RESEARCH PAPER

'Excruciating' and 'exquisite': The paradox of vulnerability for students and academics in enabling education

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Vulnerability can be an uncomfortable, even painful experience, yet it is also linked to courage, empathy, trust and liberation. In this paper, I explore this intriguing paradox and its relevance to university settings, with a focus on enabling (access) education. Taking an autoethnographic approach, I draw on my personal experiences as an educator and researcher to illustrate some of the ways students and lecturers experience "uncertainty, risk, and self-exposure" (Brown, 2012, p. 34). Students transitioning to university can struggle to feel that they belong. They need a supportive, respectful environment so they feel safe enough to take risks, at both a personal and academic level. Though less openly acknowledged, the role of the academic can also be characterised by uncertainty and discomfort. Our teaching 'performances' are constantly judged, and there are limits to how open we can be with our students; the research space is another form of self-exposure, and one that can feel particularly brutal. However, vulnerability also implies opportunities for learning and growth, and this is as true for academics as it is for our students. Letting go of our need for power and control can bring greater self-awareness, authenticity and creativity to our teaching and research, and the possibility of more holistic, transformative working environments.

Keywords: vulnerability; enabling education; autoethnography; holistic learning; transformative learning; critical self-reflection

Introduction

A book title that has stayed with me over the years is Susan Jeffers' (1987) *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*. It acknowledges the uncomfortable truth that fear is a necessary part of life, that we won't realise our potential unless we are prepared to take risks and make ourselves vulnerable. 'Feeling the fear' means accepting challenges and daring to try new experiences, but it can also refer to worrying less about what others think and trusting that we will be accepted for who we are. Sometimes just 'showing up' requires enormous courage, especially when outcomes are out of our control (Brown, 2015). As enabling educators, working with students who are transitioning to higher education, we reassure them that it is normal to be fearful, and that the potential rewards of university study can more than compensate for any discomfort along the way. We do our best to put the right kinds of support structures in place, since we understand that many students new to university face challenges of a both personal

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and academic nature (A. Bennett et al., 2016), and are plagued with self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy (Brookfield, 1999; Willans, 2019). Such feelings of powerlessness are not unique to the student experience, however. As academics, we are also vulnerable. In our teaching and research work, there are many ways in which we feel exposed as our performances are scrutinised and evaluated by students and peers. We can also have that nagging feeling of not measuring up to expectations, and question our authenticity. In this paper, I present an autoethnographic account to explore the concept of vulnerability and the ways in which it plays out in the experiences of both students and academics.

A reflexive methodology

The knowledge emerging from life experiences can potentially be captured more authentically in reflexive accounts rather than traditional methods that seek more certainty and closure (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). Reflexivity refers to the ways in which researchers critically reflect on how they are situated within the research, and make explicit their influences on processes and outcomes (Lapadat, 2017). Therefore, reflexive methods of research, such as autoethnography, might be viewed as the natural extension of the educator's ongoing practice of critical self-reflection: the "process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of our teaching assumptions" (Brookfield, 2017, p. 3), including those related to power dynamics in the learning environment. In keeping with the principles of autoethnography, I have formalised such reflections with the aim of shedding light on a particular cultural phenomenon (Ellis et al., 2011), that being the concept of 'vulnerability' and its impact on educational contexts. The 'researcher vulnerability' (Lapadat, 2017, p. 594) present in autoethnography therefore has particular salience here; embracing the "self-awareness, self-exposure and self-conscious introspection" (Le Roux, 2017, p. 204) of a reflexive method might be construed as particularly significant, and potentially powerful, in exploring the concept of 'vulnerability'.

I began the autoethnographic process by journaling my reflections and memories. My original intention was to focus on the vulnerability inherent in the student–teacher relationship, but I realised that my role in research presented an arena of heightened personal exposure. Furthermore, my experiences as a researcher afforded me empathetic understandings of the risks presented to my students in sharing their work and performances for critique. These reflections, as "thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 277), became the data to be analysed. The questions that guided my reflections and analysis were as follows:

- In what ways have I observed my students experiencing vulnerability?
- How have I experienced vulnerability, as an educator and researcher?

