



RESEARCH PAPER

“Will they see through me?” The exploration of disorienting dilemmas that contributed to the transformation of an enabling educator

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Vulnerability and failure: two terms not often associated with a university lecturer. This autoethnographic account follows the trajectory of the author’s experiences whilst navigating the new and foreign environment of academe. Using narrative reflections featuring internal dialogue, this paper shares some of the ‘disorienting dilemmas’ faced by an enabling education academic over the course of her career to portray how psychological resilience is acquired through times of failure and shame in order to provide opportunities for growth and empowerment. While many enabling educators work to build psychological resilience in their students by teaching them strategies to strengthen their self-efficacy, they may be less aware of the need for such strategies in their own lives and careers. Just as enabling students from non-traditional backgrounds may feel that they do not fit within the university learning environment, so too enabling educators from non-traditional backgrounds may feel alien within the academic profession. Through the lens of self-efficacy, this paper explores the ways in which fostering psychological resilience can be as relevant for enabling educators as it is for their students, and can form the basis for a greater understanding of the value of failure within enabling education.

Keywords: transformative learning; academic identity; vulnerability; disorienting dilemmas; psychological resilience; working class; autoethnography; self-efficacy

Introduction

Vulnerability is an uncomfortable experience and not normally associated with the prestige of being an academic lecturer within a higher education institution. In the past, the role of the academic educator was viewed as a higher calling (Trowler, 2008). Even now, within the profession, being vulnerable and expressing weakness is on par with holding a juicy bone to a starving dog: there is a chance that you will be bitten. Yet, vulnerability is said to be a powerful and authentic way to live (Tartakovsky, 2018). Brown (2012) states that “vulnerability is the core, the heart, the centre, of meaningful human experiences” (p. 5). As an educator within an enabling program at an Australian regional university, I am constantly encouraging my students to embrace their vulnerability as they experience the realisation that knowledge has the power to change their lives and open new doors of opportunity. Unbeknownst to them, their journeys also challenge me to embrace my own vulnerability as an educator. As research shows, effective enabling education involves more than just teaching an academic skillset (Bennett et

al., 2016; Crawford et al., 2018). For me, this awareness helped me gain credentials in Positive Psychology and offered me the opportunity to design an enabling unit that introduces students to positive psychology strategies. My role is that of an educator, an inspirer, a changemaker and a mentor. As an educator, I have received several awards that prove my skill and quality as an educator, but what they do not show are the experiences that had the potential to derail me, leave me vulnerable and on the verge of giving up my dreams. This autoethnographic account uses narrative reflections featuring internal dialogue that shares what Mezirow (1975) calls disorienting dilemmas to portray how I, too, have needed to develop psychological resilience. The stories presented are loosely fictionalised but capture the essence of events that took place over a number of years. I acknowledge that the recounting of these events is a narration from my perception and may be viewed differently by the other actors within the story. By no means do I intend to incur judgement or cause harm to these actors as they each played a pivotal role in helping me to discover the depth of my resilience. In fact, I am grateful for each of the experiences that have honed me to the person I am today. I am stronger, much more capable and can draw on my personal experiences to encourage and support the enabling students under my care.

Sharing such in-depth reflections through an open forum such as an academic paper brings vulnerability; however, it also brings healing for the author and for readers who may also be experiencing similar experiences. Narrative is used to stimulate inquiry through researching from the inside out by using internal dialogue as the data to understand disorienting dilemmas and the change that can occur. The aim of this paper is to highlight the positive aspects of failure, as failure can be the impetus for growth and success for both academic and student alike. Both educator and student are on a journey of discovery. As they traverse the unknown, the realisation that there is transformative power in failure has the potential to enable the educator to develop a deeper sense of empathy and compassion for the student experience and assists with accepting that their own experiences of failure and vulnerability can be times of greatest growth both personally and academically.

