Stop the clocks:
Enabling practitioners and precarity in pandemic time(s)

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The COVID-19 pandemic introduced new tensions and pressures for universities. While students and staff already experienced time pressures in competitive neoliberalised economies, these strains accelerated during the pandemic. The aim of this autoethnography study was to capture the lived experience of eight practitioners working in teaching, leadership and professional practice within the field of enabling education, across six Australian institutions between 2020–2021. The problem of 'time' emerged as a dominant theme. Without adequate time to balance work and life, sustaining personal and collective wellbeing became precarious. This paper engages with 'precarity' (Butler 2004, 2012) as manifested in workplace anxiety, stress and insecurity experienced by enabling education practitioners. It endeavours to tether these lived experiences to the temporalities of the digital neoliberal university (Bennett & Burke, 2018), particularly through Adam's (1995) concept of the inequitable time economy and its disciplining workplace 'machine time' which is always 'running on and out' (Adam 1995, p. 52) at the expense of marginalised workers. Despite such challenges, the researcher/participants emerged passionate about making a difference to the lives of their students, many of whom are from non-traditional and equity backgrounds. The autoethnographic process itself fostered a new sense of solidarity, resilience and agency.

Keywords: neoliberalism; precarity; enabling; emotional labour; burnout.

Introduction

While the nature of work in the contemporary Australian university has often been precarious at best (Hil 2012, 2015; O'Sullivan, Rahamathulla & Pawar 2020), successive waves of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic over the past two years have created new tensions and pressures for the twenty-first century neoliberalised university, particularly within pathway or enabling programs. Charged with democratic ideals of widening participation whilst also cutting costs and generating revenue, these institutions of learning and social mobility have also inadvertently become places of adversity, workplace stress and worker burnout. Perhaps nowhere in the contemporary Australian university has this precariousness and adversity been felt more than on the fringes of the academy where 'underrepresented and unacknowledged' enabling practitioners who 'do not fit into the usual disciplinary communities' (Bennett et al. 2016, p. 217) are working with non-traditional students in alternative pathway programs. For some, these alternative pathways are viewed as recruitment tools (Motta & Bennett 2018) but for those who work at the coalface in this space, philosophies of care, social justice and student flourishing infiltrate every aspect of their work, re-shaping its purpose as a form of resistance to the ideals of neoliberalism (Jones, Olds & Lisciandro 2020). Enabling students too, stand perhaps precariously and vulnerably at the academy's borders, seeking to gain entrance via alternative pathways. Yet it is rarely acknowledged that transitioning large numbers of these students in multiple learning modes through such difficult borderlands requires intensive, and almost limitless, academic and emotional labour. The combined pressures of neoliberalist outputs, academic and emotional labour, and added pressures of planning for constant and evolving pandemic contingencies create often unacknowledged precarity for enabling practitioners that can lead to teacher burnout, as seen in the findings section of this paper. The pressure to reassure, retain and recruit precarious students, while also adapting to the era of constant disruption, is often felt most acutely by the most precarious of workers in the neoliberal university.

Previous relevant papers authored by the Mental Health Special Interest Group (SIG) within the National Association of Enabling Educators Australia (NAEEA) explored the impact of emotional labour load on enabling practitioners and the links to teacher burnout (Crawford et al. 2018; Olds et al. 2018). With the addition of new co-authors from multiple Australian universities, this paper returns again to inquire after the enabling education or pathways practitioner, seeking to understand the nature of their work during pandemic times. It engages with the idea of 'precarity' (Butler 2004, 2012) as manifest in emotions of workplace anxiety, stress and insecurity experienced by enabling education practitioners in the wake of successive waves of pandemic. The paper also links these lived experiences to the temporalities of the digital neoliberal university (Bennett & Burke 2018), particularly through Adam's (1995) theories on the inequitable and gendered time economy. While Western societies have long been dependent upon, and preoccupied with, the time efficiency, time management and time discipline demanded by (post)industrial capitalist production (Adam 1995; Harvey 1990), workplace clock-time was recently transformed by the pandemic context, particularly for the most precarious workers within contemporary academic capitalism. This paper aims to explore such themes through collective autoethnography, a qualitative method that may be seen as a form of resistance to neoliberalism and a means to capture the rich nuance of eight enabling practitioners working in six institutions across Australia during 2020 and 2021. Alongside other researchers we feel the burden, a psychological malaise from 'the acceleration of our lived experience caused by neoliberalism' (Sugarman & Thrift 2017, p. 808). In this sped up world without limit (Hassan 2009) the collective autoethnography became one strategy for resisting teacher burnout and building collective resilience by clearing the emotional field, validating experience, assisting in the reframing of our experience, and returning us to community.

