

# **Stitching Together our Personal and Professional Selves**

## **A Self-Study of Inter-Collegial Support**

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Our ongoing research explores the range of benefits associated with developing strong inter-collegial friendships and practicing anticipatory reflection for sustaining the wellbeing of academics. While our gender and teacher education roles are influential, we believe that our project resonates with others working in the academy. Our research is a self-study of how we can learn to live well in our professional and personal lives by paying attention to how we support each other to lead anticipated successful and sustainable academic lives across institutions. It reveals stark realities of how we have learned to accommodate to the stresses of being in challenging academic positions. All academics need support and positive working relationships to thrive in the competitive and sometimes soul-destroying world of academia, but some are particularly susceptible to experiencing difficulties with finding and/or creating spaces to work that permit a sense of wellbeing as they navigate their way through teaching and research requirements for tenure and promotion. There are also times and or events that can be particularly challenging to navigate even when they are tenured and holding senior academic positions. Having to constantly strive to meet inherent expectations leaves them/us feeling inadequate and with low self-esteem.

We are two female academics working in Education faculties in two distant countries. A chance meeting at a conference led to productive exchanges on our work and a professional friendship developed. This moved to a deeper and more personal level when the authors spent time during their sabbaticals in each other's institutions and homes. Using collaborative self-study methodology (LaBoskey, 2004) to frame our research, we have reflected on how these experiences and the ensuing deep professional and personal friendship has been influential on our professional wellbeing and the flow-on effects this has had on our capacity to bring a richness and empathy to our teacher education practices. Here we explore how anticipatory reflection (Conway, 2001; Van Manen, 1995) has helped us to imagine and achieve goals of leading sustainable and fulfilling academic lives.

## **Objectives**

Our research focus is to question how collegial professional friendships can help us achieve professional satisfaction and sustain us in times when we are facing unrelenting pressure from demanding workplaces. We have explored the nature of the range of benefits associated with the development of strong inter-collegial relationships for our wellbeing as academics. While these benefits may appear to be peripheral to the official work of teacher educators, in our own experiences we have found them to be crucial to being able to live well within the academy and maintain our capacity to meet the demands of our jobs over extended periods of time. In this chapter we highlight the important role appreciation has played in our professional friendship, including how receiving appreciative remarks from each other makes such a difference to how we view our professional contributions as well as why appreciation is generally absent in academic circles. We also consider how we have supported one another to realise our anticipated and realistic goals in order to thrive as academics.

## Methodology and Methods

Self-study methods allowed us to collaboratively examine our practices of being in the academy (Bodone, et al., 2004), our beliefs about being “good” teacher educators/academics, and the realities our professional and personal selves came to understand. Following reciprocated face-to-face visits when we collaboratively imagined how our academic lives could feel, we used technology to continue to communicate as well as offer support and feedback. Our anticipatory reflections envisioning how we wanted to be in our respective futures were triggered by a discussion about Conway’s (2001) research. He had argued that encouraging high expectations and hopeful ideals in student teachers could be generative and inure people against cynicism and disenfranchisement. He wrote that while some theorists insist that “accurate perceptions of self, world, and the future are essential for mental health,” (p.99) others suggest that “overly positive self-evaluations, exaggerated perceptions of control or mastery, and unrealistic optimism are characteristic of normal thought” (ibid). We theorised that adopting an optimistic stance might enlighten our view of our future selves and provide us some measure of resilience to function wholeheartedly as academics.

We set ourselves a structured reading program where each of us was committed to researching and sharing readings that were most meaningful to us. For example, Kishimi and Koga’s (2013) *The courage to be disliked* and Berg and Seeber’s (2016) *The slow professor* were two books that we read at the other’s behest. We wrote and shared professional journal entries based on our responses to the readings and to our anticipatory reflections. Our journals (Holly, 2003) were repositories to chart our progress towards our goals. We regularly questioned whether they were valid, authentic and realistic and how we could reinforce or renegotiate them. The longitudinal nature of the study is important as our exchanges over the past 18-24 months have allowed us to track the impact of the various incidents and events in our professional lives on our

anticipated goals.

We have talked at length about our goals and the barriers, challenges and opportunities we encounter. We have audio recorded these conversations and, at the same time, we have both kept informal notes - Dawn's on paper, Lynn's on her computer. Taking an iterative approach to data analysis (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we found that we were continually examining, re-examining and challenging each other's reflections, responses and interpretations of our understandings of our professional lives. To create an artificial junction, we devised a prompt whereby we each wrote independently about one another's peaks and pits. This was a way for us to summarise what had been most salient, empowering, and challenging from the other's perspective, retrospectively. We shared these via email and then discussed how valid and accurate we each felt they were. Writing this article in tandem has given us further opportunity to question, reflect on and critique the sense we make of the benefits we gain through supporting one another's goals, anticipated and realistic.