“Be patient with yourself. You are growing stronger every day. The weight of the world will become lighter...and you will begin to shine brighter. Don't give up.” Robert Tew

Knock, knock, knock. “Are you in there?” Where is the old confident me? She is not here. It is like she has disappeared into a tiny room in my mind and cannot find the door to come out. I hear footsteps walk away from my office. I am mortified that I don't have the strength to face my colleague and talk about what has happened. She is my strongest advocate, but I can't let her see me at my worst. I am a professional for goodness sake and I am hiding and blubbing like a weak person. Where do I go from here? My sense of self has deserted me. That confident lady who seemed to have the world at her fingertips has been tripped and her heart shredded. All those positive affirmations that I have told myself over the years to help reduce the sense of fraud in this environment have evaporated.

According to Herrmann (2012), the discourse of an academic vocation was once constructed as one of a higher calling, or a fulfillment with spiritual overtones. For some, the discourse of academia is a call to serve. However, within educational institutions, there is a power play. It does not reside in a particular person or institution, but lies in the discourses, practices and performances of everyday life (Bourdieu, 1986). Power is everywhere in social relations and it is exercised at all levels through various discourses and multiple performances (Herrmann, 2011). However, when a person's personal power is undermined through a disorienting

dilemma, they may begin to question their pre-held beliefs and contemplate alternative viewpoints (Laros, 2017; Taylor, 2000) which may lead to either growth and change, or failure and loss.

‘Disorienting dilemmas’ are commonly seen as an integral part of transformative learning and a catalyst for perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991). A disorienting dilemma occurs when a person has an experience that was unexpected and which places them in a situation where they lose control and cannot regain it without changing their view of the world (Cranton, 2016). Transformation occurs at all levels within a university, from students to educators and institutes. Mezirow (1975) describes transformative learning as “a structural reorganization in the way that a person looks at himself and his relationships” (p. 162). The essential core of this theory is that each person views the world through their own unique lenses, layered as they are by social, cultural, psychosocial, physiological, spiritual, emotional and other influences (Willans & Seary, 2016). These lenses act as a default positioning and influence the way we fit into the world, guiding us in daily decisions, expression of opinions and the way we live within our world. Transformative theory proposes that when an event, trigger or dilemma occurs that disorients the person, it causes them to question a long held personal assumption, perspective or expectation (Cranton, 2016). This multi-layered process may not always align to a specific moment, but for some individuals, this may be the case. Cranton (2016) suggests that in this situation, discussion and dialogue with a trusted person can facilitate meaning making and when a revised or new perspective is acted upon, fundamentally, transformative learning has occurred.

“Be patient with yourself. Self-growth is tender; it's holy ground. There's no greater investment.” Stephen Covey

My heart is hammering. Why would I be called for this special meeting? I am stumped because there has not been anything that has happened that would require us to catch up. Oh well, maybe it is nothing. It could simply be a catch-up, but why am I feeling so uneasy about this?

My first disorienting dilemma was an unexpected blow to my confidence. It not only caused me to feel that my whole world shifted on its axis, but it spiralled me into depression. For two years, I had been an educator within an enabling program. I loved what I was doing, but, deep down, I had the sense of being an imposter and subconsciously was learning as I went along. I completed university as a mature aged student and had only finished my teaching degree at 38 years of age. I had a calling to be a teacher and loved this profession, especially educating adults. I was feeling enthusiastic about the future and looking at ways that I could continue to grow as an academic and educator. My future was bright and even my sense of being an ‘imposter’ in this environment was fading as I was growing in confidence. I had colleagues who were around the same level as me and we were in discussions about how we could get into research together and begin to publish papers. We were in an exciting phase of our careers and were keen about what we were going to accomplish together. I felt that I had hit the jackpot and was in my perfect career, but my inexperience had been noticed. To my surprise it was raised in a private meeting.

We acknowledge that you have only been teaching for a few years but there are a few of us who have concerns that you might be out of your depth. You haven't had the years of teaching experience that many of us have had. There are aspects that

we feel you should work on to lift your academic level. You need to develop both your written and verbal expression.

