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Transitioning students into Higher Education

Philosophies, Pedagogies and Practice

'We need to help students discover themselves and see into the life of things': Advice from Open Foundations Lecturers

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"We need to help students discover themselves and see into the life of things" Advice from Open Foundation lecturers Dr Rosalie J. Bunn The University of Newcastle's (UON) Open Foundation Program (OFP) is the largest and oldest continuously operating tertiary preparation program in Australia. Successful completion of the program allows mature students from the age of 20 years access to undergraduate university studies without the need for any prior educational qualifications. Established in 1974 as a pilot program, OFP continues to thrive and transform the lives of many people in the Hunter and Central Coast regions and more broadly through its Distance offerings. As part of ethics-approved doctoral research into the history and impacts of OFP (Bunn, 2018) 21 experienced lecturers, 12 women and 9 men who taught in arts, social science, science, and mathematics disciplines, were asked about their reflections of teaching into the program in order to explore those impacts on students, UON and the wider community over more than 40 years. Lecturers were questioned about their philosophy of teaching and what teaching strategies they had found useful during their careers to meet the challenges of the space. These questions were posed in order to ascertain what beliefs and values may have influenced the delivery of OFP, how lecturers went about their work and whether there were any particular andragogical strategies they found useful to engage mature age students. The questions invited them to cast back over their long careers to highlight what sometimes may have been unconscious or not well-developed rationales for how they performed their well respected by both students and colleagues within the university, recognised that the art of andragogy involved a clear understanding of the reciprocal nature of teaching and learning which placed the mature student's needs as well as the lecturer's professional and well-practiced teaching skills at the centre of their endeavours. Positioning these responses within Mezirow's (1978) Transformative Learning theory, which focuses on the importance of perspective change and confidence building through critical self-reflection during the learning process, this chapter shares lecturers insights into what it means to 'be' an enabling educator as well as how to 'do' enabling education. It highlights the importance of authenticity when teaching in tertiary preparation spaces, the relevance of cultivating a culture of care for these often vulnerable students as well as the need for adaptability and flexibility to respond to a diverse range of learners where "one size does not fit all".

The art of 'being' an enabling educator

Recent research exploring the role of academic staff in enabling programs concluded that a reconceptualization of a solely academic role to one that incorporates and acknowledges the practice of care and support of students is required to meet the holistic needs of students. The researchers argued that an understanding of the diversity and complexity of teaching this particular cohort of students was based on philosophies and ethics of academic staff who acknowledged

student health and wellbeing as a teaching and learning issue (Crawford & Johns, 2018, p. 17). Attempting to ascertain more specific components of enabling teaching philosophy was, however, not as simple to compile as not all the lecturers in my research had thought about or articulated what that philosophy might be. One lecturer who later moved into undergraduate teaching commented: "my own philosophy of teaching, it's one of these questions that we ask our first year students to enunciate and we get very cross when they can't, but it's always a difficult thing to enunciate ourselves". When applying a thematic analysis to their oral history responses it became clear that lecturers' philosophies were informed by intrinsic factors about what they believed one should 'be' as an enabling educator of mature age students as well as how that was enacted. Desirable personal characteristics were often inextricably entwined with what they believed one must 'do' as an effective educator, covered in the second section of this chapter. Contrary to the idea that teaching is a performance, these lecturers considered being genuine or 'true to yourself', an important attribute to engagemature students. Part of displaying an authentic self was a capacity to be 'open-minded', a quality that has been equated with intellectual virtue, which in turn is linked to wellbeing (Mavropoulou, 2017). One study on authenticity in teaching (Ramezanzadeh, Adel, & Zareian, 2016) found it included a sense of responsibility, authentic relations, and a capacity for deconstructive thinking.

The authors based their theoretical understanding of the concept on Heidegger's (1962) notion that education in its proper sense was the formation of authenticity which led to empowerment of students. Lecturers provided further examples of authenticity as being 'a grass roots teacher', explaining things as simply and clearly as possible, and being 'able to stand up and deliver' discipline content confidently while ensuring students understood its relevance to their future academic pursuits. Role-modelling good learning behaviours was seen as a way of connecting the authentic educator with creating an authentic learning environment. Rather than simply providing relevant content and ensuring effective delivery, lecturers saw a: need to search for ways to ensure students understood what they were learning. You must be modelling the behaviours that you want to see. That is, respect for yourself, respect for others, openness to learning, openness to the opinions of others, problem solving, interest in problem solving, reading things. Another lecturer advised "Always try to be positive. Negativity does not work!" By exhibiting pro-social behaviour this educator was setting a standard for students to follow.