Moreover, we found that emotions such as fear, frustration, anxiety and guilt can, and should, be discussed freely within our community of practitioners (not papered over) and that such emotional challenges are better addressed as a supportive collective, rather than isolated individuals. Most valuably, this cross-institutional research collaboration taught us to question the systems under which we operate, to explore our ways of being, and to set human limits in the often limitless space of workplace machine time (Adam 1995, p. 52). In this paper we start our discussion with a review of the precarious nature of work within the modern neoliberal university, followed by the compounded precarity caused by a global pandemic and the impact on practitioners, as the historical and socio-cultural context for the current study.

Literature review

Neoliberalism and precarity in the modern university
Neoliberalist policy settings have broadly impacted Western higher education since the 1980s; from freedom to conformity; differentiated to standardised; autonomous to automated. Krejsler writes of the 'the modernizing machine' that 'promulgates a radically different agenda for how universities and academic subjectivities can be conceptualized and enacted' (2013, p. 1157); an agenda in stark contrast to the Humboltian university borne from *Wilhelm von Humboldt's* research-led university, the dominant university model for democratic education in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since the 1990s, socio-political shifts toward corporate academic capitalism, or 'Universities Inc' (Symes & Hopkins 1994), have prioritised image management and economic efficiency, thus throwing universities, and the knowledge workers within them, into competition for increasingly scarce resources. The postmodern push to work perpetually faster and harder as well as smarter, has brought a new temporality or experience of time which was famously termed postmodern 'time-space' compression, or the socio-cultural product of both globalisation and advanced capitalism. Essentially, neoliberalism's intense pursuit of and preoccupation with intertwined cultures (and cults) of speed, growth and information technology compresses both time and space in the rush to maximise the frequency of economic outputs or service the maximum number of consumers.

The neoliberal ethos that creates a 'precarious academic life … generates a heightened sense of instability, social isolation, anxiety, expendability, disposability and moral failure in people' (Valero, Jørgensen & Brunila 2019, p. 136). For academics, continued employment is dependent on individual performance matching organisational objectives. Pressure to publish, create research income and improve research impact factors to sustain the university's reputation, precariously materialised as unrealistic academic workloads, less teaching time and less time spent with students. Workload Allocation Models (WAMs) have become tools of the time-space compression. The models beholden academics to a mechanised paradigm (Kenny & Fluck 2017) that equate to staff feeling like they are 'treated as a variable input from which maximum productivity is extracted' (Rea 2016, p.10). Unrealistic measures of time are prescribed to tasks based on the perceived economic value, rather than defined by the length of time that is realistically required to satisfactorily complete the task. As Sugarman and Thrift remark, 'in the well-known Marxian analysis, when time is money, the capitalist commodification of labour necessitates that to be continuously competitive, production must increasingly be intensified in a time frame that remains the same' (2017, p. 810). Workload models are behaviour shaping tools that direct academics to intensify output and reduce hours to meet the university's bottom-line rather than engage, create and innovate, or add to their disciplinary cannon. The mechanisms of neoliberalism in universities create temporal, corrosive norms that impact academics materially, psychologically and physically (Shahjahan 2020). In summary, neoliberalism has infiltrated our universities, commodifying education (Kenny & Fluck 2017) and creating a precarious work environment.

Precarity, pandemic times and burnout

Harvey (1990, 2005) could not have predicted the new pressures and problems of globalisation and time-space compression brought by a worldwide pandemic. Nor could he have predicted how contemporary pandemic cultures of increased risk, anxiety, stress and uncertainty would compound existing inequities, competition and time pressures within neoliberalised academic workplaces. During the pandemic, universities had no choice but to close their physical doors to comply with government-mandated snap lockdowns and physical distancing requirements. All domestic and international travel ended abruptly, and all learning was swiftly relocated online. Labelled as a 'fiscal crisis', Australian universities reeled at the loss of income when international students ceased enrolling (Peters et al. 2020, p. 36). This, among other financial challenges and limited support from the Government, resulted in further restructures and redundancies. The media reported job losses of 17,000 in the sector but the National Tertiary Education Union advise it is closer to 40,000 (Littleton & Stanford 2021).