I was bewildered and shocked that my inner vulnerability had been brought to the surface. My brain tried to quickly comprehend what was happening and what was being said, but it seemed to only be hearing the negative.

Argh...speak up for yourself!

No...they are right. I shouldn't be in this position.

But your students are always happy with your teaching. Stand up for yourself!

I can't, I don't know what to say, and they are probably right.

Surely you can come up with a rebuff and share the good things that you have experienced in the classroom!

I can't. They are more experienced than me and can see that I am unskilled.

You are being weak and are humiliating yourself by not saying anything.

I walked out of that meeting feeling completely shattered. I felt that my personal power had been taken away from me. Power to believe in myself. Power to continue honing my own pathway as an educator. In that brief moment in time, I became powerless. I lost hope in my future and lost hope in others as I thought they could not see the potential I had as an academic. I felt like I was being placed firmly back into my working class background and being told I was not welcome in the elite realm of higher education. A dark cloud settled over me and it became my norm. My confidence recoiled and I found myself in a pit of hopelessness from which there seemed to be no escape.

“One can choose to go back toward safety or forward toward growth.” Abraham Maslow

Vulnerability can be described as being at risk of harm which can come in many forms. In this case, harm came through emotional, psychological, institutional and social channels. As Kahn (2018) shares, a person is most vulnerable when safeguards are not available to protect them from being hurt. In this case, I was left feeling exposed, fragile and uncertain about my future. The imposter syndrome, which Dalla-Camina (2018) explains as the way a person doubts their ability and has an internalised fear of being exposed as a fraud, had reared its ugly head. I felt I had been exposed as a fraud within this environment and my secret self-doubt had been vindicated. Chodorow (1999) suggests that emotions can give voice to our fundamental sense of irrationality and are often subverted by desire. In some situations, our emotional state can seem ambivalent, contradictory and fragmented and thus, some emotional experiences can reveal a multiplicitous, contradictory self (Dirkx, 2003). In analysing this event many years later, I have come to realise how important it is to recognise and acknowledge my emotions. Denzin (1984) suggests that “to understand who a person is, it is necessary to understand emotion” (p. 1) as emotions always refer to the self, thus providing a means for developing self-knowledge. Through introspection, I am able to research myself from the inside. As Mason (1994) suggests, through such an activity, one may develop an inner voice, have conversations with oneself and interrogate one's actions. My emotions at that time were tender due to the lowered sense of self and, therefore, my perception of what was said may have been skewed by my emotive inner voice. My mental chatter did not allow for the positives that could have come from a substantive professional dialogue but, instead, focussed on the negatives that correlated with my internalised fear.

Writing an autoethnographic account is a vulnerable experience as the author engages in self-critical reflection; however, these processes are pivotal in professional self-study as an educator. A different, but parallel theme in the literature is how self-study, through a reflexive approach, is used to critically examine actions and reactions and the corresponding context as a way of developing a more consciously driven mode of professional activity (Kenny, Harreveld & Danaher 2016). Elliott (2005) notes that researchers develop reflexive ways of working when they pay attention to the more intricate details of their internal dialogue and the way it shapes their individual identities. Through the process of acculturation and related learning experiences, meaning is constructed and often attributed to emotional states. Bold (2012) argues for “the importance of looking back over incidents in one’s life in order to learn from them to shape the future” (p. 74). This is also highlighted by Mason (1994), who acknowledges that incidents can become more significant as connections are made between them, thus raising further questions to explore.

