

Introduction

Transformative learning is written about extensively in the field of adult education, but almost exclusively from the position of the student journey. Little research has been done into how this concept might be applied to the educators who work in adult education. This paper seeks to explore this concept as it relates to a group of academics who work within an enabling program at a regional Australian university. In the first part of the paper, we interrogate the concept of 'transformative learning' in terms of how it has been used in the past, and how it might apply to the experiences of educators, as well as adult learners. Next we describe our engagement with Brookfield's (1998) theory of critical reflection and describe how it was used to build our methodology. We identify a number of assumptions about who we are as educators and how we are positioned as academics within the broader University community. A discussion of these findings follows, in which we consider the benefits of critically reflecting on practice, as well as the broader implications in terms of future research into the experiences of other academics, and the transformative potential inherent in this line of work.

Transformative learning experiences of students

A common theme in the literature around adult education is that adult learners are different because of their capacity to expand their horizons in a way that comes with maturity and a broader set of life experiences than those of younger, inexperienced students. It is widely held that the learning that serves as a catalyst for transformation is dependent upon the adult's capacity for meaningful self-reflection (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 1990). Mezirow (1990: 13) coined the term "perspective transformation" to encapsulate the way in which personal attitudes and mindsets can change through education. He asserts that many of the individual's assumptions and ideologies are formed uncritically during childhood, and adulthood is often the time when individuals reassess these assumptions. Brookfield (1995c) is wary of attempts to portray adult education as a distinct field of learning, but concedes that one of its unique features may well be the capacity of adults to reflect critically upon their worldviews and assumptions.

Like Mezirow (1991), Cranton (2006) suggests that a learner's transformation can be mapped according to a number of stages or facets and points to some event in a person's life that acts as a catalyst for change. Both Mezirow (1990: 13) and Cranton (2006: 20) refer to this milestone as a "disorienting dilemma". While these catalysts are often perceived as life-changing events, such as a divorce or loss of a job, Mori (2005: 2 of 6) argues that the process of change can be a more gradual one and prefers to view such occurrences simply as "turning points". However these events are constructed, there is an emerging theme from the literature that some kind of challenge or struggle, either sudden or gradual, can lead to an appraisal of one's beliefs.

While some aspects of transformation may be categorised as objective and rational, the more personal aspects of this process also need to be acknowledged (Coombes & Danaher, 2006). Writers such as Dirkx (1997: 80) describe the emotional, even spiritual dimensions of transformative learning – the "very personal and imaginative ways of knowing, grounded in a more intuitive and emotional sense of our experience". Even Mezirow, in his later work, acknowledges the affective, emotional and social aspects of such change (Cranton, 2006). From this perspective,

transformative learning can be understood to be a complex interaction of cognitive, intuitive, emotional and social sensibilities.

The principles of transformative learning explicitly inform Skills for Tertiary Education Preparation Studies (STEPS), an enabling program offered at CQUniversity in Rockhampton, Queensland. Like other enabling programs, it provides an alternative pathway for adult learners into Undergraduate studies. Students in STEPS study academic writing, mathematics, IT skills, and study skills as either full-time students in one term, or part-time students over two terms to help give them the skills and understandings necessary to succeed at tertiary study. Many of the students who come to STEPS have experienced disadvantage in some way, including unfavourable socio-economic circumstances, difficult personal situations, and negative and/or disrupted schooling experiences. While the original program was designed to be delivered face-to-face, since 2006 it has been offered externally as well.

The discourse of 'transformation' is used openly in this program; students are encouraged to consider the ways in which their thinking and attitudes might change throughout their studies. In line with the literature that advocates the documentation of thoughts and feelings as a potential vehicle for transformation (Cranton, 2006), students are invited to keep learning journals to write about their learning experiences. To assist students in these reflections, they are introduced to Campbell's (1993) concept of the 'hero's journey'. This metaphor highlights the stages inherent in the journey of the archetypal hero, with the inevitable struggles culminating in the ultimate triumph. Students are encouraged to apply these concepts to their own learning journey to help them accept the challenges of university life as well as the rewards (Simpson & Coombes, 2004). As a reflective tool, the 'hero's journey' also resonates with Dirkx's (1997: 79) take on transformative learning as "a heroic struggle to wrest consciousness and knowledge from the forces of unconsciousness and ignorance". The STEPS experience is based on holistic principles and the curriculum model used is designed to "give credence to students' inner landscapes while at the same time developing their academic skills" (Simpson & Coombes, 2004: 4). Therefore, the development of self-awareness and a capacity for self-reflection are viewed as keys to becoming a confident and successful student.

