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TWO ROADS DIVERGED IN A WOOD, AND I – I TOOK THE ONE LESS TRAVELLED BY, AND THAT HAS MADE ALL THE DIFFERENCE: An early career researcher's narrative journey

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Abstract

The role of a university researcher, particularly in the light of recent reports, such as the Bradley Review into Higher Education, has changed substantially since the elitism of the Menzies era. One of the emphases in the Bradley Review is to increase members of groups under-represented within the system including those from regional areas. My current role as a university academic and researcher has been informed by my perception of marginalisation initially represented by my regional origins, gender and later my artistic practice. This paper will provide insights into key moments of my research journey using critical event narrative analysis in order to create a 'storied ground' which aims to link the reader socially and culturally to these experiences.

Polkinghorne (1988) notes that even though each of us has direct access to our own cognitive processes of meaning-making they are not directly observable to others. Therefore, the narrative events composed through this methodology have enabled me to construct, re-construct and ultimately make sense of experiences in relation to my research journey. In turn this allows others to engage with the events described in these narratives and connect with them according to their personal and professional experiences. In this paper I explore my transformation through three critical hybrid identity transformations: artist to artist-teacher; artist-teacher to sessional academic; and sessional academic to senior lecturer in the regional context. Bohl (1995) notes that the most important qualification for an event to be considered critical is that it has an impact on the person telling the story, and is usually a change experience that is not recognised as such until a certain period of time passes. Upon reflection these three events were crucial in forming my academic and researcher identity.

As Weeks (1990) notes, identity is about having a sense of belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. I am currently positioned in a regional university which, as the Bradley Review has recommended, is supporting marginal groups currently under-represented in the system. Critical Event Narrative Analysis (Webster & Mertova, 2007) has enabled me to reflectively consider how the events I have chosen have been informed by a sense of marginalisation which continues to affect, but also enrich, my current and complex position as an academic and researcher in a regional area. The findings from this research may assist those teachers and academics who take 'the road less travelled' to understand how their experiences shape and inform their interest in and commitment to those on the margins.

Introduction

This paper examines three significant hybrid identity formations in my life which have contributed to my role as an academic in a regional university. This research has been conducted using critical event analysis (Webster & Mertova, 2007) in order to describe and evaluate how these identity formations have contributed to my current role. The narratives that will be constructed from these events will provide the reader with an opportunity to consider the ways that these incidents have affected my teacher and researcher identity (Dunn, 2003; Kelchtermans, 1993; Trebiÿski, 2005) and in turn may also provide moments of recognition and connection.

In order to examine the experiences and transformation of three critical hybrid identity formations from that of artist to artist-teacher; artist-teacher to sessional academic; and sessional academic to senior lecturer, I utilised the qualitative narrative inquiry method and more specifically critical event analysis (Webster & Mertova, 2007; Woods, 1993). Narrative Inquiry uses a storytelling method in order to describe, through reflection and discussion, why the subject of the inquiry has acted in a particular way. Woods (1993, p. 102) describes a critical event as having the "right mix of ingredients at the right time and in the right context." Bohl (1995) notes that the most important qualification for an event to be considered critical is that it has an impact on the person telling the story, and is usually a change experience that is not recognised as such until a certain period of time passes. Measor (1985, p. 62) reveals that the incident itself represents the culmination of decision making and "crystallises the individual's thinking, rather than of itself being responsible for that decision."

The critical event method was utilised in these narrative accounts in order to investigate the complex challenges involved in the transformation of my identity as a teacher and a researcher.