In considering these issues, I sometimes draw on experiences preceding my university work by way of explaining moments of clarity and how my thinking has evolved. I began my teaching career as an art-English high school teacher but have mostly worked as a lecturer in adult education. My first academic appointment was in teacher education, but for the past 14 years I have worked in an enabling (access) program called STEPS (Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies), designed to provide adult learners with an alternative pathway to university. My journey as a researcher began with my doctoral studies, completed a couple of years prior to my entry into enabling education.

In the spirit of reflexivity, I openly situate myself in these reflections rather than "hiding … behind a false objectivity" (Lapadat, 2017, p. 591), but also draw on existing literature to provide context and assist in analysis. My aim is to retain a critical lens throughout,

highlighting underlying assumptions, influences and tensions in my experiences as a teacher and researcher. In this way, I hope to draw upon aspects of what Anderson (2010, cited in Le Roux, 2017) calls 'analytic autoethnography' (p. 196), as well as the more traditional evocative approach. At another level, these contrasting elements also reflect the academic and subjective sensibilities represented in this paper. As Bochner (2014) points out, narrative styles of research are the perfect vehicle for merging two identities that are usually seen as distinct: our academic and our personal selves. I embrace the uncertainties and contradictions that lie within "the dangerous intersection of personal and public life" (Palmer, 2007, p. 8), in the hope of providing fresh perspectives and inspiring further contemplation of these issues. Although the main focus of this paper is the ways that vulnerability manifests in enabling education, there are implications for a range of contexts within higher education.

'Vulnerability' as an academic concept

Brené Brown has put vulnerability in the spotlight in recent times; the increasing popularity of her work and her almost rock star status bear testimony to how widely concepts like vulnerability, shame, and courage resonate. Drawing on her social work research, Brown (2012) highlights the ways in which vulnerability—defined as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure" (p. 34)—can have both diminishing and liberating impacts. It can mean "dark emotions like fear, shame, grief, sadness, and disappointment", but should not be equated with weakness, since it can also be "the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity" (Brown, 2012, pp. 33-34). As a university educator, Brown (2016) makes no apologies for pushing her students, emotionally as well as intellectually. The sign on her office door says, "If you are comfortable, I'm not doing my job" (Brown, 2016, p. 4). An essential part of learning, it seems, is being prepared to work through our fears and insecurities. Brown (2016) also warns that "if we are brave enough, often enough, we are going to fail" (p. 3). To keep putting ourselves 'out there', we need to 'dare greatly' and have the courage to accept missteps and disappointments, even failures, along the way (Brown, 2012). According to Brown (2010), the power of vulnerability can be harnessed by cultivating a spirit of "whole-heartedness" (p. 1), which is a form of resilience based on belief in our own worthiness but also depends on authentic connections with others.

The concept of 'vulnerability' from the perspective of learning and teaching has not been a dominant theme in the literature, though specific mention can be found in some of the research around a 'whole-of-student' approach. Carl Rogers, a central figure in humanism, highlights the need for education to cater to students' emotional as well as cognitive needs (see Rogers, 1980; Rogers, Lyon & Tausch, 2014). He regards a "willingness to be vulnerable" (Rogers et al., 2014, p. 72) as a key to meaningful relationships, and this includes the way teachers relate to students. According to Rogers, learning environments are most effective when based on "empathy, respect and genuineness" (Rogers et al., 2014, p. 61). Palmer (2007) holds a similar view, encouraging teachers to explore their 'inner landscapes' so that they can be more authentic in the way they teach and relate to their students. He describes how teaching is often "a daily exercise in vulnerability" (Palmer, 2007, p. 8) in that it holds many emotional challenges as well as rewards.