An aspect from this scenario which raised a distinctive emotional response within me was around the notion of entering the elite system of academia. In particular, I felt ashamed that my speech, particularly my grammar, still reflected my working class background. Cheshire (1997) highlights that the frequency with which a person speaks using non-standard linguistics correlates with their socio-economic class. Furthermore, sociolinguists believe that negative attitudes towards a person’s linguistic ability reflects a social, rather than a linguistic, value judgement (Snell, 2015). Cheshire (1997) suggests that pinpointing speech and the vernacular culture can sometimes signal a hidden class agenda. In some cases, there may even be a sense of ‘othering’ or the insinuation of ‘you are not one of us’ which suggests rejection of a class identity rather than a judgement against skills and personal ability to undertake the role. A fundamental reason for enabling programs being developed was to allow participation in higher education of people from low socio-economic backgrounds (Priest, 2009). These students may enter university with different linguistic competencies whereby their language structure and semantic functions are at odds with the expectations of a higher education environment. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that working class participation in higher education is a way to break down moribund associations of social class with capability (Bunn, Threadgold & Burke, 2020).

My emotional reaction to the meeting compelled me to feel judged and, in turn, shame. Loveday (2016) poses the question of “how is it that a problem of society can so easily be turned into a deficiency of the self?” (p. 1144). She shares that ‘shame’ is particularly pertinent to the cultural analysis of class because of the way society attributes value to some people at the expense of others. Additionally, shame has an “enduring bodily presence” and acts to “shape the impression that working class people have of themselves” (Loveday, 2016, p. 1151). Institutions and the people within them can impose class identity through innocuous observations and perceptions. Due to my inner sense of ‘deficiency of self’ (Loveday, 2016), I did not fit into the ‘mould’ of acceptability and, hence, felt inadequate to undertake my role. Similarly, students entering enabling education may enter with feelings of inadequacy due to their past experiences in education and, therefore, educators need to constantly be aware that their students may be battling their own fear of inadequacy within this new environment.

For me, this initial disorienting dilemma raised a wealth of negative emotions and thought patterns that were destructive to my sense of self-worth and which reduced my sense of self-efficacy. This moment in time became one of my worst memories which created such toxicity that I spiralled into depression. My brain shut out any positive feedback that may have been offered in that meeting and only allowed the negative aspects to be processed. However, there

was a seed of determination that was dormant, and it required this negative event to germinate and begin the process of blossoming as unrealised potential.

“Be patient with yourself. You are growing stronger every day. The weight of the world will become lighter...and you will begin to shine brighter. Don't give up.” Robert Tew

I sit within the four walls of my office and make a silent vow: “Never again will I give others the power to make me feel unworthy”. But why am I am feeling vulnerable and unworthy? Maybe this job isn't for me? Should I be looking elsewhere and just go back to being a classroom teacher?

Sitting alone, I allow these self-deflating thoughts to negate everything good within my life. I spiral from feeling hurt and upset to feeling angry and resentful. I have never experienced such a low sense of self-worth. How can one simple incident have such a demoralising effect on a person? *Why am I allowing this to impact on me and my future? Maybe I need to look at this differently. Was there merit in what they said? Maybe there are aspects of my practice that can be improved?*

Through this healing phase, there was a strong urge to prove myself and also negate my personal self-judgement. I knew I needed to build my credentials in order to strengthen my academic base. I acknowledged that my non-academic, working class background could either be a thorn in my side or the impetus for change. I had the power to change my circumstance, and in turn, demonstrate to those whom I teach that they also have the power to change their destiny. I had to decide whether to continue to fake my confidence or build a stronger knowledge base. No longer was my job a calling, but it changed to a career as I had to put more time and effort into building my base in order to be recognised as a credible academic. Unfortunately, I temporarily lost the passion for my role because of this dilemma. No matter how much I was built up and encouraged by those who loved and cared for me, my self-efficacy had suffered. I had to rebuild my confidence alongside my academic qualities. I felt I had lost my identity because I had lost my purpose in life but, through self-advancement, I was able to draw on the concepts within positive psychology to re-establish my values and my purpose and so began the journey of self-actualisation.

“Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.” Winston Churchill

“You've done it, my dear. You have proved what I always knew”. I was standing in a room full of academics and their families from all over Queensland. I had been awarded a National Award for Excellence in Teaching, a prestigious award that not many people achieve. As I looked at the other worthy award winners and heard what they were receiving their award for, I had that familiar sense of being a fraud but quickly stopped myself. I had worked hard to get to this point. Only a month earlier, I had dressed in academic garb and gathered with other academics to walk on stage to receive my Masters. The last few years had been busy as I had completed a Certificate IV in Life Coaching, a Graduate Diploma in Learning Management, undertaken a Diploma of Positive Psychology and received my Masters in Learning Management. This award was the icing on the cake. I had been highly focused on my professional development and the award acknowledged my role as an educator in the enabling program. I turned to my colleague, who had accompanied me as my support person, and asked her a question that had been plaguing me for ages. *“Why*

did you give me the job over all those other applicants? I didn't have the credentials like some of the other applicants, nor the experience. What made you choose me? Because I don't think I would have picked me if I was in your place". She gave me an all-knowing smile and simply said: "Knowledge can be learnt, but I could see that you had the heart of an enabling educator. That is not something that can be taught. Heed this advice—don't let anyone put that light out."

"The will to win, the desire to succeed, the urge to reach your full potential...these are the keys that will unlock the door to personal excellence." Confucius

For Bourdieu (1986), the extent to which an individual can enter, and in turn succeed in, their chosen field is largely determined by the amount of 'capital' possessed by that individual. He points out that people born into the middle class have more cultural capital when it comes to higher education than those born into the working class. This is a particularly relevant issue for enabling education and, as highlighted by Bunn et al., (2020), although widening participation to equity students may be a pathway to social justice, it may also foreground the disparity in class boundaries, inadvertently impacting cultural capital and social mobility. Success at university relies heavily upon the person converting their social, economic and cultural capital into a specific form that resonates in the field of higher education, namely academic capital (Marginson, 2007). Academic capital is displayed through titles, qualifications, academic language and the standing of the university one is affiliated with. Further to this, Bourdieu (1986) suggests that one person's capital can potentially be exploited by other members of the same group. When I reflect on my disorienting dilemma, I recognise that it undermined my academic capital. It was through self-determination and academic advancement that I was able to increase my sense of capital as per Bourdieu's (1986) definition. Not only did I build my academic capital through higher qualifications and academic standing, but I also built my social, economic and cultural capital. Newman (1873) points out that 'education' stretches beyond just knowledge and skills, claiming that "education is a higher word; it implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of character; it is something individual and permanent" (p. 85).

In the academic arena, we are encouraged to critically reflect on practice in order to participate in scholarly research which improves practice. What is circumvented, sometimes unknowingly, is open discussion about our emotional strength. There is an implicit expectation that educators need to be constantly reflexive, to question our beliefs, our philosophies, our reactions, our interactions, and then to act on them. It is this final aspect that can be hard to apply, especially if our emotional stability is unbalanced. Understanding the emotional toll that comes from critique can bring about both positive and negative change depending on the person's social capital and their ability to draw on their own self-determination. Bourdieu (1986) believes that educators should conduct their research with one eye continually reflecting back upon their own 'habitus', and their dispositions learned through long social and institutional training.

"Incredible change happens in your life when you decide to take control of what you have power over instead of craving control over what you don't." Steve Maraboli

"What the heck? Let me read that again. I did not get the promotion?" I had spent the previous few months attending workshops on writing promotion applications, formulating my narrative, providing evidence and helping others through this same process. I was quite confident that I had enough evidence to prove that I was a worthy candidate to receive promotion, and yet, here I was, sitting at my desk

reading this email that informed me that I was unsuccessful. I was beginning to feel angry and confused. *“What the hell more do I need to do in this place to be recognised?”* I allowed myself to go home and let off steam as I tried to assimilate in my mind the reasoning behind this knock-back. Again, this raised insecurities from my past. *“Even these people think I’m not worth it. This just demonstrates, yet again, that I won’t be accepted in this space no matter how much work I do”*. I went from angry to humiliated through to hurt and sad. I shed tears all night and all the next day as I tried to come to terms with this humiliation again.

