



RESEARCH PAPER

‘I can be powerful as an individual agent’: Experiences of recently homeless women in an enabling program, transformative pedagogies and spaces of empowerment in higher education

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This paper reports on an action research project investigating how enabling education has the potential to empower women who have recently been homeless. The authors, both enabling practitioners and sociologists, taught a seven week intensive global sociology course to 12 women who were engaged with a women’s homeless shelter, four of whom were interviewed about their course experience. The conceptual tools we utilised to analyse the responses given by the women about their experiences are Ira Shor’s (1992) critical teaching framework, feminist pedagogies and specific elements of feminist poststructuralist theory, in discourse theory and subjectivity. The discussion details the application of pedagogical approaches that emphasise agency of the students. The study shows that providing opportunities for vulnerable and marginalised students to apply a ‘sociological imagination’ (Mills, 1959) to the study of global society can have a ‘liberating’ effect (Shor, 1992). Focusing on implementing feminist pedagogies offers female students an inclusive space to explore questions of power, identity and difference that transcends borders. Significantly, applying a critical pedagogical (Shor, 1992) approach contributed to students choosing to engage in further higher education and shift their perception of their own ‘capabilities’ (Burke, Bennett, Burgess, Gray, & Southgate, 2016). Emphasising the affirmative aspects of critical pedagogy, the paper adopts a critical lens by highlighting the discomfort produced by the ‘democratic-dialogic’ approach for some of the women in the course.

Keywords: enabling education; critical teaching framework; women’s homelessness; feminist pedagogies; pedagogies of care

Introduction

Higher education is considered a central driver contributing to women’s independence for increased opportunities and economic security (O’Connor, Carvalho, Vabø, & Cardoso, 2015). While the structural and cultural barriers to (white, middle class) women’s access to tertiary education have largely been addressed in Australia, hegemonic neo-liberal academic

masculinities (Burke, 2013) are ever present in our contemporary institutions.¹ The growth of enabling education programs as they are known in Australia, that enable access to university (Bennett et al., 2016; Stokes, 2014), and efforts to widen participation in higher education (HE) more generally, has contributed to an increase in the number of women from lower socio-economic groups attending university. However, this has coincided with rising levels of anxiety “about lower standards [that] are often attached to female bodies who have become the majority in many HE undergraduate degrees” (Burke, 2017, p. 433). For women who have been recently homeless, the obstacles are not only gendered but also derived from their material position.

As enabling practitioners and sociologists, our research makes a contribution to the field of women’s access to HE by focusing specifically on the intersections of class and gender in an enabling program course at the University of South Australia (UniSA). The authors delivered a seven week intensive global sociology course to 12 women who were recently homeless. With this cohort, we investigated our own teaching through an action research project by considering how enabling education has the potential to empower disenfranchised women. A key part of our inquiry was to investigate whether social science epistemologies offer the participants a sense of agency and hope. This research responds to Burke’s (2013) call for the development of “strategies guided by praxis-oriented understandings of the subtle and insidious operations of gendered, classed and racialized inequalities in higher education” (p. 109). In this paper, we show how adopting critical teaching approaches and feminist pedagogy can foster a sense of empowerment in the women enrolled in our intensive sociology course.

Our study provides a thematic analysis of qualitative data by applying conceptual tools related to ‘critical teaching’ such as participatory and dialogic approaches with a focus on change-agency of the students (Shor, 1992), careful pedagogies (Bennett et al., 2016; Motta & Bennett, 2018) and feminist pedagogies (Burke, Crozier, & Misiaszek, 2017). The critical teaching approaches outlined by Ira Shor (1992) present a useful framework for enabling educators to implement in their teaching as the issue of how power manifests or is shared between students and teacher is central to the approach. Hattam, Shacklock, & Smyth (1997) utilised the framework as part of a Masters of Teaching program, advocating for the ‘dialogic space’ that is created between the teachers and the students providing a strong example of how critical teaching approaches have been implemented in higher education. Most commonly, critical teaching approaches are adopted in primary and secondary education with reference to Paolo Freire’s work (1970; see also Wallowitz, 2015).