More recently, Motta and Bennett (2018) advocate a holistic view of teaching in higher education: one that draws attention to "the experience of joy, vulnerability, empowerment and powerlessness, for both students and teachers" (p. 634) to balance more traditional, hegemonic approaches. Brantmeier (2013), writing in the context of teacher education, goes so far as to propose a "pedagogy of vulnerability" as one "that invites vulnerability and deepened learning through a process of self and mutual disclosure" (p. 97). He urges educators to be open about

self-examination as a way of leading by example. Mangione and Norton (2020) expand on this work to suggest that vulnerability becomes the "pedagogy of choice in higher education" (p. 5); they urge teachers to go beyond "traditional transmissive pedagogy", to take risks, relinquish control, and strive for authenticity with their students and co-workers. A common theme for this model of learning and teaching is that of a more equal relationship with students, where the educator adopts the role of co-learner rather than expert or authority figure.

In the following sections, I explore these concepts in more depth, by drawing on my personal experiences. I firstly examine some of the implications for students, before turning my attention to the work we do as academics.

Vulnerability of students

Many adult learners who are new to university experience intense levels of anxiety (Askam, 2004). The sense of 'impostership', the feeling "that at some deeply embedded level they possess neither the talent nor the right" (Brookfield, 1999, p. 11) to undertake tertiary education, may be very real for some. This anxiety is highlighted in discussions about the 'borderline' space in which adult learners can find themselves as they leave behind their previous lives to cross into an unfamiliar and intimidating university culture (Willans, 2019). While it is important to avoid assumptions about "frailty" (Gravett, Kinchin & Winstone, 2020, p. 1) when describing this cohort, we do know that a high proportion of students who choose enabling pathways come from disadvantaged groups, including those from low socio-economic, regional or remote areas (Pitman et al., 2016). Many will have experienced failure in their formal education (Motta & Bennett, 2018) and will have ongoing challenges in their personal lives as well (A. Bennett et al., 2016). All of this suggests the increased likelihood of enabling students experiencing vulnerabilities, both academic and personal in nature, but also the opportunity for growth and transformation.

Enabling programs, like the one in which I teach, typically embrace a holistic educational philosophy that means the more personal aspects of student learning are acknowledged and supported (A. Bennett et al., 2016; National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia, 2019; Pitman et al., 2016). This ideology, with its implications for the content taught and the pedagogies employed, informs the introductory study skills subject in the STEPS enabling program. Students are invited to reflect on their feelings, beliefs and past experiences in connection to the concepts and strategies being introduced. Their insecurities about learning are directly explored as a way of helping to normalise these experiences and to develop proactive strategies to cope. For example, we talk about the concept of 'imposter syndrome' (Brookfield, 1999) in the first week of term to help students understand that their feelings of anxiety and alienation in the university environment are not unique. In this introductory subject, I make a point of telling students that if they keep engaged and complete assignments on time, positive outcomes are likely. Despite my reassurances, assessment tasks remain a source of dread for some. I've seen students labour over each question in a simple multiple-choice online quiz in their determination to get 100 per cent, and the devastation of some who do not realise this objective. Students who completed their schooling some time ago often seem more nervous than their younger counterparts, regardless of their academic ability. Over the years, I have come to understand how much is at stake for many of these students. Undertaking an enabling program is not just about advancing their career options, but a means of validating their sense of worth—tangible proof of their academic competence and their ability to succeed in life.

Asking students to engage in self-examination is potentially putting them in a vulnerable position, but we justify such activities in the hope that they will help students develop self-