“Hey, can I come in? I wanted to pop up and see how you are going”. This unexpected visit came from a highly respected colleague who had many academic accomplishments embellishing his email signature. *“Hmmm...do the tears in my eyes give you a clue?”* Here I was, sitting at my desk, tears streaming down my face, and feeling uncomfortably vulnerable as I was chatting to him. *“I just wanted to let you know that I understand how you are feeling. I actually got knocked back on my first ever promotion application and I know exactly how you are feeling”*. In response to his honesty I shared how I was feeling, *“I have allowed myself to feel miserable today and to wallow in self-pity, but tomorrow is a different story. I will find out where the application was weak, and I will spend this coming year re-writing it in such a way that there is no way they can knock me back”*. Even though I felt miserable and hurt yet again, there was a different feeling within me. I was determined to receive promotion and to make sure that when I next applied, there was no way I was going to be knocked back. I wanted to put this negative reaction behind me and to allow myself the freedom to celebrate my colleague’s victory, as she had been successful in achieving promotion. I did not want to let my failure overshadow her success. In this instance, I realised I was an emotionally stronger person with a higher level of self-belief. I had a sense of self-determination that had just been triggered and become my motivation for the coming year.

“We should not judge people by their peak of excellence; but by the distance they have travelled from the point where they started.” Henry Ward Beecher

“Hey, I hope you don’t mind, but I read through your successful promotion application and modelled my own on it. I can’t believe you were only going for a Level B. Here I am going for Level C and my list of accomplishments is not as extensive as yours. Your application was amazing”. Sitting with a coffee in hand, I felt a real sense of closure as this positive affirmation confirmed what I knew. My application was strong and there was no way they could not have awarded me that promotion. Two years down the track and my application was being used as a model for a quality promotion application. I realised that the times in my career where I have perceived myself to be a failure in the eyes of others, have not impacted negatively on myself or my career. My sense of determination to succeed has been pivotal in developing my psychological resilience and coming out the victor. I had become smarter and wiser in the way I bounced back. I ensured that I sought help from those who were at a higher level than me. I sought wisdom through others who had more experience and I had perseverance to ensure I was putting the best me forward. I can now very confidently call myself successful.

“Once we believe in ourselves, we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight, or any experience that reveals the human spirit.” E. E. Cummings

Writing an autoethnographic account requires the author to probe deeper into past experiences and use highly reflexive and interpretive practices that can cause discomfort as deeper meanings are revealed and past memories recalled and scrutinised. This account has demonstrated that through imperfection and failure there is a time for vulnerability which may lead to a time of strength and inner growth. Through this personal and deep introspection, there is a haunting paradox of a moment in time and of timelessness, where the memories and feelings associated with those experiences are still as raw as the day they happened. With this research method, the person of the researcher, even when vigorously controlled, is more evident and more visible than in any other form. Yet, through the process of reflection, there is healing. It is through being respectful of these situations and allowing a sense of generosity around the process undertaken that healing can occur. However, as Bruner (1984) highlights, autoethnographic accounts are “*reflections of lives, not lives as actually lived*” (p. 17) [emphasis added]. These accounts are shaped by real lived experiences and events within a person’s life, yet it is acknowledged that the recounting of these events can be viewed differently through the lens of the person experiencing it compared to the other actors involved within the story. I acknowledge that the experiences I recount encapsulate specific moments and events that occurred over a span of years but are loosely fictionalised in order to allow the story to be told in a more flowing manner. In telling these stories, I acknowledge that other actors may have experienced these events somewhat differently and their perspective may differ from mine. I am by no means singling out participants within these scenarios to cause harm or to inflict pain. They are merely actors within a plot. Nor do I hold any feelings of anger or resentment, because writing this story has been a time of growth and it is only through these hardships that I have been able to grow and mature both as an academic and as a person.