While Shor’s (1992) approach draws on the same philosophy as Freire (Shor and Freire published together in 1987), his development of a practical ‘guide’ for applying critical pedagogy to teaching was valuable in the development of our own praxis. We adopt Burke et al.’s (2017) approach to praxis that “teaching is not only a professional practice but ... should be formed in dialogue with critical theories if it is to be fine-tuned to complex and intricate relations of power, difference and inequalities” (p. 41). The unintended outcomes of shifting pedagogic spaces are also discussed in this paper, as some of the participants shared their discomfort with the democratic-dialogic approach adopted by the teachers. Additionally, we adopt tools of poststructuralist theory (Weedon, 1987) to help analyse the subject position of the students as they have experienced obstacles related to gender and class. Significantly, the

¹ The caring professions of education, social work, and nursing have created the strongest pathways for women into university and workforce participation, but gender disparities persist in disciplines such as engineering, information technology and the natural sciences (Franzway, Sharp, Mills, & Gill, 2009).

findings of our action research project demonstrate how applying a critical pedagogical (Shor, 1992) approach contributed to students choosing to engage in further higher education and shift their perception of their own capabilities (Burke et al., 2016). In interviews with four of the women, they shared their hope about their futures and their interest in furthering their education on completion of the course.

Problems with higher education pedagogy

Originally teaching in undergraduate programs and then shifting into enabling education, the authors are familiar with how often HE pedagogy relies on the ‘banking method’ of education (Freire, 1973) with one-way communication from teacher to student in the lecture format. The student-centred model has been promoted across our university and, architecturally, there has been a push for collaborative teaching spaces to encourage the focus away from the teacher as the ‘holder’ of the knowledge (UniSA, 2009). As argued by Burke et al. (2017), problems with HE pedagogy are not just symptomatic of the power dynamic between teacher and students but also the way that universities define who belongs. Traditionally, a ‘proper’ university student (read legitimate) is confident and independent, and someone who has a voice (but knows when to be quiet) (Burke et al., 2017). The subject position of the *legitimate* university student is constructed along class, ethnic and gendered lines, and according to these qualities is more likely to be white, middle class and male (Burke et al., 2017) due to the dualisms that exist between masculinity and femininity constructs and issues related to ‘voice’ (who is allowed to have a voice and how these reflect cultural values). While there has been intense focus on addressing access to higher education in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008; Muldoon, 2011) there are concerns about what experience students have once they get there because “higher education pedagogies might also be complicit in the reproduction of inequalities even after entry to [university] has been achieved” (Burke et al., 2017, p. 2).

The UniSA enabling program offers an alternative pathway into university for students who have either not achieved the entry score needed for a Bachelor program or who, for a plethora of reasons, have not completed Year 12 (Stokes, 2014). The establishment of UniSA College is a direct outcome of our university’s efforts to widen participation to students from under-represented groups. Of the students who enrol in our pathway programs, 64% belong to a defined equity group and many may have experienced gatekeeping mechanisms at high school resulting in them leaving school early (Smyth & Hattam, 2004). Smyth and Hattam’s (2004) study demonstrated through an analysis of the schools’ cultural geography that the gatekeeping behaviours of teachers often led to students not going onto tertiary education. Such gatekeeping included targeting individual students as either suitable or unsuitable for university and subsequently providing selective support for those students who the teachers believed would complete Year 12 with a competitive entry score for university. In HE, equity groups are variously defined as people who are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; people from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds; people with a disability; people from NESB; newly arrived migrants; people from regional and remote areas; and women in non-traditional disciplines. The Bradley Review (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) specifically detailed raising the participation rates of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in tertiary education. Similar to La Trobe and the University of Newcastle, UniSA’s enabling program offers a distinct pathway into Bachelor level programs (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2014; Bennett et al., 2016).

UniSA’s most popular pathway program in terms of volume of students (Foundation Studies) is completely open access and fee-free. UniSA also offers a suite of two-year Diploma programs as well as the Aboriginal Pathway Program that is offered in the metropole and across five different regional sites. The programs offer a range of academic literacy courses as well as

discipline specific courses to prepare students for their destination degree. The numbers have grown from approximately 300 students in 2011 to over 1,000 students annually since 2016. The widening participation agenda has provided space to consider how we can do things differently in HE to contribute to positive education outcomes for under-represented student groups. For our enabling program specifically, this has involved acknowledging that the banking method does not adequately engage students in learning, particularly students who have experienced educational trauma or who come from backgrounds with limited experience with university. Freire (1970) identified the problematic power dynamic that ensues when transmitting information to students as though they are empty receptacles and teachers, the holders of all relevant knowledge. In Freire's (1970) words:

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. (p. 72)