awareness and positive learning strategies. Such an approach aligns with transformative learning theory which assumes that critical self-reflection can help clarify viewpoints and even lead to moments of epiphany (Cranton, 2016). However, it isn't always easy to get the settings right. I learnt, early on in my career as a high school teacher, about the risks involved in asking students to share personal stories. When I was teaching Year 8, this being only the second English class I'd taught, the activity set for the whole year level involved students writing and illustrating booklets about themselves, being guided by a set of prompts. One student came to me after class, looking quite upset. Jess (pseudonym) was concerned about having to describe 'the saddest day of your life'. Presumably there had been a 'happiest day' to discuss as well, but this was not the cause of her anxiety. Jess wanted to know what she should do if her saddest day 'was too sad to talk about'. Her question took me by surprise. I can remember saying that sometimes it can be freeing to talk about things that make us sad. I can only hope that I also made it clear that she need only share what she was comfortable with. The heart-rending story Jess ended up writing about was the day her disabled sister was transferred from the family home to an institution. As I read her story I was deeply touched, but was also left with a sense of disquiet. Maybe it was cathartic for Jess to share her 'unspeakable' sense of loss and helped her feel less alone? Or maybe she really didn't want to tell that story to a relative stranger, but felt compelled to give an honest answer because this is what the task required, and she wanted to get a good mark? I will never know, but the incident taught me about my position of power in the teacher–student relationship, and my responsibility to try never to take advantage of that trust.

It is a dilemma that I have faced throughout my teaching career: knowing when to push gently, when to let go, and when to steer students in a 'safer' direction. In the introductory study skills subject in STEPS we cover topics such as goal-setting and motivation, personality types, learning preferences, time management, and stress management. Ostensibly, these are 'soft' topics, and yet the reality is that this content can sometimes delve into complex psychological territory. The weight of this responsibility was brought home to me a couple of years ago when a University counsellor voiced her concerns about some of the subject's content to a lecturer on our teaching team. As the subject coordinator at the time, I felt it was important to find out more, so arranged to speak with the counsellor. I began the phone conversation feeling slightly defensive, but afterwards, had a much better idea of where she was coming from. One of the counsellor's concerns was the topic of 'resilience' and a question in an assessment task that asked students to give an example from their own lives. As she explained, some students may have a history of *not* being resilient in the face of adversity, and the question might stir up painful memories, with no clear strategy for how to deal with them. After consulting the rest of the teaching team, we changed the question so that students could talk about resilience more objectively, by referring to someone they knew personally or simply knew about. This change would also make the question more appropriate for those students who had not experienced the type of hardship implied by the question. We also discussed the need to give students an 'out' if any class activities left them feeling too exposed. The incident served as another reminder to be careful about assumptions, and the responsibility we have as educators to give students a measure of control when dealing with sensitive topics.

Sometimes I am astonished by what adult learners are comfortable sharing. The STEPS study skills subject also includes an oral presentation task where students can talk about a subject of their choice for three to four minutes. Public speaking is already a form of self-exposure that makes many students deeply anxious, even petrified, and yet some choose to talk about life-changing experiences, personal challenges, and causes they are passionate about. Even when talking about more general topics such as travel adventures or hobbies, there is often a sense

of sharing something of deep personal significance. Such activities present risks for the teacher as well as the student, since it is our responsibility to ensure that there are no harmful consequences. For example, when students choose a highly personal topic, I have seen them become upset, sometimes to the point where it is difficult for them to continue. While signs of emotion should not be equated with 'failure', it is possible that students may experience a more intense degree of emotional exposure than they had bargained for. The audience's needs must also be considered if there is a chance that raw topics might strike a nerve.

Despite these risks, the exercise often brings the class together; students get to know each other better and also bond over the shared experience of public speaking. For some, the sense of achievement is exhilarating. This can simply be because they overcame their fear of public speaking, but it can also relate to the personal nature of their topic. One presentation that exemplifies this for me was by a young man who talked about what it was like to come out as gay in a small regional community. When he first approached me with his idea, I was cautious. I reminded him that sometimes it is much harder to share raw topics than we imagine, and to be mindful of audience and purpose. But the student reassured me that he could tell his story in a factual way, and that is exactly what he did. He talked honestly, without a hint of self-pity even though the struggles he experienced were clearly profound. The class were fully supportive of his bravery and generous in their praise of what he had achieved, as a person and as a presenter. The experience seemed undeniably affirming for that particular student, as it has been for others who talk with a sense of honesty and courage about subjects that are close to their hearts. The acceptance and respect of students by their peers and teacher, without judgement, can represent powerful, deeply inspiring learning moments for all concerned.