Many were optimistic that the pandemic would be an opportunity to reimagine higher education and move away from a dominant neoliberal discourse (Peters et al. 2020), yet it is argued that this discourse was only strengthened in Australia (Larsen & Emmett 2023) and abroad (Kınıkoğlu & Can 2021). Computer-based technologies, neoliberalism's 'tools of capital acceleration', took centre stage in academic life and the relevance of 'clock-time' was even further degraded in favour of a more limitless 'network time' (Sugarman & Thrift 2017, p. 812). Universities implemented tighter WAMs for remaining staff and provided little time allocation for adapting to the online space, despite research indicating online learning materials require triple time to create, and intentionality is vital to reconceptualise student learning needs in the design process (Gloria & Uttal 2020). Blurring of boundaries around 'network time' forced work into the personal space of staff, increased multi-tasking, and quickened and evaporated time. This was compounded further for those working with non-traditional students who typically possess lower levels of digital literacy and digital access (Hopkins 2021).

The pandemic increased precarity for practitioners. Precarity can be understood as 'an ontological condition of vulnerability' (Kınıkoğlu & Can 2021, p. 818). Butler (2004, 2009), who wrote extensively about social precarity, argued that insecurity and precarity is experienced inequitably, with those in less privileged positions most vulnerable. In academia, 'there are degrees and hierarchies of precariousness' (Kınıkoğlu & Can 2021, p. 820), and uncertainties are 'intertwined with social stratifications based on discipline, age, race, and gender' (p. 819). The often low-level and casualised staff who do most of the teaching of non-traditional students in the neoliberalised university may be the new working 'precariat' of the tertiary sector, at risk of time pressure strain to the point of burnout. Hattam and Weiler (2022) referred to these as 'illegitimate' academics; characterised by feelings of separation and invisibility arising from the type of academic work that they undertake. Job insecurity, teaching heavy workloads, the type of knowledges taught (which currently sit outside of the Australian Qualifications Framework), the high emotional labour required, and deficient framings of enabling students under the neoliberal 'dichotomy of excellence/equity' (Hattam and Weiler 2022, p. 3) likely contribute to staff perceptions of being 'lesser' and further illuminates the precarity inherent in this space.

The notions of neoliberalism and precarity may remain abstract, until the connections between these systems and the impact on the humans in the system are clearly illustrated. Emotional regulation theories such as the self-compassion theory describe individuals as moving between three states, threat, drive and soothe (Gilbert 2010). When sensing a threat, an individual will activate drive systems to alleviate threat. Once the threat has dissipated, the soothe system is required to down regulate the nervous system and return the body to a healthier state of

regulation. The state of threat created by constant competition and job insecurity in neoliberalist academia, and further compounded by years of pandemic-related adversity places demands that leave an individual in constant drive (Hammond 2021). Workplace pressure to be always 'on' (ever faster, flexible and adaptable) and 'available' (adopting on-call service-orientations) increasingly puts academics at risk of burnout. This constant taxing, over sustained periods, can limit an individual's ability to return to a psychologically healthy baseline (Bakker, Demerouti & Verbeke 2004) or to re-establish emotional regulation through engaging the soothing system (Hammond 2021). The extra role performance such as the emotional labour required to 'hold' non-traditional and vulnerable students in transitional spaces, places further demand on enabling academics (Crawford et al. 2018). Additionally, and more concerning, enabling educators, motivated by philosophies of social justice and equity (Jones, Olds & Lisciandro 2019) can encounter fractures in their internal meaning making, a kind of moral injury (Smigelsky et al. 2022) when adequate resources are unavailable to deliver a standard that matches their personal values. When Hochschild (1983) first conceptualised 'emotional labour' she perhaps did not anticipate a time when academics, more than the flight attendants they studied, would be so pressured to manage their own negative emotions in stressful situations while at the same time tending to the emotional needs of large numbers of diverse others online.

Offsetting such risks requires not only appropriate recognition of the workplace demands in enabling fields and a reimagining of workload models, but also opportunities to develop psychological capital within the sector (Olds et al. 2018). Writing about such experiences is useful for the individual as a catalyst for reflection and to achieve greater understanding (Jackson, Firtko & Edenborough 2007). It is imperative, therefore, to explore the common patterns of lived experiences of teaching-intensive enabling education practitioners across multiple institutions in the register of (unequal, classed and gendered) temporality.