We have also developed the awareness that the construction of a 'good' university student is harmful to the pedagogical relationship between us and our students because it relies on the normative assumptions that the student needs to come equipped with the financial, cultural and psychological tools required for academic 'success'. We know from experience that traditional HE pedagogy does not 'work' in enabling education and agree with others that it needs an overhaul across the tertiary sector at all levels of education (see Bennett et al., 2016; Burke et al., 2017). The assumptions, codes, capitals, discourses, language, spaces and sense of time that underpin and form a traditional university experience can be exclusive to students who do not have a history of tertiary education in their family (Burke & Crozier, 2013; Hattam, Stokes, & Ulpen, 2018). Consequently, "this is not a level playing field; those who are able to decode the practices to achieve 'success' often are those with access to privileged resources, capitals and networks" (Burke, 2017, p. 432). Burke and Crozier (2013) detail the exclusive practices, experiences and culture of universities; walking into a lecture theatre for the first time, the academic language adopted by the teaching staff or discovered in the readings, having sufficient time to focus on study, feeling comfortable in the teaching spaces, as though you belong there. Others have problematised how students-at-risk are managed by university processes and argue that academic culture and discourses need to be demystified for enabling students in order to support their continued engagement with higher education (Hattam et al., 2018). Our paper provides a case study of alternatives to HE pedagogy that contributed to empowering experiences for a group of female students who had experienced homelessness.

Pedagogy in research

The conceptual tools we utilised to analyse the responses given by the women about their experiences in our program are Ira Shor's (1992) critical teaching framework, feminist pedagogies and specific elements of feminist poststructuralist theory, in discourse theory and subjectivity. The three different, but often overlapping and complementary tools, are adopted as each offers a valuable account of how HE praxis can be developed to genuinely engage adult learners who have not previously considered a pathway into university or who may have had obstacles to study or employment.

Starting with Shor's (1992) critical teaching framework, we were drawn to his emphasis on the 'empowering' role that education can play; for him "empowering education is a critical-

democratic pedagogy for self and social change” (p. 15). Shor (1992) lists eleven values that underpin his empowering approach, including: participatory, affective, problem-posing, situated, multicultural, dialogic, desocialising, democratic, researching, interdisciplinary and activist. For the purposes of this paper, we will utilise three of these elements: participatory, dialogic and activist. Firstly, Shor’s framework has a strong focus on the ‘talking’ that occurs in the teaching space as he believes this is political, and that “the rules for talking are a key mechanism for empowering or disempowering students. How much open discussion is there in class? How much one-way ‘teacher-talk’?” (Shor, 1992, p. 11). Hence, to focus on ‘participation’ in the teaching space, as educators we need to ensure there are opportunities for mutual dialogue. This melds into the second aspect which is the ‘dialogic’ element of Shor’s (1992) framework as he emphasises that “an empowering teacher does not talk knowledge *at* students but talks *with* them” (p. 85, emphasis in original).² The third element of Shor’s approach that we operationalise in our teaching is the focus on ‘activist’. When we initially read Shor’s book on empowering education, it was the following passage that provided much of the inspiration for reshaping our praxis:

In terms of activating student thoughts about change, the teacher can raise the profile of change-agency under way now. Efforts to transform knowledge and society exist in every age but the status quo is hostile to ideas, values and movements that challenge existing authority. Official culture has a stake in obscuring the opposition. The critical democratic teacher can work against this by giving a high profile to alternatives and dissent in society. For my courses, I look for stories and materials of citizen activism and dissent, of groups involved in relevant campaigns and constructive projects, to give them some visibility in the lives of my students. (Shor, 1992, p. 191)

This is not to say that we were not already aware of the agentic value of teaching sociology to students who have been disenfranchised, but the emphasis on drawing on real-world cases of ‘dissent’ ignited our interest in utilising instances of people having agency, resisting or asserting power in our teaching. Our awareness of the students’ sense of either political apathy or despair has grown over the last few years. Showing them examples of how and why it is important to be ‘political’ brings discomfort but offers an alternative narrative or framework for their lives. Our approach to teaching an introductory global sociology course is to continually emphasise the continuum of structure versus agency. The students engage with both the constraints that exist as well as being provided examples of people and groups pushing up against the structures to enact social, political or cultural changes. Each week we problem-pose a global phenomenon and apply the sociological imagination (Willis, 2011) to make sense of its origins and its current sources by asking the question: What is it about the way the society is structured that contributes to the phenomenon of, for example, islamophobia, sweatshops in Bangladesh, inhumane refugee policies, resistance to gender diversity, the global division of wealth. In our in-class analysis we explore social movements, non-government organisations and inter-governmental organisations to consider their contributions towards these phenomena.