Of course, personal stories can be shared in a range of contexts and not just in set activities. We also gain insights into students' personal challenges in less planned ways, such as in class discussions, online forums, and one-on-one discussions. The level of disclosure can sometimes seem like a plea for help. A student once told me in the context of a written introductory activity that she had been sexually abused when she was younger, and that I was the first person she had told. At such times, the student is putting their full trust in the lecturer, and the glimpses we get into their personal lives can reveal realties that are quite shocking. Students are often particularly at the mercy of lecturers' compassion when asking for special consideration, such as when needing more time for an assignment. To justify their applications for extensions, they can share heartbreaking stories, such as relationship breakdowns, grief, illness, homelessness, and domestic violence. There are many accounts of mental illness. Sometimes these stories are so worrying that it is best to suggest students seek professional help. Moreover, the role of confidant can feel burdensome, and it is not always easy to know how to respond. As much as it is heartening to know that we have students' trust, we need to be realistic about our role and how students' needs can best be met.

Vulnerability of academics

A scholarly identity might imply expertise and authority, but there are a number of ways in which academics can also experience vulnerability. At one level, this is encouraged in learning and teaching, on the assumption that learning environments are most effective when based on empathy, mutual respect, and openness rather than authoritarian control (Rogers et al., 2014). At another level, there are institutional constraints that cannot be ignored in the teacher–student relationship. While I have, on occasion, formed friendships with students that have lasted beyond the teaching term, generally speaking, there are limits to the degree of authenticity that can be realised. Apart from the obvious power imbalance that exists because of the control we have over processes such as the granting of extensions and the grading of student work, there

are other factors that inhibit self-disclosure and true equality. As classroom teachers, we can never be quite sure how our teaching performances will be received or even who is in 'control'. As much as I try to be sincere in my dealings with students, whether face-to-face or online, I know that when I am 'in front of a class', I tend to present a larger version of myself in my attempts to entertain as well as educate. I would like to think my classes are places of mutual learning, but am also conscious of needing to provide expertise and guidance.

When I began my teaching career as a high school teacher, I was much more reserved in my approach than I am now. Having trained in the 1980s, I can remember the advice of 'not smiling until Christmas', and being worried that if I was too familiar with students, they would lose respect for me. It took me a while to realise that asserting your authority wasn't always going to work, and it was generally better to try to keep students 'on side'. For the most part, I was lucky with the schools in which I taught, but even so, there were situations that stretched my limits. In Stroud's (2018) brutally honest autobiography, she reflects on the stresses normalised in her work as a primary school teacher: "All day I'd been on edge, on high alert, ready for something bad to happen" (p. 114). Some days were like that for me as a high school teacher; it was a feeling more of relief at day's end rather than a genuine sense of satisfaction or enjoyment.

Moving on in my career, I can vividly remember my first tutorial teaching undergraduate education students. Not only were students attentive, but I was amazed to see some nodding, even smiling, as I spoke. At that time, the contrast with my high school teaching experiences was so acute, it was almost disconcerting. The theory of andragogy (Knowles, 1991) asserts that teaching adults is different from school teaching. This premise has been widely criticised, with some questioning if adult learning is a legitimate field of study at all (Merriam, 2002). While many of these critiques are valid, one distinction that is not talked about so much is behaviour management. My experience is that adult learners generally have more motivation and maturity, and this tends to make them more respectful in learning situations. Occasionally, there are adults who present with challenging behaviours, certainly there are some who have made me nervous, but I have rarely felt on 'high alert' in a university classroom in the same way I did in some high school settings. For the most part, there is a sense of freedom in knowing I can trust the class and get on with the job of teaching. This has given me the licence to be more open about who I am and let my guard down. Becoming a parent also softened my approach to students, as perhaps has more maturity.