## **Outcomes**

Armstrong and Cross (2008) write "Anticipatory learning focusses on human initiative and on our capacity to influence events, environments, and experiences that have not yet happened" (p.605). It has been our intention to anticipate how we wanted to be and then support one another to bring this to fruition.

How we "wanted to be" in the academy was influenced by our reading of Adlerian psychology as espoused by Kishimi and Koga (2013). We discussed the importance of establishing a horizontal relationship between ourselves and our institutions. Rather than seeing ourselves as subservient pawns, we envisaged ourselves as agentic and capable of negotiating what we wanted to accomplish within our roles. We defined the tasks that were professionally rewarding and separated

them from those that the institution expected we carry out, but which gave us limited satisfaction. We took control and ownership of those facets of our work that fed into our anticipated mission and reduced our investment in those tasks which were not really ours (for example attending meetings to discuss changes to assessment procedures or relocation of service providers over which we had no control). While we were determined to align our work more closely to what we thought was important we also understood that we would be subject to pressure from our institutions. We gained resolve from our inter-collegial friendship - while we thought we were facing unique pressures through discussing them we found they were in fact, rather common and, with the benefit hindsight, trivial.

We were mindful that we might not meet the institutions' expectations or promulgated standards. Through our discussions we highlighted similarities and differences in our workplace. For both of us, these standards are most closely prescribed for research. For example, Dawn's institution requires that senior academics produce three quality assured, peer reviewed publications annually. Of these outputs, sole-authored publications in A-ranked journals, multiple citations and high impact scores are held in the highest esteem and given most kudos. Annually, we are both required to write a detailed report of all research endeavours including journal articles, chapters in edited books, books, conference presentations, chapters in proceedings, keynote presentations etc. All academics are subject to periodic quantification of their research so that their institutions can provide accountability for public investment in research and to establish the institution's reputational ranking. For example, the UK has a 5-yearly Research Excellence Framework (REF), New Zealand has a 6-yearly Performance Based Research Fund review (PBRF) and Australia's Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) review is 3-yearly.

While we are both active researchers and are committed to contributing new knowledge and to improving our practice, the

pressure to record our contributions for regular scrutiny both internally and externally is repetitive. We have referred to this process as FIGJAMing (an acronym for \*expletive I'm Good; Just Ask Me). Being asked to validate how prestigious our work is for others via citations and the like, undersells the importance of our work to ourselves and our students. No matter how proud we are of our published work, others who proclaim more loudly that they are published in higher ranked journals with higher citation and impact figures always overshadow our output. We question how impact is compared meaningfully when our research is purposefully aimed at a niche audience and based on enhancing our own practices.

We both enjoy doing research and contributing to the scholarly communities. Lynn for example wrote in an email, "I do get a kick out of getting messages from ResearchGate that I have been cited or that people are reading my articles." (email, 24 01 2020). What Lynn dislikes and finds demeaning are the constant requirements to seek funding for research, and the unnecessarily critical responses of peers on competitive funding applications. Since much of our research is small scale and self-study-focused we have had little need to chase large research grants. While research dollars awarded are a quantifiable measure, we are mindful of the valued contribution we can make through smaller studies. In fact, our most 'successful' research articles have resulted from small local or internal grants.

We are also disheartened by the validation and review process that we participate in as part of our professional duties. We know that our reviews of others' work will impact - most often adversely. We recognise that rejection letters wound. Instructions to revise and resubmit work frustrate even when the critique is constructive. We recognise this is true for ourselves so how can we couch our comments to support developing research?

Using anticipatory reflection to imagine what our professional lives might look like if our institution and colleagues equally valued

research and teaching has given us the fortitude to argue against the status quo. We have outlined some of the research standards above. Teaching, as part of our academic roles, has been harder to quantify.