² Shor (1992) outlines explicit practices of the dialogic teacher that include: doing analysis with the students’ participation; avoiding jargon or obscure allusions that intimidate students into silence; posing thought provoking, open-ended problems to students so that they feel challenged in thinking them through; avoiding short answer questions which make students feel like robots; be patient in listening to students and in giving them time to think on their feet; invite students to speak from experience, integrating that material into social issues and academic themes; and invite students to suggest themes for study and ask them to select reading matter (see pp. 95-96).

The second conceptual tool employed in our analysis is feminist pedagogies, specifically the work of Burke et al. (2017), Bennett et al. (2016) and Motta and Bennett (2018). These authors thoughtfully point to the impact of binary thinking on the construction of gender norms that are ever present in our tertiary institutions and which shape our pedagogical relationships, and support the definition of a 'legitimate' student/academic being white, male and middle class. This can impact on the way that female university students feel and engage with education, as well as how female academics feel and engage with their students. In our teaching, we have an awareness of the performativity of being a university student, and what that looks like in the teaching space – having a voice, being confident and appearing 'intelligent' (Burke et al., 2017) that are linked to forms of hegemonic masculinity. Hence, in our teaching we challenge these norms to create an inclusive environment for our female students so they do not feel pressure to perform in this way.

The work of Motta and Bennett (2018) emphasises the gendered norms around 'caring' that are often linked to dominant constructions of femininity, and historically rejected or denied in HE pedagogy. The turn to 'affect' (Ahmed, 2004) in education has culminated in attention on the feelings of students and educators as central to experiences of education, and to actively show, as an educator, that you 'care' about the student's well-being. While we are aware that it can be problematic for female academics to adopt 'caring' qualities because this can contribute to stereotyping, we, as educators in an enabling program, value this quality due to the need to build trust in our relationships with students which we have found is not achieved without demonstrating 'care'. Experience has shown us that students often bring with them past 'hurts' from teachers who did not show care, and therefore our implementation of 'care-full pedagogies' (Motta & Bennett, 2018) is especially important.

The third part of the conceptual framework of the paper draws from discourse theory and subjectivity. Our explanation of these tools comes from feminist poststructuralist theory that is heavily influenced by Foucault's work on power (see Weedon, 1987). These tools are useful as they provide an additional dimension to our analysis, but also to the development of our praxis, as they offer a space to consider the subject-position of our students. A Foucauldian explanation of society and the individual – and the power relationships that exist amongst us in society – is one that provides a hopeful account of people resisting power as the individual (or subject) engages through 'discourses', and not just through material, institutional or structural elements of power. Foucault's (1972) definition of discourse signifies the relationship between practices, language, knowledge and power; for him, discourses can be thought of as more than merely ways to communicate but "as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (p. 49). Foucault's theory of discourse offers us a way of thinking about the way that the meaning-making system works through language, but also has broader implications for what a society or culture defines as the 'truth' through competing belief systems or knowledges. Hall (1997) suggests that discourse itself constitutes subjects who embody the specific forms of knowledge (such as the 'good' student, 'bad' student and so on).

Foucault suggested that the subject is socially constructed and produced the concept of 'subjectivity'; that is, the "conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world" (Weedon, 1987, p. 32). This paper considers students as 'subjects', who actively negotiate the organisational or institutional discourses presented by the university as well as the discourses shaping their own lives, specific to their identity markers (gender, race/ethnicity, religion, social class, sexuality, disability), histories, contexts, and obstacles. The focus on gender and social class is important given that we consider how the women's subjectivity shifts as an outcome of engaging with our

program to have a hopeful outlook on the role that university can play in their futures.

Assumptions and mis/recognitions about women's homelessness

As sociologists, our own framework for understanding 'personal problems as public issues' (Mills, 1959) has meant that our view of homelessness comes from a place of not judging or blaming the individual for their situation but rather understanding that circumstances, structures and constraints have contributed to the person's situation. Our feminist sociological background incorporates the significance of patriarchal, neo-liberal and capitalist structures in contributing to women's homelessness. The social location of our students being female and recently homeless is significant inasmuch as they provide reflections on their lives in the teaching space; and the very nature of the disadvantage in accessing higher education. As feminist scholars and enabling practitioners, we grappled with the question of the role that our interest in progress for women plays in the delivery and development of the course and our pedagogy. We are interested in how the participants speak of the role education can play or aspirations to re-engage with education in spite of significant disadvantage.