Online teaching involves a particular set of dynamics and requires a different kind of 'performance' of the teacher. Establishing meaningful relationships with online students can be more difficult, but I try to connect with them by keeping the tone of my communications friendly and approachable. This includes my presence in video recordings that are used in the online learning and teaching space. For me, there is a sense of achievement in creating such videos, but there are also a number of personal challenges. The digital footprint resulting from the availability of these online resources creates its own set of vulnerabilities, as do ongoing struggles with technology when many factors are out of my control. When I know a lecture is to be recorded, for example, I find it harder to relax and tend to stay more 'on script'. Watching the recordings back is often humbling. Sometimes you wish you hadn't gestured so much, that the lighting hadn't made you look quite so ghoulish, or that you hadn't made such an obvious blunder. There was the time I began the lecture with a breezy 'Welcome to Week 9', when we were, in fact, in Week 10. When making the shorter 'talking head' videos, I sometimes redo them several times in an effort to 'get it right', but at a certain point, you have to let go of

perfection, and trust that students will see your stammers and stumbles as part of your humanness.

On the positive side, however, students often express their gratitude for these recordings. I've had online students comment that they feel like they 'know' me, and others greet me like a long lost friend upon meeting me for the first time. I once had an online student write to say how much she had enjoyed watching a particular lecture recording, and especially seeing my reactions when the technology failed. This was a surprising admission, but I surmised that she was referring to my facial expression and the way I'd exclaimed (thankfully without swearing). Although I felt a sense of embarrassment about her feedback, I also got it. In that unguarded moment, she saw me, not as some remote university figure, but as a person she could relate to. Even when our teaching performances are less than perfect, there can be a 'realness' and spontaneity about these expressions of self that students appreciate, perhaps even find reassuring.

There are a myriad of other ways in which academics can feel vulnerable, as acknowledged by Brown (2016) who talks about the "armor" (p. 6) needed to work in university settings, and Peseta, Barrie and McLean (2017) who describe academic life as "a peculiar kind of difficult work" (p. 453). Jackson (2018) highlights the increasing stresses faced by academics because of economic rationalism and pressures to enhance institutional reputations. We are increasingly expected to prove our worth using standardised, competitive measures: "the demand to count, measure, rank, quantify, evaluate and judge … haunts virtually all aspects of our work" (Peseta et al., 2017, p. 435). Our success as educators is measured by data from anonymous subject and teaching evaluations that students complete each term, with the expectation of high participation rates, as well as high results. This push to quantify the quality of teaching has led to a "narrow conception of teaching excellence" (Mangione & Norton, 2020, p. 2). Research has also become a commodity, and our worth determined by research dollars and personal metrics ascribed by platforms such as Scopus and ResearchGate. Research outputs are frequently used as currency in negotiating promotions and grants (Elizabeth & Grant, 2013), with preferences for journals promising high impact factors. Such expectations of a researcher can seem out of step for those working in enabling education. In some ways we remain on the borders of the academy, with opportunities to secure external funding more limited, and some of the accepted publications in access and equity not measuring up by such standards. As R. Bennett et al. (2016) articulate, academics who support learning and teaching efforts across the university can have a more tenuous academic identity, and are likely to feel more vulnerable than those positioned within conventional faculty and discipline structures.

There is no doubt that research activities have added a stimulating and rewarding dimension to my work, but of all the things I do as an academic, this is where I feel the most vulnerable. The ongoing challenge to get research published is just one aspect of what can be an intimidating, alienating culture. Even when the writing is not personal in nature, there is a high level of self-exposure in sharing your work, and if you dare to submit articles to more highly ranked journals, you do so knowing the odds are stacked against you. As academics, our experiences as researchers, especially when starting out, have direct parallels with those of the students we teach; we submit our work to the scrutiny of others, hoping for a positive response. When this validation is not forthcoming, we can doubt our capacity and our sense of belonging in the academy. The first time I had a piece of writing rejected was while I was doing my doctorate. I can remember the gut-wrenching sense of shame upon realising that even my second, carefully reworked article was not good enough to be published. I could not even take comfort from knowing the target publication was particularly prestigious, because it wasn't. My

academic journey throughout school and my tertiary studies had been mostly affirming. The feeling of failure, therefore, was alien and uncomfortable.