Demonstrating that lecturers genuinely cared about students, another variant of authenticity, was also seen as an important trait of an enabling educator. Cavanagh, Macfarlane, Glynn, and Macfarlane (2012) identify a culture of care as building relationships, exercising holistic caring, building capacity, and trust. Increasingly, lecturers were aware of the importance of student mental health and wellbeing to student success. Collaborative research on how best to implement initiatives that promote student mental health and wellbeing within the field is gaining increasing attention in Australian universities (Crawford et al., 2016).

Enhancing tolerance and understanding of society more broadly was mentioned as part of creating a healthy teaching environment. This position is supported by Noddings' (1984) work on caring,

which argues for a feminine approach to ethics and moral education. Comments such as "look after your students and show an interest in them" and "demonstrate commitment to students and to the course" indicated that lecturers understood the significance of pastoral care when connecting with students. An enabling counsellor with many years' experience observed that lecturers she had worked with provided a of attitudinal response to their learning, and assuming they have the capability. It's just about tailoring it, yeah, and there's things they need to learn and that they are capable of that learning. And just that really safe learning environment, safe and supportive. And I think that's what they love and that's what I think has made it such a positive program is the safety and the security. And yet, they're challenged, you know, and they're educated, and they're informed of what will be required of them. But it's done in such a paced way and a gentle way that it's not too threatening or overwhelming or scary, you know. It's that lovely, just pacing it well and getting them up to the mark so they are ready for undergraduate [studies]. As observed, this caring attitude also translated into lecturers' approach to marking student work, an area in which students were particularly vulnerable to criticism.

The art of being a good enabling educator was to manage this aspect of the lecturer-student relationship with sensitivity. One lecturer commented that education can also be therapeutic due to the personal growth and development potential that results from students' learning experience. Having empathy with student ambitions and sensitivity for the emotional commitment they were making when returning to mature age study were deemed essential to building positive classroom relationships. In turn, good relationships were deemed important to a productive learning space. This involved creating a learning environment that "makes for relaxed and happy students", and breaking down barriers that positioned the lecturer as authority by providing spaces for student voices and listening to and respecting student views. However, one lecturer advised: "You need to tailor the experience so that they are comfortable coming, they are not immediately threatened, but not so comfortable that they settle into a comfort zone and don't go beyond it". With this in mind, lecturers recognised the importance of creating a non-threatening environment in which fun and humour could contribute to teaching effectiveness.

This view is supported by Kher, Molstad, and Donaghue (1999) who argue that humour fosters openness and respect in the classroom and can be especially useful when teaching more difficult or 'dreaded' subjects. However, the fun was to be tempered by the need for hard work, and students were to expect the humorous and joyful times along with the challenges. These lecturers regarded the capacity to be flexible in one's approach to students and also within the learning environment. First, it was recognised that students' lives were incredibly complex and competing familial and work responsibilities could hamper their educational commitments. A flexible attitude to matters such as assignment deadlines which took this into account was considered necessary. Yoo, Schallert, and Svinicki (2015) argue that when effective teachers are also flexible, student learning improves. Second, lecturers expressed the need to be flexible in teaching delivery to ensure that as many learner types could benefit from a variety of delivery modes. Like Bigum and Rowan (2004) who argued that the concept of flexible learning, while well intentioned, must also be subject to

critique, one lecturer commented: "the old fashioned chalk and talk still works". Another lecturer remarked on the need to reconcile traditional and progressive education methods to ensure that outcomes for students were tailored to a range of andragogical strategies. Many lecturers held the view that students were on a journey where what they learned along the way was often more important than what students sometimes regarded as the ultimate goal of passing the course or transitioning into undergraduate programs. Lecturers were conscious that self-development was occurring alongside the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Sometimes this resulted in students deconstructing their former identity and changing their habitus (Bunn, 2017).

Interestingly, having a sensitivity to these changes in students' lives also impacted favourably on the lecturer: First of all, respect the student. Respect the student, because they come with a bank of knowledge and information, skills and background. You have to be able to take them from where they're at to a new level of learning. That's my core belief. And once you do that your teaching changes and you evolve into a person who is able to connect with the student and then direct their learning. So that's my philosophy. These lecturers promoted the value of education by showing commitment to lifelong learning. They recognised that people from any educational background or of any age could benefit from the enabling experience. In order to make their learning journey easier the lecturers aimed to demystify difficult or previously inaccessible paths to knowledge. They also believed that setting high standards and goals for their students must be accompanied by showing them how to achieve them. Lecturers also recognised the part they played in assisting students on their personal journey was helping students "discover themselves and see into the life of things".