Prior to this course our connection with homelessness (personally and academically) was very limited. We acknowledge the importance of identifying assumptions that we may have held going into the program about women's homelessness (Zufferey, 2014), that in turn may have influenced our pedagogical relationships. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2018), homelessness increased by an alarming 13.7% in the 5 years prior to release of those figures. According to the Homelessness Organisation (2013) out of 116,427 Australians experiencing homelessness, 57% were male and 42% were female. However, new data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2012) shows that in 2016-2017 the person most likely to seek homelessness help in Victoria is a 25-34 year old woman, most probably with a dependent child. In the 2011 Australian Census, while more males were homeless on Census night, 59% of people supported by specialist homelessness services were female (AIHW, 2012). Women aged 18-34 were the group most likely to access specialist homelessness services with 37% of all clients.

In an attempt to avoid the process of mis/recognition (Burke, 2017) we rejected a deficit view (Burke, 2012) that the women in the course would not be 'capable' of engaging with the curriculum nor did we regard them as a 'homogenous' group. We did, however, hold assumptions about the emotional fragility of the women and the likelihood that the majority of the participants were homeless due to domestic violence. It is the case that a majority of the women were fearful of their ex-partners but homelessness due to domestic violence was not the only cause with this specific cohort. Over the seven weeks of the course, a number (but not all) of the women openly shared the contributing factors that led to their homelessness and connection with the women's shelter. For two, it was domestic violence related. For another five it was mental health related and for one it was attributed to alcoholism. We have learnt not to stereotype homeless women as 'unwilling victims' (Zufferey, 2014), for in spite of the obstacles, women who experience homelessness have positive and hopeful views of their future by gaining independence through education and employment (Biederman & Forlan, 2016). Rivera's (2008) work on homeless women participating in the popular education programs in the US (equivalent to enabling education programs in Australia) argues that education increased women's self-esteem, that they were often inspired to help other low-income women, that they learned to advocate for their rights and became more involved in their children's education. Her findings suggest that popular education can best address the academic, personal and community goals of very materially poor women.

Research methods

The participants in the course comprised 12 women who were recently homeless. Their ages ranged from 20 to 60 years and all except one student was Anglo-Australian. All of the women were clients of Catherine House homeless shelter for women. Following ethics approval, four of the students agreed to be interviewed, with the interviews taking place at UniSA College at the end of the course. Individual interviews were conducted in order to allow the participants to single out the experiences and issues that they consider to be the most important. The questions posed in interviews focused on the women's experiences of the course. Interviews provide a chance to observe how people reflect directly on behaviour, circumstances and events. According to Sixsmith, Boneham, and Goldring (2003), reflection can be very valuable in gaining an insider's perspective. The in-depth interviews were used to elicit an approach of how participants see themselves and their experiences in the context of this study. The interviews were transcribed and then analysed thematically with the conceptual tools outlined earlier.

This research utilised feminist qualitative interviewing as a primary method, as this was expected to produce more interactive, dialogic engagement (Oakley, 1981). Qualitative feminist research "centers and makes problematic women's diverse situations as well as the institutions that frame those situations" (Olesen, 2000, p. 216). As Olesen (2000) argues, qualitative research permits more direct attention to the feminist question of whose knowledge is presented in research, thus impelling the quest for the voices of those who are underrepresented. Our research sought answers to questions about how social experience is created and given meaning. Feminist qualitative research is useful as it acknowledges "the socially constructed nature of reality, intimate relationship between the researcher and what is being studied and the situational constraints that shape enquiry" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10). We recognise that our qualitative research will be subjective in nature (Malterud, 2001). All knowledge claims are historically or sociologically relative but this does not imply that they cannot serve as starting points into the inquiry. These claims are relative to the positionality of the researcher and those being researched. Feminist analyses have exposed the power-based dynamics inherent in all research and have suggested that power is something to not only be aware of, but to negotiate in the research process. Feminist scholars (e.g., Merriam et al., 2001; Cotterill, 1992, Lather, 1992; Reinharz, 1992) are particularly concerned that participants "have an equal relationship with the researcher, that the research experience is empowering and is producing a more interactive relationship with the reader/consumer" (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 413).