I persevered with the piece and shortly afterwards sent it to a visiting professor who was available to speak to postgraduate students about their work. I explained in my email that I would appreciate his feedback, as I was having trouble converting the large body of work from my thesis to more contained, shorter pieces of writing. When I met the professor, he began by saying that he whole-heartedly agreed that I was having problems. During the course of our conversation, he shared that he no longer had to worry about rejections because of being a 'name' in education, and that journals would accept almost anything he offered. Admittedly, the professor also provided some useful advice, but what struck me most about the meeting was his lack of empathy and his failure to offer a single word of encouragement. Leaving the meeting feeling even more deflated, I decided at that point that writing journal articles was beyond me, and I would worry about that aspect of my work after finishing the thesis. Since that time, I have become more accustomed to criticism and rejection, and having some successes in publication along the way has helped to provide a more balanced perspective. Undoubtedly, there is valuable learning to be gained from the peer review process, but the sense of powerlessness in having others decide the fate of your work is still nerve-racking, and the harsher responses always require some serious emotional armour. It still amazes me that academics whose expertise is in 'learning and teaching' can take a clinical, 'unholistic' approach to providing critique.

All research presents a level of self-exposure, but electing to write yourself into the study, such as in autoethnography, presents a particular kind of 'nakedness'. This is a new method for me, and although I have enjoyed the freedom of a less rigid approach to academic writing and research, there has been a quiet battle within myself throughout as I seek the 'right' tenor and make decisions on what to share. My discomfort with the 'auto' component of this writing might be considered ironic, in view of the number of times I have asked students to write about their personal experiences. In some ways, autoethnography could be described as a holistic approach to research, one in which the human elements are foregrounded and celebrated, rather than seen as a failure to achieve objectivity and rigour. In exploring the more intimate aspects of ourselves, and abandoning our academic desire for "stability, order, and control" (Bochner, 2014, p. 280), we are, in effect, making ourselves more vulnerable. We risk being judged—as people, as well as researchers and writers. This kind of writing, as both terrifying and liberating, might be viewed as another expression of vulnerability's yin and yang.

There have been times in my career when I may have limited myself because of my timidity and harsh inner critic. More and more I can appreciate that a willingness to be vulnerable is not just desirable, but necessary if we are to reach our potential. It could be that the difference between a 'good' teacher and a 'great' one is that spark of audacity, that willingness not just to take pedagogical risks, but also to be more 'human', less controlled, and less controlling. As researchers, too, a safer route might get us points on the board, but we won't know what is possible unless we dare to take on new challenges, and keep exploring new concepts and approaches. Another benefit of embracing our vulnerabilities relates to the possibility of heightened self-awareness and clarity of thought. We extol the benefits of critical self-reflection to our students, but as academics, we also have much to gain (McDougall & Davis, 2011). As Palmer (2007) argues, "the more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more sure-footed our teaching—and our living—becomes" (p. 13). While he is speaking as an educator, such potential may equally apply to research processes if we are prepared to scrutinise the more subjective aspects of what we do (Lapadat, 2017). We also need to acknowledge that

taking risks generally requires the support of others, whether it be from teaching teams, research groups and collaborations, or in our one-on-one interactions with peers and managers. Meaningful connections with others, and our need "to feel seen, heard, and valued" (Brown, 2010, p. 19), are an essential part of cultivating a sense of worthiness. Were it not for the support of trusted colleagues, I would have found it much more difficult to negotiate the setbacks and disappointments in my academic career; my observations of and interactions with other academics convince me that I am not alone in this.