The effects of this transformation are explained by Mezirow (1978, p. 101) as "significant phases of reassessment and growth in which familiar assumptions are challenged and new directions and commitments are charted". OFP lecturers recognised the point at which enabling students differ from other HE students is that they are "beginning again" (Mezirow, 1978, p. 102). It is a process in which learners come to see themselves differently and develop a critical consciousness which Mezirow sees as a prerequisite for "structural reorganization of their lives" (Mezirow, 1978, p. 108), self-confidence is built by increased competency as they are introduced to new skills and a supportive social environment, which is generated in large part by the lecturer and their broader educational experience. Dirkx (2012, p. 400) argues that "complex processes of elaborating and remaking ways of understanding the self", require a shift that is fostered through academic study that challenges students and can be a very emotional experience. One lecturer commented "it's not what they get out of it but what they learn along the way" that was important. Prominent in some philosophies was promoting ideas about social justice and equality, and enhancing tolerance and understanding of society. In fact, OFP itself was regarded as a socially responsible activity that addressed inequality and disadvantage: I have a special place in my esteem for teaching in Open Foundation, because there was a sense that you were doing something that was socially useful, and something that put you in touch with adult people, and doing a bit more than just recovering untapped resources. Comments such as "convince students it doesn't matter what their background

is, they can still learn" and "give everyone an equal voice" demonstrated a commitment to principles of social justice and equity. While it was acknowledged that education can be a liberating experience for students, this was seen as dependent upon creating just the right environment in which students could flourish: My philosophy of teaching is that education, essentially, should be liberating. The best way to make education liberating is to make it non-threatening but challenging; fun but preparatory of hard work; open, so inclusive but funnily that is gradually excluding certain characteristics, that is, capacity not to organize yourself, not to work hard, those sorts of things. So you open it up to everybody early on. These seemingly contradictory aims, expressed by Dewey (1916) as "the problem of dualisms", were often expressed as part of the balancing act of the enabling educator who needed to be alert to the dangers of taking certain approaches. Cautions such as: finding the right balance which ensured facilitating learning rather than taking a 'jug and mug' approach in which the educator pours all their knowledge into an empty vessel; teaching students how to learn as opposed to just teaching them content; working from the known to the unknown; introducing new material and vocabulary gradually; were offered as tips to teaching effectiveness.

Effective andragogies for teaching in the enabling space

'Doing' enabling education was shown to be multifaceted and the interviews elicited a great amount of advice about how to put enabling education into practice. Lecturers' responses offered advice on how to approach students (see Table 14.1) and on classroom practice (see Table 14.2). One lecturer who was herself an OFP student and had therefore experienced this teaching environment from both teacher and student perspectives commented on her teaching philosophy: It's more of a constructionist sort of one I guess if I'm thinking back to terminology. One where, if at all possible, try and work out the best way a student's going to learn and to work with them. So it's the idea that your learning shouldn't be top down but at University it often is, in a sense, top down. But more, very student centred … so that you can work with the student and the groups of students and start where they are starting from, and try and work with them. Helping students see the value of what they are studying was deemed essential to student engagement. In fact, it was thought that the approach taken by OFP enabling educators was beginning to influence the broader teaching and learning culture at UON. One former program convenor stated: There is a slowly growing recognition, I think, that Open Foundation staff … know a lot about teaching and learning for non-traditional, particularly low SES students and that the University needs to get a whole lot better at that at the Undergraduate level. I think there's a slowly increasing awareness of that and I think we have had some impact and I think that is going to increase, slowly. In order to be an effective teacher lecturers were keen to constantly reflect on their practice in order to provide the most appropriate learning experience for their diverse range of students. This was expressed as "keep asking yourself 'How else can I teach it?' for those who don't get it" and "Remind yourself Uni is a strange lifestyle and environment for our students". Being able to place oneself in the role of the other, a sociological concept coined by Mead (1934) in order to think through how students

might be approaching tasks, and thoughtful consideration and questioning of what does and does not work within classrooms were regarded as essential to quality teaching.