Methods

According to Ellis (2004), autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe a personal experience which can then be analysed and understood in a larger cultural context. It is a subjective, yet meaningful, qualitative approach that can capture rich descriptions of culture (Geertz 1973, p. 10), uncover narrative truths and give voice to previously marginalised stories (Ellis & Bochner 2000). The sharing of personal stories during research such as this can also be therapeutic, lending itself to a purging of burdens providing validation for pain experienced, reducing isolation and creating agency (Ellis, Adams & Bocher 2011). Following Adam (1995, p. 106), who has called for a feminist deconstruction of clock-time tyranny drawing on a 'multitude of unconventional social science sources ranging from people's personal accounts to poetry', the 'evidence' this paper presents derives from collaborative autoethnographic reflection. Autoethnography is a form of resistance against more mainstream qualitative research and attempts 'to disrupt the binary of art and science' (Ellis & Bochner 2000, p. 283). This approach is therefore fitting for a group of enabling researchers who are united by a shared social-justice ethos. A community ethnography provides scope to capture the nuanced crisis that the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated in many academics and to share the experience of a distinct collective of enabling educators. The researchers/participants in this study demonstrate that autoethnographical research can be 'rigorous, theoretical, analytical, emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena' (Ellis, Adams & Bocher 2011, p.283). Following Butler (2004, p. xvii), we have also pushed 'the limits of the sayable' in our field of enabling education to reach a deeper understanding of how we experience emotional, psychological and physical aspects of workplace precarity during (and after) the pandemic or the COVID-19 catalyst for increased stress, uncertainty and illness.

The data for this study was collected by eight of the nine researchers completing the role of dual participant and researcher. Each participant wrote a 1000-word guided reflection in response to a set of questions, as follows:

1. What are the perceived challenges, costs and benefits for practitioners in enabling education during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What personal impacts are experienced by staff in this context?
3. How do you manage the impacts of COVID-19 to maintain: a sense of wellbeing; create healthy work-life boundaries; and maintain high standard, quality teaching and support to students?

Reflections were then collected and de-identified, before being collated into a single document. The nature of collaborative autoethnography demands generative and collective discussions to agree upon meaning (Crawford et al. 2018); therefore, the group of researchers met before the thematic analysis to discuss first impressions and commonalities.

The thematic analysis was completed by following the five-phrase approach as outlined by Lisciandro, Jones and Geerlings (2018). In phase one, qualitative responses were classified into categorical data *where appropriate* using NVivo. A word frequency query was run to determine predominate terms, which were then categorised into loose themes. Synonyms for these terms were used to expand the list of terms. The analysis found that the following twenty words were most frequently used: time, teaching, students, support, working, need, home, learning, feel, enabling, online, leave, health, education, program, fear, life, care, teachers, expectations. A number of loose, overarching themes emerged (not in order of prevalence): work-life balance/work environ, the online learning environment, and wellbeing. In phase two, the responses were then re-read for themed terms and coded. During this stage of analysis, the ninth researcher, who had not participated in previous collaborative discussions, was brought on board to analyse the data to reduce bias. In phase three, the coded data was grouped into more refined key themes. The research assistant and researchers mapped and reviewed themes and coding in phase four, and in phase five the themes were named and prevalence defined. Most poignantly, the resulting data emerged as not only as a collection of guided reflections but evocative personal narratives (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011) that could reveal substantial meaningful insight or 'bigger stories' (Ricoeur 1984) if a narrative analysis, in particular looking at structural elements, was also performed. Therefore, the themes and a narrative analysis is unpacked below.

Findings and discussion

The increasing time pressures of the digital neoliberal university took centre stage in the autoethnographic reflections of participant researchers in this study. While enabling educators and their students already experienced growing time pressures in competitive neoliberalised economies, these time-space pressures were accelerated as never before for those practitioners primarily responsible for teaching, transitioning and supporting larger numbers of non-traditional students online during the COVID-19 pandemic. When categorised using NVivo, 'time', used 70 times, was the most frequent term after 'teaching'. Time became a unifying strand that wove throughout the reflections. Starkly evident too were a number of commonalties; all reflections provided commentary on the toxic workplace environment created by neoliberalism and the resulting unreasonable workload models which compressed time and impacted on wellbeing. Rich descriptions were provided of the struggle for a work-life balance and the challenges of working in the online space. It is important to note too that all reflections followed a particular narrative arc that journeyed the participant from a place of conflict and despair to resolution and hope. These themes are discussed in more depth below.