Background

Growing up in a small country town at times felt stifling, hampered as I was by the extremes of weather and the lack of social activity. The only escape I had was through creating artworks and submitting them, rather hopefully, to various competitions. I used to imagine that part of me went with my artwork to different places in Australia. I remember the thrill of entering various competitions and being rewarded with small cash prizes or certificates. Being part of a large family meant that everything was shared – the engagement I had with my artwork however was very individualised and during these intense moments when I was working on one of my creations I experienced what Csikszentmihalyi (1996) described as the phenomenon of 'flow'. During these times I was able to forget personal problems, lost the crippling sense of self-consciousness I often experienced growing up and as a result felt empowered. The phenomenon of flow is often experienced by people intensely engaged in sports, games, art and music. Although these pursuits do not often provide conventional rewards, such as money or fame, Csikszentmihalyi and Rich (1997, pp. 48 – 49) contend the benefits of flow are themselves a motivating factor. As an arts educator I have found that this flow state is also important to encourage in students, particularly those who need to express their feelings when discursive expression is too difficult or inappropriate.

At the beginning of Year 11 the guidance officer at my high school encouraged my parents to enrol me in non-arts subjects so that I would have the opportunity to apply for university. I do not recall when the topic of university was discussed, or even if I had raised it. At this time arts subjects were not counted towards the Tertiary Entrance (TE) score and therefore the decision was made to focus predominately on science subjects. The feeling of being stifled intensified as I had to work extremely hard to try to comprehend difficult subject matter and any spare time was spent on study. I had also loved the piano, which I had studied since Year 3, but this was also sacrificed in pursuit of that elusive university place. It was as though I had been cut off from the life-line of creativity offered by my artistic pursuits. I endured Years 11 and 12 rather than enjoy them, but in an act

which emphasised the futility of my science laden senior years, I promptly applied for a Diploma in Visual Arts as my first preference on the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC) form. My application was accepted at a regional university predominately through my Year 10 art folio, a situation which revealed the full extent of my artistic stagnation in the final years of my schooling.

The bush track: Artist to Artist-Teacher

I approached university study with a degree of trepidation, and it was only my ignorance of the challenge which lay ahead that enabled me to break the bonds of a conventional lower middle class background which was itself a reflection of my parent's own upbringing. They were the children of Depression era Australians, and had no intrinsic respect for activities without clear financial benefit. There are distinct disadvantages experienced by first-generation students attending university (Gofen, 2009; London, 1989; Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg & Jalomo, 1984), and in my case this was exacerbated by my friends enjoying the financial security offered by employment. Other limitations included a woefully inadequate understanding of post-secondary education, limited academic preparation in high school and the all pervasive effect of financial pressure. I was keenly aware that it was only through the tertiary assistance program operating at the time that my family could afford to support me while I gained an undergraduate qualification. Their support was possible because they possessed an unexamined belief that education was vital, but the notion of a career as an artist challenged their understanding of what constituted gainful employment. In contrast with Gofen's (2009) findings, however, my parents were thus supportive of my university studies in an abstract, but not a specific sense. I was to "study hard" by reading and understanding content, even though this proved difficult in a studio context where the emphasis was on the creativity of making. Unlike visual arts students in a contemporary setting, there was no recognition of the importance of visual diaries, let alone a theoretical investigation of our work.

In the initial stages of my university education I experienced a profound "culture shock," which is described by Inman and Mayes (1999) as a significant cultural and academic transition in which one re-evaluates their family background. I was quickly overwhelmed by the constant exposure to new ideas and images which neither my conventional upbringing nor my schooling, had prepared me. Herzog and Pittman (1995) reveal that students from rural areas bring a different perspective to groups because they suffer stereotypes about what it means to be normal. I felt that I was a cultural outsider, a sense of marginalisation that led me to re-evaluate what I had hitherto accepted as a 'normal' upbringing (Aries & Seider, 2005; Granfield, 1991). My fellow students appeared to have already begun the process of forming their identity as artists and seemed, at least in my eyes, to be more familiar with this new, exciting and often frightening world. Though I had a passion for art, I was conscious, and in retrospect too conscious, of the gaps in my knowledge. This sense of unfamiliarity was not a completely negative experience, for I felt driven by an urge to learn, to experience, to 'catch up.'