“One can choose to go back toward safety or forward toward growth. Growth must be chosen again and again; fear must be overcome again and again.” Abraham Maslow

“Do you think that is why you are still studying? I mean, are you still trying to prove that you are credible? Is this still your driving force?” I had just been talking to a colleague about the busyness of life and trying to fit the Doctorate into an already very busy career. Our conversation veered to the writing of this autoethnographic paper and the story plot behind the narratives. This question had me stumped. I went to answer and pulled myself up to contemplate what was just asked. *“Wowsers, I actually don’t know”*. I was going to say no, absolutely not, I am doing this for me; but as I thought about it, I truly didn’t know if that was the case or not. I realised at that point in time that I love studying and I love researching. That is why my life was spiralling out of control because I had taken on too much. However, I had not found the Doctoral experience to be enjoyable and it had become a chore, but there was a small part of me that needed it. I realised that I always need to be working towards a goal; towards something that ensures that I am credible in the eyes of onlookers. I picked up my coffee and studied the mug (a treasured gift) and with a sense of acceptance said, *“Maybe that vulnerable woman still has scars that are invisible to the naked eye”*.

“I’ve got a theory that if you give 100% all the time, somehow things will work out in the end.” Larry Bird

Applying this knowledge to students

As an enabling lecturer, there are lessons that I have learnt through my personal experiences which could be applied directly to interactions with a student cohort. Enabling students often enter the educational environment with low self-esteem and confidence in their ability and capacity to handle the rigours of university study (Burton et al., 2009; Maunder, Gingham & Rogers, 2010). These students may feel this way because of experiences of failure in the school system which are often linked to their socioeconomic status. In addition, many may experience the imposter syndrome as they enter the university environment. For these students, they experience the sense of being a fraud and comments and/or constructive criticism may be perceived as a personal attack. These students are on heightened alert for the judgement that might be legitimised by the very people they look up to (Bunn et al., 2020). This judgement could cause them to feel shame and reinforce the deficit view of the working class culture and identity (Bunn et al., 2020). These students are in a state of vulnerability and, as James (2016) suggests, “there is a strong indicator that students’ beliefs and thoughts play a major role in successful learning” (p. 40). As educators, part of our role is to help them build their personal sense of efficacy in their capacity to engage in university study and to overcome the doubts they have upon entry to the course. When we consider this through the lens of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) we acknowledge that each student’s personal belief affects their performance and behaviours, and this can very easily be undermined when they are at their most vulnerable. Bandura (1997) maintains that there are four sources of influence that can build or negate a person’s sense of efficacy: 1. Mastery, which is developed as a person succeeds at the task they are undertaking; 2. Vicarious experiences, whereby they see that like-minded others are successful in a similar pursuit; 3. Verbal persuasion, where they are encouraged and inspired by people they look up to, and 4. Psychological states, which relates to a person’s psychological resilience (Bandura, 1997; James, 2016).

In my own story, my self-efficacy was negatively affected by two of these dimensions: mastery and verbal persuasion. These two elements were evident in my fear of being underqualified for my job and the suggestion about my competence and place within the university. For students, these same elements may manifest in slightly different ways. Mastery, for an enabling student, may relate to mastery over academic skills. Although students need to be challenged, if the experience is too easy, that can negate the growth of self-belief. However, when they have been sufficiently challenged in their academic performance and they succeed, this increases their sense of efficacy in their ability to master academic skills (Ackerman, 2019; James, 2016). Bandura suggests that if failure occurs before a strong sense of efficacy has been developed, this negates the student’s sense of confidence in their ability to handle the rigours of university (Bandura, 1997). Another form of influence that is critical for enabling students is that of verbal persuasion. This can relate directly to the academic lecturers whom the students encounter. Verbal persuasion, whereby the student is encouraged to adopt an idea, attitude or course of action is brought about by communications from other people (Ackerman, 2019). It describes the positive impact that words can have on someone’s efficacy but, by the same token, the powerfully negative impact that demeaning and disparaging words can have on them. Having experienced the powerfully negative impact that words had on me, I am acutely aware of the need to weigh my words carefully when interacting with enabling students in order to foster, rather than diminish, their sense of self-efficacy. Therefore, with enabling students, it is important for educators to use language that builds and empowers in order to give them hope that they can succeed in this academic environment.