Work environ and balancing life

While the corporatisation of education has influenced university work environments since the 1980s, the reflections in this paper suggest that during the pandemic the neoliberal squeeze became tighter and the margins more inequitable within the wider inequitable time economy (Adam 1995) of academic capitalism. Concerns around inflexible and inequitable online teaching from home, its impact on practitioner job precarity and digital surveillance were threaded throughout participant responses, depicting an emotional environment of anxiety, frustration, guilt, pressure and fear. Much of this anxiety was related to a sense of time pressure, running out of time or not enough time in the working day to satisfy the demands of diverse and often contradictory or competing student and management pressures. As Adam (1995, p. 101) observed, the time economy of the rationalised workplace requires all tasks to be completed in the shortest possible time in order to spend the least amount of money on labour. Enabling education, with its humanistic pedagogies of care and support for diverse, non-traditional students, however, does not sit easily alongside this wider economistic demand for increased, digitised, efficiency and productivity. Moreover, wholistic support for equity groups from increasingly diverse backgrounds does not easily translate into the clock-time tyranny of digital academic capitalism. As Adam (1995) observed, in practice the tyranny of clock-time in the workplace often translates into flexibility *of* workers, not flexibility *for* workers due to perpetual time pressures. As our participants observed below, those who cannot keep up, feel a heightened sense of their own precarity (Butler 2004, 2012) in this inequitable system, especially if they have children or elderly parents at home to care for. In keeping with Butler's (2004, p. 32) insights, we found that human emotional vulnerability is distributed differently and unequally within the neoliberalist workplace during times of crisis.

Hawkins, Manzi and Ojeda (2014) eloquently, albeit alarmingly, expressed that neoliberalised academia encourages productive bodies as opposed to nurturing ones. This was reflected in increased and relentless daily time pressures, a limited and scarce resource, and a juggling act for many of the participants who are attending to work and family commitments. So, for many of the practitioners, it was a struggle to coordinate work and attend to family obligations successfully without guilt, because of the tendency 'to be on the hook for fixing problems from when I woke until when I went to bed' (Participant 4). Additionally, 'while there are some time-saving advantages to working from home, the blending of work and personal spaces also makes it easier for work to encroach on personal time and in some cases harder to maintain an appropriate work-life balance' (Participant 3). Participant 3's comment is represented in what Sugarman and Thrift suggest is a 'malaise of acceleration' when networked users – in this case academics – are 'trapped' in a technology-induced conception of time (2017, p. 821). The acceleration for academics occurred due to the need to take all learning and teaching (as well as all meetings and consultations) online quickly, while being confined to the home. Whilst this 'brought a long overdue corporate mainstream acceptance of the benefits of working from home' (Participant 1), it also brought with it an additional pressure of always being available. In this work environment time became limitless, as the expected work hours shifted from bounded, to flexible and interminable, a paradox succinctly stated by Participant 1: 'whilst we enjoyed the flexibility that Covid-19 forced upon us because not having to drive to work, the work-related flexibility ramped up not being able to draw the line between a work-life balance'. Adam (1995, p. 52) also observed that the punishing 'machine time' of (academic) capitalist production is absolutely 'at odds with the rhythms of the body and the "natural" environment' and that this socio-political construction of time also exacerbates gender inequalities.

All the practitioners in this study were female, working either full-time or part-time, performing multiple care giving roles and were required to work long hours, including weekends and weeknights to complete mounting tasks and attend to unrealistic neoliberal deadlines. Borelli et al. (2017) posit that mothers with feelings of work-family guilt often experience conflict between the tasks in the public and private spheres, and this can compound the mental load of everyday life, which is exemplified in Participant 1's reflection that 'the expectations of enabling educators to do more with less also continue to grow and it is mostly female teaching staff who are stuck in the middle and feel the squeeze most acutely'. The work-life pendulum was not well-balanced during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the weight heavily falling on prioritising work commitments over family caregiving. This, Participant 7 found, led to 'more meetings, there were so many more working groups formed, taking more out of us. It meant that any work I did not complete during the day, meant working after dinner'. The split of time and lack of balance resulted in academics becoming fragmented and abbreviated versions of themselves which had a significant impact on wellbeing. As Sugarman and Thrift write 'we also are becoming fragmented, as constitutive features of our personhood – our selfhood, identities, relationships, and the cultures within which we are constituted – become abbreviated, discontinuous, and less coherent under the constraints of time' (2017, p. 818), thus creating 'a huge emotional toll' that made Participant 3 feel 'deeply uncomfortable for being so completely misaligned with my personal values'.