We were cognisant of the unequal power relationship with the women who participated in the research as we were the participants' lecturers as well as the researchers from the university. This could have caused the participants to feel obligated to participate in the individual interviews, so in an effort to prevent this, all participants were interviewed by a research assistant. Prior to the interviews, we organised a meeting between the research assistant and the participants, where the women were introduced to the research aims and were invited to address any matters they might be concerned about. We provided participant information letters at this meeting where it was clearly indicated that interviews would be strictly voluntary and that participants could withdraw from the study, without consequence, at any time. This was also outlined in the consent form for interviews. The feedback received from the interviewer was that the participants were enthusiastic about being involved in the project. In the discussion of findings below, pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participants.

How the women's subjectivity changed: hope for the future, for themselves, for the world

Data from interviews illustrated that the women experienced a process of beginning to see

themselves differently, as their subjectivity was influenced by the competing discourses revealed to them in the course. These discourses are specifically in relation to who can have power (change-agency) in society as well as who is a proper university student, or who belongs at university. The course is a foundation level global sociology course that considers the freedoms and constraints that exist due to patriarchal, neo-liberal, capitalist and ethnocentric belief systems that shape global politics, business and identities. Across the seven weeks, the class explored how globalisation has played a significant role in increasing our interconnectedness politically, socially, economically and culturally, and the positive and negative influences for groups of people around the world. Each week we would consider the elements that account for the 'structure-agency' explanation of phenomena, so the students are presented with opportunities to consider the possibilities and limitations that exist for people to make social changes. As one participant reflected:

This course has been a real eye-opener. For my own abilities and for my stance and views of the world around. Changes you can make, voting is this weekend, petitions, protest, I used to be into a lot, in my 20s, taken a back seat. Now it's [the course] – reignited the flame of that. Slowly, slowly, still not out of my little shell but slowly getting there. (Isla)

Rather than being a 'doom and gloom' sociology class (Johnson, 2005), we apply multiple lenses to global issues that show students how people are resisting or engaging in activism or dissent that demonstrates the agentic acts that present hopeful possibilities. This was evident in a comment by Monique: "*The course encourages a sense of empowerment, every step I take, keeps reminding me that people have the right to be heard, no matter who they are*". We concur with Shor (1992) that most often, "students do not come to class with a transformative agenda. Few are looking for empowering education" (p. 196). Yet, students will often show a stronger sense of hope that change can be made when presented with examples. Another participant commented on the perspective gained from the course regarding being able to contribute positively to her community:

I have come out of the course thinking I have a choice, it's quite amazing to understand that, and empowering at the same time, and I really loved that. The course helped me understand that and I can have conversations with my friends about or donate to organizations that help the poverty areas and buy fair trade products – act locally and think globally. The course helped me do that. (Teresa)

As enabling educators, we were committed to giving our students a 'care-full' (Motta & Bennett, 2018) experience of education and helping them to build their confidence so they could imagine pursuing tertiary education beyond the seven week course. Their interview responses demonstrate that the students did have plans for future study. For example, Olivia commented: "*doing this course, it has made me more confident that maybe I can do it*", and Isla stated:

It meant a lot, it means I have a future and righting the wrongs that I have done in my youth and I got to pursue that pipe dream from when I was younger, I feel more positive about myself. It's given me a sense of direction of what I want to do in my life and study is such a crucial part.

The interviews also demonstrated a shift that occurred for the students in helping them make sense of their gendered or social location. As Teresa stated:

[The course] helps you understand your place and experiences and life in a different way, helped me understand and then let go of it – frustrated and then understand it – that’s the way it is. Then I feel empowered and it helps me be at peace. Acceptance, that awareness is very powerful. With education I can rise up in the class [system].

The course explores theories of social class which provide a framework for the students to hang their own life narratives onto and make sense of their current social location. Teresa’s comment above also indicates that she regards furthering her education as a strategy for social mobility. Isla also reflected on the history of her social location and how the course encouraged reflexivity:

The course has made me question so much and it’s made me really look inside and question, how I have grown up and who I have become now and it’s a re-evaluation of everything. It feels a bit strange, but good, it’s the time for it.

For Olivia, the course contributed to feelings of confidence and increased social awareness as she spoke of being “*More brave, continue my curiosity and pay more attention to what is going on around me*”.