Transformative learning experiences of educators

While much has been written about the transformative potential of the enabling programs such as STEPS in terms of the student journey (e.g., Seary & Willans, 2004; Simpson & Coombes, 2004), the impact of working in such an environment has largely gone unexplored. As Cranton (2006) points out, it is still relatively uncommon to discuss the business of adult education as a potentially transformative experience. As teaching is, in itself, a dimension of lifelong learning, then surely there is a role for educators to reflect upon the ways in which they have been challenged by, and grown from, their teaching experiences. Such processes facilitate the formation of an individual philosophy of teaching: "naming and describing our frame of reference about education and our role within that world is a part of our transformative journey as an educator" (Cranton, 2006: 193). As Simpson and Coombes (2001: 7 of 9) point out, even teachers "sometimes have to leave their comfort zones and confront their self-doubts". If we accept that critical self-reflection can lead to positive

transformation in students, then it seems reasonable to assume that educators can also use this as a vehicle for professional growth.

The idea that critical reflection can facilitate transformation is obviously appealing to educators who work in the area of adult education. However, the limitations of transformative learning theory also need to be acknowledged. There is a 'rose-coloured glasses' mindset that permeates much of the writing about adult education and its link to profound, life-changing experiences. We therefore acknowledge that 'transformation' is an emotion-laden term with links to lofty educational aspirations. Brookfield (2000: 98) warns of "the relentlessly upbeat rhetoric surrounding much exposition on empowerment, liberation, emancipation and transformation" in the context of adult learning. There may be a tendency to romanticise our findings out of a desire to perceive the work we do in a positive light. Therefore, we align our view with Cranton who constructs transformation as the development of "self-awareness through consciousness-raising activities" (2006: 182). In Brookfield's words, we are engaging in critically reflective practice; that is, we are standing outside of our practice to see what we do from a wider perspective (1995a: 7 of 11).

Critical reflection: in theory

Brookfield defines critically reflective practice as "a process of inquiry, involving practitioners in trying to discover, and research, the assumptions that frame how they work" (1998: 197). He warns that not all reflection is critical and that at the heart of this process lies a preoccupation with understanding "how considerations of power undergird, frame and distort so many educational processes and interactions" (Brookfield, 1995a: 4 of 11). This means acknowledging that some teaching practices may be well-intentioned, but actually end up perpetuating hegemonic agenda. So it seems the job of critical reflection, from the educator's perspective, is not simply to ask questions like "what did I do today?", "did it work well?" etc. Rather, the work of critical reflection is to try and disclose the power relations and unquestioned assumptions that structure our teaching practices, particularly those that we may not have been aware of previously.

The question remains as to how one goes about engaging in productive critical reflection. According to Brookfield (1998, p. 197), critical reflection is a "puzzling and contradictory task" but necessary if we are to see what we do from a broader perspective. One of the ongoing difficulties in this process is that we must rely upon "our own interpretive filters to become aware of our own interpretive filters" (Brookfield, 1998: 197). Brookfield (1998) believes such limitations may be overcome, in part, by drawing upon four complementary lenses: the autobiographical lens; the lens of learners' eyes; the lens of colleagues' perceptions; and finally, the lens of theoretical, philosophical, and research literature. If it is true, as Brookfield suggests, that "the most distinctive feature of the reflective process is its focus on hunting assumptions" (Brookfield, 1995a: 1 of 11), then these different lenses can provide different viewpoints for revealing a range of assumptions. We acknowledge that there are other aspects of our STEPS experience that could be included in a critical reflection. These might include our reflections on the teaching process or various assumptions about the curriculum. However, our focus in this paper is the potential transformative experiences for educators in enabling programs. It is for this reason that we consider Brookfield's framework for a holistic approach to critical reflection to be of greatest relevance.

Rather than following Brookfield's dictates without question, however, we have adapted these lenses to suit our own purposes. We use the autobiographical lens, for example, to create a frame of reference that draws upon our learning experiences as educators, rather than using our past learning experiences as students. In so doing, we are acknowledging the unique subjectivities that each of us brings to this teaching experience in terms of our personal and professional backgrounds, as well as our beliefs about our practice. The second lens that we use here is that of our colleagues, since one of the key aspects of this process has been to share our reflections with each other. As Brookfield (1998) notes, colleagues can help us identify assumptions, especially those pertaining to power structures in a way that encourages more democratic processes. We have also drawn upon our reading from the literature around adult learning and transformative learning theories. This theoretical lens has helped us "investigate the hunches, instincts and tacit knowledge that shape our practice" (Brookfield, 1995b: 1 of 9), as well as assisting us in developing a method for our study. However, we have elected not to draw on students' viewpoints as the fourth lens in this study. Our reasoning is that there has already been considerable research into the student perspective in the context of transformative learning and that our purpose here is more about the educator's role in a broader sense, rather than simply the improvement of teaching practice.