The pandemic added further job precarity in the already uncertain sphere of higher education, and exacerbated feelings of pressure, hopelessness and fear, which as Manathunga and Bottrell suggests lead to 'work-related stress and burnout' (2019, p. 8). Pressure felt by academics of being perpetually 'on' was compounded by the hyper-competitive, resource-scarce and precarious state of academia where colleagues were losing their jobs. Participant 3 expressed that 'there were many redundancies and casual staff were made scarce. Remaining academics were overloaded and yet almost made to feel lucky to still have a job'. A national study undertaken by the Australian Council of Learned Academies, found that non-permanent academic staff highlight 'uncertain job prospect' as the most challenging part of their work (Yoo 2019, p. 92). The personal experience of job precarity was stated by Participant 5 whose 'application for an ongoing continuous position was not approved. The Covid card was played'. Compassion for colleagues furthered the sense of 'grief and loss' (Participant 8) and as expressed by Participant 6: 'My heart goes out to my fellow sessionals and I KNOW that in enabling programs there are a lot of casual staff. At my previous university the enabling program probably had the highest number/ratio of casual staff.'

As the pandemic closed in around higher education, the 'Covid card' was played in such a way that the benefits of working from home – more time with family, away from toxic workplaces, and less driving – were lost. Not only were these enabling academics working longer hours, while the safety of their home space was being eroded, they additionally felt that this work remained hidden from management and fuelled doubts that leadership had that staff were fulfilling their work obligations. The inequality between academic workers who are secure and those who are comparatively precarious (Butler 2004, 2012) was also enacted through strategies of digital and on campus surveillance, regulation, reward and punishment as evident in incidents described by the participants. The 'working from home' model created a need in participants to be visible, as there was a sense that their 'presence' was being surveyed: 'the worst impact is the lack of trust that is communicated by upper management, doubt about academics working to full capacity at home, and surveillance of our foot traffic on campus' (Participant 8). Foucault (1977) writes that the impact of surveillance is 'to induce in the [employee] a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. It is argued that, while

neoliberalism enacted surveillance through such artifacts as research outputs and metrics, the pandemic introduced a new panoptic layer of self-surveillance and control over the work environment. While neoliberal pressures of competition, workload models, budget constraints and job precarity created pressurised workplaces pre-pandemic (Larsen & Emmett 2023; Kınıkoğlu & Can 2021), the added pressures brought about by further precarity, working from home and surveillance during the pandemic dropped the final veil. All that remained, or so it seemed to the most precarious of workers, was a panoptic hamster wheel of burnt-out enabling academics spinning their wheels to keep their students, their jobs and the university afloat.

Online learning environment

The issue of the online working environment, and the challenge of having to adjust to it relatively quickly once the pandemic hit, also became apparent throughout the autoethnographic reflections. Many reflections lamented the challenge of inadequate time and training when transferring learning online. Participants were given very little notice when asked to adapt their face-to-face classes and activities to online ones, once again something not adequately captured in the mechanised paradigm (Kenny & Fluck 2017) of WAMs, despite research indicating this task is labour intensive and significant training is required to do this effectively (Gloria & Uttal 2020). Participant 3 commented on the challenge of, first of all familiarising herself in a short time frame with the unfamiliar technology of Zoom/Collaborate, and then of being 'perplexed by the sea of silent students who never once turned on their mic or camera'. Additionally, participants mentioned the challenge of engaging and developing a rapport with students in an online context, given that the students are neither physically present with the tutor or each other.

There was a lack of time and knowledge to create 'connected learning' spaces (Jones & Olds 2019, p. 114). The pandemic disallowed time for academics to learn the brave world of online learning, as its own unique teaching and learning space, which requires a specific knowledge of not only enabling but digital pedagogy. As Jones and Olds (2019) suggest, 'the isolation felt by many online students requires more supplementary activities to reduce isolation, create connection and communicate and scaffold outcomes' (p. 115), all which take time and knowledge to create. For those who had not taught in this space before, the move to teaching online revealed the difficulty in creating dynamic spaces where students felt safe to engage and participate. Participant 2 highlighted that many students in online classes chose 'to stay silent and just lurk'; and when listening to a recorded group session she was 'shocked to discover in the play-back that the students were mostly ignoring each other, something I have never seen happen in an actual embodied face to face group on campus where students tend to intuitively build real and supportive relationships among themselves'. These encounters proved demoralising for practitioners, with histories of strong engagement in face-to-face classrooms, adding further to feelings of disempowerment.