Our research demonstrates that the ‘care-full practice’ (Motta & Bennett, 2018) we implemented in the facilitation of our course made the “*difference between staying and going*” for Teresa. The efforts we made at ensuring the students felt included in the broader university and its culture were also reflected in interviews, such as with Teresa who stated: “*felt like I was really part of it [the uni] and I was really included, and I didn’t expect it because it was such a short course*”. The students also revealed in interviews that they found the teaching approaches ‘*supportive*’ (Olivia), and the teachers “*understanding and cooperative*” (Isla), and when additional resources were emailed to Teresa, she felt this “*showed the educators cared*”. These comments indicate the importance of connecting with students, in spite of the resistance often demonstrated by educators in HE to adopt care-full practices in their teaching (Burke et al., 2017).

While the women interviewed reflected positively on their experience of the sociological framework used in our enabling course and the ‘care-full’ (Motta & Bennett, 2018) teaching approaches we adopted, they also shared their feelings of uneasiness about enrolling in an undergraduate university course. Addressing the discomfort involved us challenging the dominant discourses of a ‘proper’ student in the teaching space and countering the normative assumptions about who belongs at university. Often it is students from equity groups who are perceived as lacking ‘capability’ to be successful at university; or who have the strongest feelings that they do not belong (Burke et al., 2016). We adopt Burke et al.’s (2016) view of capability, that it is not fixed or innate but something that develops over time. For Isla, “*the idea of going to uni seemed far-fetched*” and she questioned her own capability. For Olivia, she spoke of not expecting to become a student at her age and that it was a ‘*dramatic*’ step for her to enrol into the enabling course. She compared this opportunity to attend a course on a university campus with her home country: “*In Russia it would be too difficult. It would be about money. First step, why not. I think it’s like training, swim or not to swim, it’s difficult but it would be okay.*” Olivia grew up in a materially poor family in Russia and she often spoke about the Russian Communist economic system in negative terms. It was significant for her to be able to attend a course at university for free. Monique highlighted her previous experiences at TAFE and in a Bachelor program at university: “*[the teaching] reminded her of TAFE more than university, as uni is a little more uptight. I’m up here and your [sic] down there*”. These comments illustrate that the students entered the course with their own powerful preconceived notions about what studying at university will be like, what it involves (financial resources or presumptions about

‘intelligence’), and normative assumptions about who belongs at university.

Since the course ended, we have maintained contact with the participants and, at the time of writing, can report on the education trajectory of the women as three of the four interview participants are actively engaging in further education. Monique enrolled into a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in Sociology, and is currently sitting on a credit average. Isla enrolled in a Women’s Studies course at TAFE SA, with intentions to enrol into a degree program in the near future after building her academic literacies. Teresa enrolled into an Honours program at our university and is currently achieving a distinction average. She was also awarded a South Australian state government initiative award. Through their involvement in an enabling course, the women have challenged the normative assumptions about who belongs in HE and demonstrated their capability to achieve high marks at university in spite of their recent homelessness, supporting Rivera’s (2008) findings that homeless women are motivated to engage with education pathways to better their lives.

While the students entered the program with assumptions about who belongs at university, they also brought ideas with them about what it means to be a ‘good’ student. Burke et al.’s (2016) study on the meaning-making processes of capability and belonging at university also revealed practices and habits of mind that define a proper student, such as a “love of learning, time management, having the ‘right’ attitude, following instructions, prioritising study, its value and worth, willing to work hard and do what is expected and being smart/intelligent” (p. 28). In our teaching, we try to create a space where students do not feel this pressure to perform or explicitly exhibit the habits of mind. We made it very explicit that the students had the option of attending the course workshops and choosing their level of participation – whether that was sitting in the room and listening to the discussions, or alternatively, engaging with the readings and submitting the assessment. It was encouraging that Isla, for example, commented that she “*didn’t feel judged*” in the teaching space and that there was “*an understanding that we are all learning and at different stages at opening our eyes up*”. Teresa also revealed that she didn’t feel pressure from us to perform: “*if we didn’t get it done, if we didn’t understand, there was no disappointment or no rules or stipulations, compassion was shown*”.