Critical reflection: in practice

As a starting point for our reflections, as a group, we decided on a set of questions that would guide us in our reflections about our individual autobiographies, that is, our personal experiences in, and beliefs about, working as educators in an enabling program. Our familiarity with concepts in the literature around adult education and transformation helped us to formulate questions that challenged us to think about our worldviews and teaching ethos, as well as the challenges, and rewards associated with what we do and what we have learnt. Some of these questions were similar to the kinds of questions we ask of our students to guide them in their own reflections about their learning journeys. Each of us took the time to answer these questions without formally consulting each other.

1. Describe your educational qualifications and work experience prior to STEPS.
2. Describe the teaching and administrative roles you have experienced working the STEPS program.
3. Compare the STEPS teaching experience to other work experience in terms of its particular challenges and rewards.
4. What have you learned about yourself as an educator from working in the STEPS program?
5. Has your worldview changed in any way as a result of teaching with the STEPS program? If so, how?
6. Has your understanding of Australian society changed in any way as a result of teaching with the STEPS program?

Once that process was completed, these responses were gathered and collated and we began a series of discussions about these findings via phone and email. In order to

make sense of the data, we engaged in a broadly thematic analysis in line with the method described by Bernard (2010). Using this approach, a “theme” is a form of “expression” that connotes fundamental concepts being described: “In selecting one set of terms over others, we surely ignore subtle differences, but the basic ideas are just as useful under many glosses” (Bernard, 2010, p. 55). It is understood that the first stage in generating themes is often at the time when guiding questions are formulated, usually in the context of interviews, but in this case, questions for self-reflection were drafted. As we became more familiar with the work of Brookfield, we turned out attention to identifying underlying assumptions as a specific kind of unifying ‘theme’. We also tried to explore more explicitly the power relations implicit in these responses, so focused more on our positioning as academics in the broader University community. Thus we added the following to our original list.

1. Has teaching in the STEPS program changed your views on what it is to be an academic?
2. What do you think are the particular assumptions made of you as a STEPS teacher?
3. What assumptions are there about STEPS students in the wider University community?
4. Have your initial assumptions about STEPS students been challenged in any way?

In this way, the process of reflection took on a more ‘critical’ edge rather than simply providing an opportunity to identify shared (and contrasting) viewpoints about our teaching experiences. Therefore, the methodological approach employed became a reiterative process that involved both inductive and deductive reasoning. The assumptions that we identified were induced from the data in our hunt for repetition of ideas, similarities and differences, and key-words-in-context (Bernard, 2010), but deductive reasoning was also used in that our guiding questions and analysis were informed by theoretical perspectives. Using each other as “critical mirrors” (Brookfield, 1998: 200) became particularly crucial at the stage of analysing our findings; in quizzing each other about each other’s reflections, we were able to draw out the assumptions that underpinned our responses to the questions that we had posed.

There were three academics involved in this research project. Two currently still teach in STEPS while the third has since left the program due to a family relocation. Further background details are represented in the table below:

Background	Profile 1	Profile 2	Profile 3
Experience in schools	As music instructor	As high-school teacher	As primary school teacher
Experience teaching in Undergraduate	In cultural studies	In education	In Australian history

PhD	In cultural studies	In curriculum reform	In Lebanese history
Years working in STEPS	4	4	10

We have all had teaching experiences in schools, as well as in Undergraduate programs, before coming to work in an enabling program. In the STEPS program, each of us has taught Language and Learning, a subject that develops the skills and thinking needed for academic writing, and two of us have taught in Tertiary Preparation Skills, which may loosely be described as a subject that teaches study skills and promotes self-awareness. Those who teach within the STEPS program are employed as ‘academics’ rather than ‘general staff’. Accordingly, post-graduate qualifications are encouraged and there is an expectation to be active in research, though lecturers in the program with doctoral qualifications are in the minority.