Wellbeing

The precarious work environment and lack of life balance created by neoliberalism and further compounded by the pandemic, placed participants in a constant state of threat and drive (Hammond 2021) where 'No one is safe' and this 'became the theme of both work and COVID'. (Participant 1). The surveillance, job insecurity, isolation, time pressures and lack of trust that characterised the work environment during the pandemic heightened this vulnerability and disempowerment, at a cost to staff wellbeing as 'we were scared, down to our very core, of losing hours, losing income or losing our jobs altogether' (Participant 6). This working environment impacted the wellbeing of these enabling educators, which was already at risk in pre-pandemic times (Crawford et al. 2018; Olds et al. 2018).

Practitioners were vulnerable to poor mental, emotional and physical health, as manifested through workplace anxiety, stress and insecurity. Most alarming was the extensive use of words such as exhausted or fatigued. 'Guilt', 'frustrations', 'fear', 'anxiety/anxious', 'worried', 'overwhelm', 'anger', 'uncertainty', 'exhausting' and 'tired, featured extensively and repetitively throughout the reflections. indicating participants were in a state of threat and fatigue (Hammond 2021). One participant stated 'it was all so very physically and emotionally taxing' (Participant 7) and another stated 'my physical and mental health have declined' (Participant 8). According to Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter's (2001) theory of burnout, exhaustion is a key catalyst and component. Participants commented that the emotional labour required in caring for and supporting vulnerable students impacted their wellbeing, for example Participant 7 shared that 'My own mental health and wellbeing was compromised from hearing their stories and attempts at suicide'. Descriptions of physical impacts included feeling worn out, gaining weight, experiencing 'early menopause' and other physical symptoms such as 'heart-racing', 'a physical churning', being 'tensed up' and 'not able to switch off from work'.

The reflections provide numerous examples of this emotional labour and compromised wellbeing being absorbed and silenced by practitioners for fear of being seen as negative or incompetent, and/or being punished. One participant commented that the endless digital work caused 'headaches and other health problems' that no one was prepared to raise with the university because they knew that job losses were coming. Participant 1 also reflected on the experience of masking negative emotions for fear of retribution:

> Every woman I know well in my workplace has had some experience of feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, angry or resentful but we counsel ourselves and each other to hide it and try to keep smiling. People who are perceived as negative are not wanted in workplaces … if they express their own feelings, feelings of frustration, fear or anger for example, they will certainly pay for it one way or another.

A number of practitioners also mentioned feelings of 'shame' and 'guilt' being leveraged to ensure that demands of work and the job of 'caring' for students continued to take priority over their own wellbeing and the gendered experience of vulnerability and precariousness in this context: 'I felt I had little choice but to prioritise work over family and self-care to meet unrealistic deadlines, rather than to risk being seen as incompetent or unreliable as a woman and a mother in the workplace' (Participant 3). Participant 1 lamented that 'No one wants to hear about the price we pay along the way for putting ourselves and our own needs last'. Grief too was noted, as 'Leadership never acknowledged the grief and loss, and survivors' guilt that was felt by staff' (Participant 8), when colleagues were made redundant.

Alongside compromised wellbeing, the reflections included evidence of coping strategies and soothing systems being engaged. This included instilling 'strong boundaries', leaning on colleagues for support, engaging in physical activity, eating well, spending time in nature and with family and friends, and returning to a belief system that provides existential meaning (Jackson, Firkto & Edinborough 2007). Many noted that writing through the struggle became therapeutic as they were able to capture the nuance of the experience and the externalisation of the pain provided room for reflection. Participant 5 commented that: 'Reflection has enabled me to see the situation from a macro perspective and remind myself of my values.' Through reading the reflections and in discussions as a group, individuals were able to find company in the shared experience and this in turn reduced isolation. Participant 1 noted:

> I have found a great deal of solace and solidarity from joining this group of enabling educator researchers who have a special interest in mental health and have made me feel that I am not alone. This group is one of the most positive things to come out of the COVID19 experience for me and suggests the way forward.

This naming and witnessing are powerful (Ellis, Adams & Bocher 2011). Jackson, Firtko and Edenborough (2007) note that personal resilience is grown through the building of positive and nurturing professional relationships. We found this writing and sharing of our stories and feelings of vulnerability and precarity (emotions heighted during pandemic crisis) also enabled us, as enabling educators, to build a sense of solidarity and security within the group space. If, as Adam (1995) has observed, encounters with illness and death may ironically enable those affected to critically reflect on the value of time, then the pandemic experience might be productive as well as oppressive if it brings forth more conscious reflection on the way precarious practitioners experience clock-time in the neoliberal university.