The interview data also demonstrate that the utilisation of Shor’s (1992) critical teaching approaches made the women feel comfortable to speak in the tutorial space which was important to their sense of belonging. As Shor (1992) explains, when working towards mutual dialogue, “balancing the teachers authority and the students’ input is the key to making the process both critical and democratic” (p. 85). This approach was discussed in the interviews mostly in positive terms, however it was revealed by some that they would have liked more explicit ‘cutting-off’ of some voices, for example: “[we got] *side-tracked into going into someone’s story and we could lose a bit of time*” (Isla). Another student considered her own voice in the teaching space: “*I might have been a bit too talkative and my questions – because I do talk a lot. I could have considered others*” (Teresa). Monique also reflected on her contributions in the tutorial space, as she considered she would “*ratchet herself back in*” as she had “*too many opportunities to speak*”. Olivia also commented on the “*patience*” of the teachers, as there were students who did “*too much talking*”.

This unexpected outcome of encouraging participation and facilitating discussion, rather than controlling it, was that it brought some discomfort to the students as they were looking to us to stop some students from talking. One explanation for this discomfort may be that the students were accustomed to the teacher-directed style and therefore found that our effort to run a more

democratic space was challenging.³ This does indicate though that we had successfully created an environment where the students felt comfortable sharing their views, as expressed by Isla, “*very comfortable to ask questions and got responses that made sense*” and Olivia, “*very friendly atmosphere where everyone got involved and everyone was encouraged to talk*”. As Burke et al. (2017) suggest, the norms of student behaviour are shaped by discourses of masculinity as well as having cultural underpinning regarding social class and ethnicity. Performativity is linked to participation levels, how one speaks and how often. The passivity often connected to female students was not observed in our teaching space, as reflected above regarding the students’ sense of comfort in talking. But this could be attributed to the class being all female, including teachers. An awareness of the need to perform though came through with many comments about struggles with the course readings and language therein, which they put on themselves as a ‘deficit’. Isla reflected on the readings “*being overwhelming and a challenge as the language was difficult*”. Burke’s (2017) connection to feelings of ‘shame’ as coming from previous educational experiences may also be useful in explaining some of the participant’s reflections. “*I am ashamed to open my mouth, to say something is a big deal for me*” (Olivia). Here we can see how “the fear of speaking out and being exposed as ‘unworthy’ in formal academic and pedagogical contexts” (Burke, 2017, p. 435) is strong for Olivia as she thinks she will be judged for her lack of spoken English proficiency.

Conclusion

Our action research project teaching a seven week global sociology course to 12 women who were recently homeless demonstrates hopeful education experiences and outcomes for the participants. The women involved in the project were overwhelmingly affirmative about their experience, reflecting on our approaches to create a comfortable space where they felt supported and open to share their views, but without the pressure of performing. The aim to introduce the sociological imagination to the women and apply it to global issues with a focus on ‘activism’ and ‘dissent’ competed with the discourses that had previously made them feel ‘constrained’ or limited to make changes in their lives. To facilitate a course that contributed to the hopeful outlook for women who had recently been homeless has been a turning point in our praxis, affirming the value of social science epistemologies and critical teaching approaches in enabling programs. Our research demonstrates the success of enabling programs to widen participation of underrepresented groups in university programs. We also acknowledge that rich pedagogical spaces are not guaranteed to produce desired outcomes.

We have made steps towards reclaiming feminism in our praxis as the pedagogies of care we used made the difference to our students ‘staying or going’. The women’s continued engagement with tertiary education beyond the seven week course talks back to the anxieties about lowering standards in higher education and the discourses of ‘excellence’ and prestige cultures (Burke, 2017). The social location of the women prior to attending the course would be defined in HE policy as ‘non-traditional’ and yet a number of them have gone on to achieve at university. The pedagogical approaches we adopted in the course sought to provide a safe space for the women to consider their student subjectivities in terms of belonging at university and their capability to engage in further study. In alignment with the work of Burke et al. (2017) we have worked on the development of ‘transformative pedagogy’ that “involves examining how perceived attributes of people or practices are either valued (recognised) or devalued (misrecognised)” (p.

³ While we plan to consider the implication of these unintended outcomes in our future research, encouraging participation and facilitating discussion was central to our democratic-dialogic approach in this course. Future research will also explore the ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ (Zembylas, 2015) as it relates to unexpected emotions experienced in the teaching space.

27). The gender and class intersections of our students – women who were recently homeless – were recognised, valued and supported through the pedagogy we adopted in our enabling course. Our future plans for the course involves extending the invitation to women from another women's service agency linked to supporting domestic violence survivors, to reach more women who may be considering engaging with education but who would otherwise be locked out of university.

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