Critical reflections and hunting assumptions

Since Brookfield argues that the critical dimension of reflection lies in “hunting assumptions” (1995a: 1 of 11), we decided that the logical way to hone our thematic analysis, was to identify underlying assumptions in the data: about our frames of reference as educators, and how our experiences in this program might have changed us. Not all of these assumptions unearth implicit power relations, but all are significant in this context in that all are representative of the perspectives and beliefs that underpin the work we do. While our initial focus was to look at ourselves as teachers, it soon emerged that our broader role as academics, engaged in research as well as teaching activity, was just as pertinent to issues around personal and professional growth. Therefore, in writing our responses, and the ensuing analysis, we refer to ourselves as both educators and as academics, the latter being used to denote a role that encompasses a range of scholarly activities beyond simply ‘teaching’. In questioning the various aspects of our work, we allow for the possibility that our perspectives may have already changed, but we also argue that the process of identifying underlying assumptions and beliefs is, in itself, a consciousness-raising exercise. After careful examination, a number of key, inter-related assumptions emerged: *the mandate of transformation; equity; acceptance of diversity; ‘otherness’; and teaching over research.*

The mandate of transformation

One assumption that emerged from our reflections is that the adult learners in an enabling program are generally perceived as ‘ripe for change’ and ready to embrace all that the program has to offer. While it may be true that many students in the program are ready for such a change and committed to succeeding, there are those whose motivation appears to be lacking. In some cases, the behaviour of students does not indicate that they are even committed to achieving academic success, least of all personal transformation: *they don’t turn up to class, they are late with assessment, their classroom etiquette is less than desirable and so on.* Even with the most concerted of efforts on behalf of the teaching staff, such students can take up a lot of time and energy, and can have a negative effect on the classroom climate. At some level, all STEPS students are ready for change or they would not have enrolled in the

program, but this is not necessarily reflected in their attitude to their work in the longer term.

Because personal transformation is articulated as part of the STEPS philosophy, we felt that there is an expectation on us, as lecturers, to facilitate such change. Transformation is openly discussed with students and the role of self-reflection given considerable priority. Though students are not graded on it, writing a 'hero's journey' reflection at the end of the program is a compulsory activity. However, not all teachers in the program are entirely comfortable with this expectation:

While I believe that all forms of learning are invaluable and that for the individual education is a wonderful asset, I have not always been comfortable with what could be termed 'mandatory transformation'. The Hero's Journey, for example, is useful and it is a good experience for students to keep a reflective journal but it is important to avoid creating overt pressure to transform as a central goal of the course.

As teachers, we can also experience a sense of failure when our students do not embrace the concepts behind the 'hero's journey', or show any evidence that they are anything but superficially engaged in the program. The reality is that for some of our students, the STEPS program represents a ticket into university, rather than a life-changing experience. Furthermore, in making this kind of critical self-reflection mandatory, we risk taking advantage of our positions of authority, since not all students are comfortable with the level of emotional exposure that activities such as personal journalling require.

Despite some unease with the assumption that students will transform, we also recognise that many students do appreciate the opportunity afforded to them. Seeing how many students 'blossom' is clearly one of the biggest rewards of working in such a program: *Teaching in STEPS is very rewarding – it is a privilege to be a part of the learning journeys of our students, especially those who are so earnest in their efforts to make a difference in their lives.* Despite any reservations about assumed transformation, it cannot be denied that the changes experienced by some students are quite dramatic, and witnessing these journeys serves to provide inspiration to us as educators and as people, as well as broadening our understandings of human potential.

Equity

Related to this capacity for transformation is a belief that our work helps to achieve equity for students who have experienced genuine disadvantage. In making such a claim, it must be acknowledged that there are no guarantees that education can ever fully compensate for the disadvantage that characterises the backgrounds of many non-traditional university students. However, each of us reflected that the STEPS program does at least provide opportunities for students from a broad range of backgrounds to develop their academic potential:

My experience teaching Language and Learning in STEPS has reaffirmed my long held conviction that access to education is an essential element of civil democratic societies. The wonderful aspect of STEPS is that it allows people who may not previously have had the opportunity or inclination to pursue further studies to do so.

This philosophical commitment to the program is also evident in the following comment:

The social justice aspects of this work really appeal to me. We have some very capable women come through this program – those who are in their 40s or 50s but who were never given the chance to pursue their education when they were younger because of gender issues. It is really satisfying to see people like this just blossom in the program.

Therefore, the opportunity to help some students overcome disadvantage is another of the more rewarding aspects of our work and aligns with our personal beliefs about education and social empowerment.