We are required to teach undergraduate and postgraduate student teachers and to supervise doctoral and master's candidates in related education fields. Both of our institutions want to provide teaching as effectively and profitably as possible while simultaneously spending the least amount of money and employing the smallest number of staff as they can. As a consequence of fiscal constraints, there has been a move to large class lecturing rather than small class teaching. Sessional staff have been employed to cover individual courses increasing the workload of course co-ordinators and programme directors. There have been restructuring and redesigning of programmes and redeployment of staff. Making faculty redundant has compromised the delivery of some courses and added to the anxiety and stress of remaining staff. We have found that the amount of time and effort it takes to prepare and deliver content in engaging, inclusive and culturally appropriate ways while using digital technologies and innovative teaching strategies can expand to fill every working hour. Providing detailed constructive feedback and grading students' work within set timeframes adds to the workload. Knowing that our teaching performance is constantly under review and that our students' end of course evaluations are scrutinised by our line managers adds to our stress. Brookfield (1995) reminds us that students' evaluations are rarely perfect. Even so we are guilty of ascribing disproportionate significance to negative or mediocre student evaluations. We worry over the students' claims that we did not provide enough detail for them to complete the assessment task, or that we required them to do too much reading in comparison to other courses or that they are unable to access on-line resources. As Brookfield (1995) writes, "The constant inability to obtain uniformly good evaluations leads to feelings of incompetence and guilt" (p. 17).

However, as a result of this project, we recognised that keeping these

evaluations to ourselves led to feeling demotivated and as though we have nothing more to contribute. By owning up to these feelings in our conversations and writing, we have given ourselves permission to view students' evaluations with a more dispassionate gaze. Other researchers' meta-analysis of student evaluations (for example Uttl, White, Gonzalez, 2016) adds credence to our argument that they are a poor measure of teacher effectiveness but, nonetheless, they are influential yardsticks in our institutions. By dint of having discussed our personal responses in private, we have been able to articulate our concerns in public fora with assurance. Doing so has led to constructive conversations with our colleagues about what standardised student evaluations *can* indicate and how we can respond appropriately.

Our responses to journal entries that we share, and our email exchanges ascribe considerable importance to the relentless pressure to perform in all aspects of our professional lives. We have both felt underappreciated and overwhelmed at work as we attempted to meet our institutions' expectations. Even as we have shared this conspiratorially, we have recognised that we are not unique in our inability to meet these expectations and remain well. Our willingness to look critically at the role we can take to support one another goes beyond a close and closed international friendship. We are positioned by our researcher's stance to do more than share our frustration and indignation in private chats. Here we turn a self-studying lens to consider what we have learnt, particularly about appreciation, that might be of value to others.

## **Appreciation**

### ***Teaching***

One of the aspects of our jobs that we both really enjoy is teaching and we both put considerable amounts of time and energy into



preparing courses, exchanging with students, and giving feedback in constructive ways. At the same time, we are both well aware that good teaching is not valued as much as good researching, that is, being successful in receiving grants and publishing in top tier journals. Believing in the importance of investing in our teaching while knowing that our institutions do not recognise this investment as much as a similar investment in research is a source of frustration for us. Focusing on our strengths as teachers and reminding each other of the importance of what we do and how well we do it has been fundamental to reaching our professional anticipated goals. We recognize the importance of appreciation for wellbeing at any professional stage. What we have come to realise through this project is that not only do we feel underappreciated, but we are also not adept at showing our appreciation for others. We have paid so much attention to negative student evaluations and peer-review criticism that we have become cautious and mean-spirited. Internalising these messages diminishes our capacity to be generous to others. This project provided an actual opportunity to watch one another teaching. Despite protestations that we weren't doing anything noteworthy, watching one another in action was stimulating and validated us as professionals. For example, Dawn was impressed having seen Lynn diagnose her students' ability in small groups. She wrote

You were so skilful... I was so impressed with the ease with which you diagnosed students' competence and then gave them very clear instructions as to how they could improve. It was a precise, empathetic exchange between an expert and novices. I know why you are excited about teaching them - you really do make a difference to the way they are going to teach. (Dawn, Peaks and Pits reflection)

We wondered why we rarely invite our colleagues to watch us teach

unless we need evidence of a formal observation for a promotion application. We surmised that colleagues are either too busy or we worry that they will be judgmental and find us lacklustre. We forget how accomplished we are in our respective roles until there is an outsider to call attention to the nuanced ways that we cope with the complexity of teaching. The study has fostered in us a greater respect for our professional expertise. We do have considerable experience and willingness to share. We are justifiably proud of what we endeavour to create in our classrooms - meaningful, inclusive learning experiences. Working together has enabled us to be more vulnerable and at the same time resilient to critique. We take solace from this collegial friendship and look for ways that we can extend the benefits into our individual workplaces. Actually, more than solace, this project has given us the determination to do so. We now actively seek opportunities to commend others for the contribution they are making to our professional lives and are quick to acknowledge the typically unnoticed efforts that our colleagues are making.