“It’s not the easy successes that proves your mettle, but how you pick yourself up after a fall and try again. By going on in spite of your setbacks, you will also inspire others to not give up.” John Smith

One of the key elements of the psychology around building self-efficacy is the understanding that failure can lead to growth. This can be a difficult thing to grasp. Instead of teaching self-compassion in the face of failure, we may seek instead to shield ourselves, as well as our children and our students, from the hurt that failure can bring. The phenomenon of the helicopter parent is an example of how misguided this impulse can be. Research has shown that this is having detrimental impacts on children heading into university. These students are not as resilient (Campbell, 2019), suffer more from anxiety (Reed et al., 2016), have trouble adjusting to university (Darlow, Norvilitis & Schuetze, 2017), and have decreased levels of self-regulation (Hong et al., 2015). My own experience of failure in my career as an academic has shown me how important it is to meet such experiences with self-compassion. This has given me an enhanced understanding of the importance of helping students to manage failure through strategies designed to build their self-efficacy (James, 2016; James & Walters, 2020). Research by Neff, Hsieh and Dejjitterat (2005) demonstrates that developing self-compassion in students may be the key to overcoming academic failure. They suggest that self-compassion is associated with lower anxiety levels and, when examining the relationship between self-compassion and coping with a perceived academic failure, it was “found that self-compassion was significantly associated with the tendency to cope with one’s negative feelings by using the adaptive emotion-focused strategies of positive reinterpretation/growth and acceptance” (Neff et al., 2005, p. 280). They conclude that “self-compassion helps to facilitate the learning process by freeing individuals from the debilitating consequences of harsh self-criticism, isolation, and over-identification in the face of failure, and instead provides students with self-kindness, a sense of common humanity, and emotional balance” (Neff et al., 2005, p. 281).

Concluding thoughts

This autoethnographic account is a very personal exposé which considers the impact that disorienting dilemmas have had on me as an aspiring academic. Through writing about my personal experiences, I share some of the emotional dilemmas that had the most profound effects on me, and the impact on my professional growth. It is my belief that it is our role as educators to help our enabling students to develop their own sense of efficacy so that when they enter undergraduate studies, they are psychologically strong enough in their self-belief to overcome any failures they encounter. I acknowledge that failure is not an ideal situation for anybody to experience, but it is often the impetus for growth and success. As I considered my personal experiences through the lens of theory whilst writing this paper, it has helped me to better understand how they have shaped me as a person, as an educator and as an academic. I have come to recognise that I have developed a strong psychological resilience to failure. The periods where I felt most defeated and vulnerable were my times of greatest growth both academically and personally. I do not look back on these moments with the same intensity of hurt that I had felt at the time because I can see that they were the triggers for growth and transformation. Nor do I hold anyone responsible, as without these events I may not be where I am today. However, I do acknowledge that if I had a stronger sense of self-compassion, maybe the debilitating sense of regression I experienced at the time, may have had a less demoralising impact. A lesson I have learned from these experiences, and one that I will champion as an enabling educator, is that although university can sometimes be a challenging environment—for both academics and students—if we can view negative events through a more positive lens and respond with a growth mindset, our response to failure and criticism may lead to better learning experiences and a stronger psychological resilience. I have now moulded my identity

as an academic and, as I continue to traverse through academe, it is my desire that my story gives hope to other aspiring academics, as well as students, who also may feel a sense of inferiority, and help them to not just survive, but to flourish in this environment.

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