Acceptance of diversity

Closely related to the concept of 'equity' is the assumption that working in STEPS means working with students from a wide range of backgrounds, many of which will be disadvantaged. One consequence of such diversity is that students bring with them an array of social and emotional problems. Therefore, one of the challenges for STEPS teachers is dealing with *the 'baggage' – psychological and otherwise – that STEPS students bring with them – often right into the classroom.* While the exploration of the personal is encouraged in STEPS, this openness also means the emotional and personal aspects are always close to the surface. In some cases, students present with serious emotional conditions and this can make the 'mentoring' role of the teacher quite challenging. Unless carefully managed, some students can develop an emotional dependence upon our support which can become a situation difficult to sustain.

However, we also acknowledge that dealing with this diversity has expanded our perspectives, as educators and as people. Not only have we had to develop our personal communication skills, but we have also developed a broader tolerance of, and appreciation for, the human experience. In some cases, the depth of the struggle of some individuals has made a lasting impression:

It has been a great experience to work with so many students from so many backgrounds and I have been deeply impressed by the students who, despite great hardship and difficulties, have been determined to pursue their educational goals.

As educators who come from relatively protected, middle-class backgrounds, we realise that we have encountered a broader spectrum of people than we might otherwise have done, as a direct result of working within the STEPS program. This has broadened our outlook on society by inviting us to question our judgments of people, who at first glance may present with less than favourable academic, social and emotional backgrounds. It also highlights the contrast between our own lives and our students:

Teaching in STEPS has also given me an insight into how tough some people are doing it. . . It makes me appreciate how privileged I am in terms of the opportunities I have been given in life.

'Otherness'

Though there are clearly many ways in which working in the STEPS program is a privilege, another assumption to emerge from these reflections is that working in an enabling program is perceived as a marginalised activity from a University-wide perspective. STEPS, along with the other access programs offered at the University, is frequently overlooked when it comes to teaching and learning policies and procedures:

There is an assumption that learning support is the 'remedial' part of university and that the students are less than capable. . . that we are working on the fringes of the university, with the fringes of society.

We felt that such perceptions of the program have an impact on our standing as academics, that we are somehow removed from traditional constructions of university academia, as evidenced by the following comment:

There would seem to be an assumption that this [distinction] makes STEPS teachers less credible in the sense of academic kudos, even though many of them are similarly or better qualified and experienced than some employed in Faculties.

Though the program, for the most part, enjoys a good reputation for the outcomes that are achieved for its students, the academic status of the lecturers involved does appear to be compromised.

The career path of the academic within an enabling program like STEPS also emerges as a disadvantage. While academics in STEPS are encouraged to have a higher degree, and a good proportion take on leadership roles and/or research projects, there are limited promotional opportunities:

There are no senior lecturers within our ranks, so there is no established career path for lecturers with a strong research, admin or teaching profile, seeking promotion.

Furthermore, the longer a lecturer remains within the program, the harder it may be for them to make the transition back into some discipline areas:

I do recognise that the longer I teach with STEPS the less likely it is I would be considered for a position in [my discipline area] as my experience in teaching in that area is fading into the distance.

Maintaining a healthy research profile was perceived as one way of insuring against that possible outcome.

Teaching over research

Related to the sense of 'otherness' experienced is the assumption that, as academics in the STEPS program, we are teachers first and foremost, and research is something that is fitted in around commitments to students:

Teaching comes first at the expense of all other academic activities. This means that research activity is often non-existent for long periods of time, and then hurriedly rushed together in down time (which itself has proved to be somewhat of a myth).

Though staff are encouraged to participate in research by those in senior management, it is not usually factored into the academic's workload. What is more, there is a 'nine-to-five' mindset about working in STEPS, with teachers being expected to be available to students most of the time, and, unlike being an academic in other parts of the University, working off-campus is not condoned. A sense of frustration with these expectations is evident in the following comment: *Within STEPS, I think there is an assumption that you will provide students with almost unlimited access.* The expectation is that lecturers interested in research will pursue such activities in the 'down time' between teaching terms.

The assumption that research work is a diversion from the teaching work seems to be taking a narrow view of these activities. Being an active researcher can have direct benefits on teaching activity, even when the discipline area is not directly linked to

‘teaching and learning’. For example, our own writing and researching activity has given us a depth of understanding of these processes which reflects in our teaching of these processes. What is more, our involvement of these activities provides a model of academic life for our students and, at a grassroots level, has enabled us to empathise with our students because we are also actively involved in writing and researching.