## ***Research***

The project also has been generative from a research perspective. We have presented this nascent work in several forms individually on behalf of the other. Working with formal and informal feedback, we have tailored several articles for dissemination. Individually, we have been able to distance ourselves from personalised critique. We have also been able to assert our joint understanding with considerable authority. We have relied on the other to keep the momentum going when our energy is dissipated by other demands. Our use of Telegram, a social media application we installed on our cell phones, has enabled us to use humor when we have sensed the other may be struggling. It has meant that we can see when our message has been read or our photos seen. It has been an opportunity to share in one another's personal lives from a distance.

Fortuitously, our schedules and pressure points are staggered. While

we recognise that we cannot always prioritise this research, the focus of sustaining our well-being through this collegial friendship has seeped into our daily lives. The impact of this research can be measured in more expansive terms than the number of outputs we have generated. Having reflected on how we want to lead our academic lives, this project has enabled us to stitch together aspects of our professional lives with the strong thread of wellbeing and sustainability. What we have discussed at length is that this research actually means something more to us than tangible outputs. It has provided a safe space within which to express vulnerability and angst. It has been a place to grow our appreciation of our own strengths and weaknesses and to know that another has seen and appreciated our accomplishments and expertise. Most importantly, if we take self-study seriously then we must make our developing understanding transparent to our community. We challenge others to be more generous with their own research - speak from the heart about things that make a difference to us all in our professional lives. In this chapter we are describing our systematic study of our experiences in the academy as teacher educators and our findings indicate how important it is for teacher educators to support each other. We are advocating a collegial and supportive approach rather than a judgemental or competitive one.

### ***Realistic Expectations***

We have asked ourselves how this self-study has impacted on our teacher education practices. In fact, we were challenged by one of the reviewers for not including anything in this study that might improve teacher education, other than removing requirements to publish and student course evaluations, which puzzled us somewhat. Of course, university professors should be expected to carry out and publish research and student course evaluations are hugely important to improving our teaching. When we reflected on our anticipated goals, we realised early in this project that stepping outside normal routines could heighten our sense of the possibilities and potential in our own

circumstances. This led to a clear understanding of the ways in which our institutions both constrain and enable us. Applied to the broader context of forming a 'horizontal relationship' with our institutions (Kishimi & Koga, 2013) we have come to the realisation that intrinsic motivation to accomplish our mission as teacher educators is more powerful than the need to satisfy external standards and criteria. A lesson we have learnt from considering our teaching goals is the need to minimise our angst over student evaluations. We will continue to devote as much time and energy as we can into creating the sort of learning opportunities that we think best suit our students within institutional constraints but we anticipate that our endeavours will not find favour with all of the students. Their evaluations may be influenced by factors which are outside of our control - the room, the time or the delivery mode. Our students may be unaware of constraints we are operating under with regards to setting assignment deadlines or prescribing standardised requirements. We can make a difference within these structures to practice teaching in pedagogically sound and research informed ways.

We have renewed our determination to keep studying our practice in order to improve it. Sharing our research is important to us because we are driven to contribute to our community's understanding. Our motivation is to add something meaningful to the debate around what it is to be a successful academic. We want to live well in the academic space. This project has reinforced that there are some battles we cannot win but we are proud to be fighting for a good cause. We are using this platform as an opportunity to "demystify, debunk, and deconstruct the notion that somewhere, some "expert' like [us] has the answers" (Brookfield, 1995, p.260). This inter-collegial support has emboldened us to talk openly about our professional disappointments, frustrations, and realisations with someone who understands the particular demands of educational institutions and who can help us put things in perspective and move forward. The work of teacher educators is teacher education, and the self-study of teacher education practices includes the self-study of being a teacher

educator. It is an opportunity to examine the motivating factors for ourselves in order to continue our work preparing future teachers. We sincerely hope that articulating how we anticipate our future selves will be in the academy gives permission for others to initiate similar conversations with colleagues, near and far.

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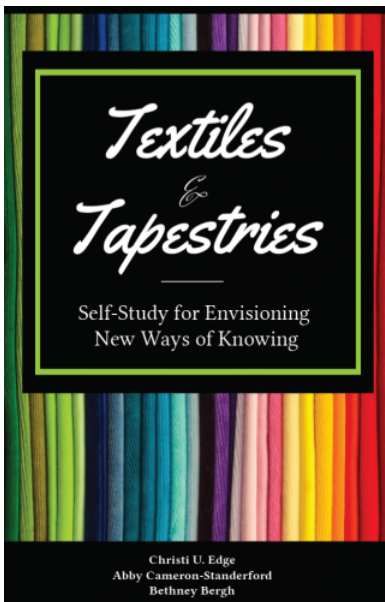
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