having taught, mentored, listened to, guided and interacted with thousands of students over my many years of teaching. I have certainly changed as an educator, and autoethnography has permitted me to authentically present my recall of certain encounters as an enabling educator in STEPS as a way of examining the impact of broader changes in enabling education. I have conveyed moments that elicited joy, humility, frustration and consternation. My growing sense of disenchantment with the dilution of STEPS over recent years has been expressed, as has my regret that I did not advocate more ferociously for the reinstatement of events that celebrated a sense of community. However, I acknowledge the inevitable winds of change across the higher education sector and how they have shaped STEPS over the last decade in both positive and negative ways.

I feel apprehensive about the future of STEPS while dramatic change sweeps through higher education and regret that it is not something I can fix. Never has the entire world been brought to its knees by such unprecedented social, economic, humanitarian, and existential challenges. I began this paper pre-pandemic, but as I complete it, many millions have died; countless others are seriously ill, socially isolated from loved ones, many dying alone; millions upon millions are newly unemployed and thousands are displaced as they wander oceans on ships afforded scant safe harbours. The world has changed. I ponder inevitable, significant changes ahead as a battered higher education sector, and by default, enabling education, drastically reduces its workforce. Its attempts to sustain and reconceptualise itself are likely to necessitate the further dilution of contextualised curriculum content in STEPS and increased time restraints. I find it increasingly difficult to focus on and justify my professional roles as an academic in higher education, providing online teaching and learning for my students, and conducting research that now feels redundant and irrelevant as we perch precariously on the precipice of an unknown future. What will be valued in this new world? What will be counted as important? Who will decide, and how? These profound questions are difficult to contemplate let alone answer as social, moral, economic, political and existential compasses fluctuate, a stronger

force distorting, hindering and influencing their course. New pointers will be set, new ways of delivering enabling and higher education constructed, new curriculum matter deemed to be of relevance in an unknown future. Thus, as I close my chapter as an enabling educator and become a 'voluntarily redundant' employee, I implore enabling educators to constantly remind their institutions of the uniqueness of enabling students, of the need to foreground their life experiences, knowledge, and competencies ahead of their shortcomings, and of the imperative to acknowledge their apprehensions and fears as legitimate and worthy of care. Planning and delivery of enabling education must remain ever cognisant of these critical defining features.

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