A narrative arc in personal stories of time and precarity

Narratives can be analysed for common structural elements, and it is the adherence to predictable structures that help locate our truths in 'bigger stories' (Ricoeur 1984). The structural elements present in the personal narratives/reflections in this research followed an affective trajectory, or narrative arc, including staging, progression and cognitive tension (Boyd, Blackburn & Pennebaker 2020). The responses typically began with a setting of scene (staging) '2021 seems a little like ground hog day, but the one where things haven't become so bad that Bill Murray starts trying to end his life' (Participant 2). The reflections then offered multiple descriptions of a rampant neoliberal workplace that limited ways of being (progression) and created or compounded vulnerability and precarity in enabling educators existing on the fringes of the academy during a time of mass layoffs and casualisation (Kınıkoğlu & Can 2021). Participant 5 stated 'I witnessed my co-workers hastily raking through their days in fright.' The cognitive tension was evident in the middle of the reflections where descriptions of individuals adjusting to the new norms created by the pandemic were apparent: 'And there it is, the uncertainty and demand and failure to meet all the changing boundaries and expectations that others set for us' (Participant 2). Then, however the narratives reveal each individual, once having named not just the problem but the emotions created, coming to terms with the cognitive tension. Armed with some understanding of the situation, the researchers then told of being able to turn to exploring ways of remedying the tension. All narratives offered coping and soothing strategies for responding in crisis. Strategies are vital for the borderland, 'illegitimate academics' (Hattam & Weiler 2022) for they offer some control where agency has been previously limited (Olds et al. 2018). Without agency, burnout can occur (Tinni, Pietarinen & Pyhältö 2016). Present too, as the narratives concluded, was a begrudging acceptance that while there is much that these fringe dwelling practitioners (Bennett et al., 2016) could do in these spaces, there is a finite amount that individuals can do, within current limiting university structures, before their wellbeing is affected. Vitally this community of supportive, reflective practitioners provided a place of safety whilst moving through the turmoil and towards acceptance. It is communities of this nature that need to be celebrated and nurtured in the enabling spaces.

The autoethnographical reflections revealed personal meanings of time, or temporality, which reach beyond the even ticking of clock-time, to expose the uneven, gendered experiences of time-space compression made by power disparities within academic capitalism. The richer, deeper, qualitative data of autoethnographic reflection also revealed some inconvenient truths about what happens to the self and self-care in digital spaces where there are seemingly no limits

to information labour and no sense of 'clocking off'. Similarly, these personal stories chart the emotional landscape around a shortage of time to perform as expected in care giving roles at home and work, sometimes resulting in feelings of shame, guilt, fatigue and emotional exhaustion.

Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge that these very personal stories and practitioner insights from qualitative study of a small sample of autoethnographic reflections are limited in scope and are not necessarily true for all enabling educators elsewhere in Australian universities. The autoethnographic nature of this study, however, served to illuminate a number of common challenges facing enabling educators during pandemic times and united a group of practitioners across six Australian institutions, reducing alienation and boosting psychological capital (Olds et al. 2018).

The study also revealed a hidden paradox of the democratised, digital university. While equity and access are core values of the (post)modern university, the academic and emotional labourers who make these values a lived reality in their everyday practice of enabling education are themselves frequently left feeling undervalued, exhausted or 'out of time.' These stories also expose contradictions within the 'caring' cultures of the enabling education sector, which too often overlooks the wellbeing and human fragility of its most vulnerable academic 'care' workers, and the human limits to their (emotional and academic) labour. While an 'ethic of care' is indeed key to supporting successful transitions in enabling pedagogies (Motta & Bennett 2018), it is equally important that this emotional labour does not cost the wellbeing of the care providers who occupy a precarious space within the academic workforce. The hothouse atmosphere of the pandemic years serves, at least, as an illuminating prism through which to view other risks and tensions of the neoliberalised university and perhaps even a trigger for disruption of dominant time-tyranny and the perpetual growth and speed demanded by economistic interpretations of value in Australian universities.

While the time of strict snap lockdowns may be over, the pandemic era and its challenges remain. Moreover, these candid learnings about labour from hard working enabling practitioners on the ground are particularly illuminating about the operation of power in the neoliberal university and the future for its most precarious workers in a time of mass casualisation and mass layoffs. These personal stories also reveal optimism, hope and ongoing commitment to making a difference in the lives of their non-traditional students from underrepresented backgrounds. As with other times of transition and change, there is perhaps some grieving for what is lost (a call to 'stop the clocks') as well as some hope for the future as we move forward through renewed solidarity and collaboration.

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