Some final thoughts

In writing about the concept of vulnerability, I have drawn out a few threads of what is actually a textured, complex tapestry. There are many possible interpretations, and numerous ways in which it can manifest within the context of enabling education and in the broader higher education landscape. The vignettes drawn from my personal experiences as an educator and researcher have been used to illustrate some of the ways that students and academics take risks and experience emotional exposure. My position of mainstreamed privilege needs to be acknowledged in this discussion. Students and lecturers who represent 'difference', in terms of racial, class, ability, linguistic, sexual, or any other difference, are likely to have had their sense of powerlessness amplified in ways I cannot fully appreciate. Nor is accepting vulnerability always healthy. Where it is linked to "violence, harm and forms of oppression" (Jackson, 2018, p. 234), there could well be cause for genuine concern, and the responsibility for change should not be placed solely on the individual.

In an educational setting, a certain amount of vulnerability is inevitable and even necessary for student learning. For enabling students, such feelings may be intensified, since many worry if they belong at university at all. Their sense of self-exposure may be heightened when they are asked to explore personal feelings and past experiences as a way of developing self-awareness and autonomy. As an enabling educator, I have tried to provide compassionate and supportive environments where learners are comfortable enough to take such risks, and, as a consequence, have witnessed profound learning moments when students expressed themselves in courageous, sometimes transformative ways. However, I am also mindful that there are no guarantees that democratically intended learning experiences will have positive outcomes. As Brookfield (2001) cautions, exercises designed to acknowledge life experiences and give adult learners a 'voice' may result in some students feeling an intensified sense of surveillance. I have learnt that part of the trust required in any learning event means ensuring that students need only engage in personal sharing to the extent they feel comfortable. There are also times when the disturbing nature of students' revelations mean the best course of action is to recommend they seek professional help. As educators, we need to constantly reflect on our practice, check our assumptions and expectations, and remain flexible in our approach.

Although we talk about this less often, the role of an academic also involves risk-taking and courage. Our work in teaching and research is regularly scrutinised, rated and compared, by our students and our peers, and there are many ways in which outcomes are outside of our control. Teaching is a kind of performance, and as such, there are ongoing insecurities about how our 'audience' might receive us, both online and in face-to-face settings. Working with adult learners can allow certain freedoms and make mutual sharing more likely, but generally speaking, there are limits to how equal and authentic the teacher–student relationship can be. The world of research, another form of self-exposure, can be particularly brutal. Where rejections and criticisms are par for the course, it can feel like the stakes are high. In a culture which focuses so much on scholarly credibility, academics tend to hide "behind a veneer of

academic and theoretical detachment" (Bochner, 2014, p. 291). However, like our students, we can have that gnawing sense of 'impostorship', of 'not being enough'.

In my academic career I have experienced disappointment, embarrassment, shame and failure. However, I also know that taking risks along the way, in teaching and in research, has created opportunities to grow, make a difference, be creative, and connect with others. This is the "excruciating" and "exquisite" (Brown, 2012, p. 5) nature of vulnerability—"the powerlessness and empowerment" (Motta & Bennett, 2018, p. 634) that define higher education. We seem to understand this paradox in the context of our students' journeys. Perhaps it is time we were prepared to be more open about its relevance to our work as academics and its essential part in our own learning. This understanding should not be used to legitimise genuine harm, nor to inspire a culture of victimhood. However, there is both humility and power in naming the insecurities we feel and the courage it takes to keep putting ourselves out there: to "feel the fear and do it anyway" (Jeffers, 1987). Such a mindset can help us find resilience from within and move beyond the need for perfection or external validation, but also accept that, like our students, most of us work best in environments where we feel valued and supported. As Palmer (2007) points out, 'authority' should not be confused with 'power' (p. 12). At a personal level, letting go of our need for control can bring greater self-awareness, authenticity and creativity to our teaching and research. In a broader sense, workplaces that provide opportunities for self-discovery and honest sharing, without the threat of competition or the bluster of academic arrogance, seem much more likely to promote genuine learning and growth. Acknowledging and embracing our vulnerabilities as we work and learn has the potential to be as beneficial to lecturers as it is to students—in enabling education and in higher education more broadly.

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