TABLE 14.1 Tips on approach to students

Help students discover themselves and see into the 'life of things'	Respect, reassure and encourage students	Take students as they are	Make relaxed and happy students
Help students see study takes time and effort	Provide opportunities for growth and development	Teach students how to learn	Train students in educational capital
Connect with students	Work with students	Help students see the value in want we do	Show students what is possible
Place students in a quasi-teaching situation where they teach others	Guide and mentor students rather than instruct or control them	Never override student contribution	Entertain students, but not with jokes
Try not to offend students (but you can send politicians up)	Help students get past that inner voice that tells them they can't do it	Look after your students and show an interest in them	Teach students a love of learning as well as skills
Make students comfortable but not too much!	Provide space for student voices, and listening to them	Teach students to think about their thinking	Recognise that one size does not fit all!

TABLE 14.2 Tips for classroom practice

Classes to be fun but preparation for hard work	Teach problem solving and to be reflective	Provide strategies, like colour coding or baking analogies	Take time to teach basic skills
Use humour as a learning device	Teach skills that are transferrable	Mix up your teaching delivery	Encourage discussions, student views are important
Have clear and specific goals and aims	Open knowledge up but funnel down as well	Provide non-threatening but challenging tasks	Teach values and critique of them
Avoid academic language	The old-fashioned chalk and talk still works	Teachers as tool and facilitators of learning	Work from the known to the unknown
Introduce new ideas and more sophisticated vocabulary gradually	Create independent learners	Use contemporary models to engage eg. Song lyrics rather than poetry	Scaffold knowledge and tasks
Introduce a variety of ways of understanding material and check they do understand it	Reconcile traditional and progressive education	Provide practical examples and translatethem to theory	Have a thorough knowledge of your discipline
Show passion and enthusiasm for your topic	Facilitate learning with different experiences & opportunities	Teach from the bottom up	Make things simpler

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Other personal qualities that affected lecturers' approach to their work and which constituted an enabling ethos included commitment to students as well as loyalty to the program. The Director of enabling programs at UON at the time of interview commented: So it's the commitment of people. I very rarely have had a staff member from our Enabling Programs coming to me and saying "I want this for myself." It tends to be "Can we get this for the students?" And I think talking to people who come from other areas of the University, I think they are surprised at the amazing commitment. Yes, we are all being paid to do it, but the extra work that is put in is because they believe in it … People will go the extra mile for the student. The staff themselves recognised this commitment in their own approach, but also in their observations of their colleagues' teaching which was seen as "value-adding" to their paid duties: We tend to put an awful lot into our teaching, and do a lot of pastoral care, and a lot of extra work, give students a lot of feedback. So I think the "value adding" that we do is very important, and it's not just academic … it's the whole person. An enabling ethos that included taking students "as they are"; starting their learning journey "where the student is starting from" and assisting to build their self-confidence were frequently mentioned in lecturers' philosophies. Creating impacted their wider relationships (Bunn, 2013).

Student surveys included in the wider research project revealed that a greater number of students cited issues relating to self-identity than any other response as their reason for enrolling in OFP (Bunn, 2014). In addition to gaining educational skills, these students often sought to test or prove their intellectual capability and to elevate the esteem in which they were held by others. The delicate balance of juggling these sensitivities formed part of these lecturers teaching philosophies. The complexity of creating a productive learning space for enabling students was therefore dependant on the lecturer demonstrating passion and enthusiasm for, as well as competence in, delivering course content; in conjunction with a focus on the students' learning needs. This was expressed as: Helping them to learn to become independent learners and people who enjoy the learning process and have the skills they need in order to learn further, so meta skills in fact, so that they can in fact become not just independent learners but lifelong learners, so that whatever situation they're in they can approach it with a whole suite of problem solving skills and internal review and monitoring skills that allow them to learn from that experience … You have to challenge them. And doing that to this massively diverse group of students at the same time, is to me the central pedagogical challenge of Open Foundation teaching. And it's one that I think we're pretty good at.

Conclusion

These UON enabling educators were already "pay[ing] attention" to the transformation taking place in their students' lives, long before Dirkx (2012, p. 404) advised to do so. Their collective wisdom has shown that lecturers' attitudes and values coalesce with their classroom approaches such that their choice of curriculum and relationship with students is tailored to ensure productive andragogy takes place. Personal qualities of lecturers directed toward facilitating student empowerment and growth, implementing critical pedagogy in the form of a social justice agenda,

establishing positive classroom relationships and learning communities, enhancing logical and conceptual growth of students all formed part of the philosophies and strategies of these enabling educators despite the fact that some had never, prior to interview, explicitly considered or reflected on their philosophy of teaching. These lecturers recognised the many checks and balances required for effective teaching and were aware of the problem of dualisms discussed by Dewey (1916). Their guiding principles were authenticity, care, respect and reassurance.

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