Despite the perception that research is not highly prioritised, it would be unfair to suggest that it was not valued at all or that there was no research culture within this part of the University. There exists a core group of academics who are involved in research and/or post-graduate study, and collaborative research projects are quite common. While most of us are relatively inexperienced from a research perspective, there is evidence of collegiality and mutual respect from which we benefit:

I have had the opportunity to work with dedicated educators and have learnt a great deal from my colleagues. Through a reading group, I had the opportunity to study intellectual ideas which have influenced the way I think and write.

It should also be noted that academics within the program have been generously funded to go to local and overseas research conferences over the years. A recent positive initiative is allowing academics to take on reduced teaching responsibilities in order to pursue research projects or meet study commitments. Such developments enable these academics to develop their research profiles and, in some cases, to participate more fully in the research culture within the broader University.

Implications

The process of identifying and questioning the assumptions that underpin our work has helped us stand outside of our practice and gain fresh perspectives. It has been a consciousness-raising activity from two aspects: firstly, it has given us an insight into the kind of reflection we expect of our students, and secondly, the process of identifying assumptions has encouraged us to question our perspectives, and perhaps finetune our initial impressions. The process of analysing our reflections and sharing them with each other has helped us to see that the challenges associated with being an educator in STEPS are, in some cases, also intrinsically linked with the opportunities. For example, the assumption that all STEPS students should ‘transform’ may seem unrealistic, and yet it is this same possibility for genuine transformation that provides us with inspiration and also broadens our understanding of human potential and resilience. Similarly, in looking at our broader role as academics, we identify certain frustrations associated with the view that we are marginalised and that research activity is not part of our core business. However, working within this part of the University has enabled us to grow in other ways, and we have welcomed the opportunities to contribute to a productive and collegial research culture. The other positive aspects, such as developing a broader appreciation for diversity, and helping to achieve equity, may also be directly linked to personal and professional growth.

We recognise that, in articulating this set of beliefs, we represent a privileged group in comparison to other groups of learners, and are therefore cautious about making claims of transformation. Our engagement with critical self-reflection does not compare with the “vocation of becoming more fully human” which was the focus of Freire’s work (1972: 41) with the peasants of South America, nor are our new insights as dramatic as the kinds of life-changing experiences that our own students often talk about (Simpson & Coombes, 2001). While the challenges identified in these

assumptions do not necessarily have the same impact as the “disorienting dilemmas” (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 1990) described in transformative learning theory, they do bring to light perceived tensions, and also reveal certain vulnerabilities on our part. In so doing, such reflections afford opportunities for adjusting assumptions about who we are as educators and what we do.

These findings also raise questions about the role of the academic, particularly in enabling programs. With Australian universities under pressure to broaden their access, as articulated in the Bradley Review (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2008), enabling programs are increasingly likely to come under the spotlight. If universities wish to recruit and retain high-quality academics to such programs, then there is a need to review their role in this context and how this might conform with or challenge constructions of the academic’s role in more traditional areas. The nexus of teaching and research has emerged as an area of concern, since it is clear that, for some academics at least, research activity is considered an integral aspect of their professional growth. We also acknowledge that the challenges and rewards identified in this context are not necessarily unique to those working in enabling programs. Therefore, the issues raised in this study can provide a starting point for further research into the role of the academic, both within and outside of enabling programs, and the challenges and opportunities that characterise this career path.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the concept of transformation and how it might be applied to a group of educators working in an enabling program in an Australian regional university. In order to do this, we engaged in a reflective process, not unlike the one we ask of our students, in which we considered our beliefs about the work we do and its impact on us as individuals. Brookfield’s (1998) theory of critical self reflection was adapted to develop a methodology that enabled us to stand outside of our own practice by identifying common assumptions about our role and what we have learnt. Though our original intention was to look at our experiences as teachers, broader issues such as our contribution to research and our positioning as academics in the University community emerged as significant in exploring the transformative potential of our work.

While we are cautious about ascribing the term ‘transformation’, we assert that the process of articulating our beliefs about our work and the program itself, comparing our thoughts with colleagues, and using the literature in the field as a frame of reference, has led to a heightened awareness about who we are as academics. This initial exploration highlights the fact that we are constantly learning: our experiences in this program have expanded our professional knowledge as well as broadening our personal worldviews and attitudes. A number of challenges and frustrations were revealed and these might suggest that the status of the academic working in an enabling program is compromised in some ways. However, these reflections also reveal the privileges associated with the work we do and the valuable opportunities for personal and professional growth. The learning journey of the educator (or academic), as well as the student, emerges an area worthy of investigation, particularly in light of the broadening landscape of tertiary offerings.

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