The decision to study science at the expense of more creative, and thus less valued pursuits in my senior years, though well intentioned, left me without a theoretical or practical grounding in art. Any subsequent attempt to develop my identity as an artist was inevitably going to be inhibited by this seemingly trivial decision made by a guidance officer whose name I can no longer recall. It took almost two years of a diploma course before I felt that I had made good the ground lost during those two fruitless years spent in the science laboratories. With this growing awareness there came a commensurate improvement in my results which did much to obscure just how difficult the early years of my university education had been.

I majored in the discipline areas of ceramics and textiles as I enjoyed the tactile nature of the materials and the sculptural dimensionality they afforded. In retrospect, however, my choice of media did not represent as complete a break with my background as my growing intellectual success may have suggested. For I was oblivious to the fact that in the contemporary art world "any

work which has a craft pedigree does not stand a chance of being accepted ... the crafts person has a position but it is perceived as rural, reactionary, hidebound, skill-orientated and rooted in the ethics of toil and conservatism" (Dormer 1988, pp. 138, 141). Having been educated in an environment which some might have perceived as reactionary and conservative in itself, I may well have been unaware of this ideological conflict even had I studied senior art. Yet it was this debate which would have ramifications for my practice which went far beyond the confines of my own studio, and would ultimately shape the way an ostensibly accepting and open minded art community would view not just the quality of an individual piece, but the intrinsic worth of the process which created it. This elitism had a long reach, for it extended deep into regional Queensland where I first was employed as a teacher; shaping the place of art in the school curriculum to the point that it was timetabled after lunch, based on the pragmatic almost cynical belief that as the day wore on the students were less capable of grasping abstract ideas and were presumably more amenable to 'craft' based activities. For as Bennett (1985) noted, and as any teacher of art becomes painfully aware, there is a status hierarchy of schools subjects which disadvantages the 'practical subjects' such as visual art.

This ready dismissal of craft as an inferior pursuit was itself deeply embedded in my upbringing, during which my female relatives pursued craft-based work as a creative outlet in a world relatively devoid of such opportunities. The separation of fine arts and craft, and the perception of elitism which accompanied it, was thus even more keenly felt. It was not merely a rejection of what my relatives had valued, but to my youthful outrage it seemed to de-legitimize their whole experience. Time has softened that sense of outrage, as I came to understand that this was actually part of a vast historical process beginning with the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism which had separated the home and the workplace (Bermingham, 1992). The effect of this exiling of craft to the home was in turn exacerbated by the all pervasive Victorian ideal of domesticity which rested on a construct of the feminine which rendered the women as a spiritual guardian of the home, separated from the elite, or male, world of fine art. Nothing in my upbringing had prepared me to question the accepted social order of males and females, which anecdotally made the male, maths trained staff relegating art to the heat of a western Queensland afternoon strangely familiar. I was at the time unfamiliar with the work of Nochlin (2003), who described this world as one entrenched in meaningful symbols, signs, and signals, which has linked women with domesticity as a genetic and spiritual birthright, but the world she described was one I inhabited. I accepted many of the stereotypes which were prevalent growing up in a country town and did not fully comprehend the social mobility which would be afforded to me through the gaining of a university qualification.

The recession of 1987 occurred just as I was completing my undergraduate study, and the associated fear of unemployment made it almost inevitable that I would again eschew the road less travelled, and instead seek a teaching qualification at the expense of the far less certain world of art. The blow was softened by my belief that I could successfully balance a teaching career and an arts practice in a manner many women have sought to balance career and motherhood. It was, in one sense a difficult, though not impossible road to travel, and it is one that continues to confront arts educators. In a recent study of two pre-service teachers, Unrath and Kerridge (2009) concluded that it was not merely a difficult road, but was, in fact, one that was not traversable. They argued that it was simply impossible to be both a studio artist and a teacher. One of the participants in the study noted that in teaching they felt they were giving something back to their students. The implication was that art is a solitary, selfish pursuit, while teaching, by definition, is an altruistic activity which demanded the sacrifice of an arts practice. As a teacher educator in the arts who is still attempting to traverse this difficult road, I often reveal to my secondary art pre-service teachers that the passion they feel for their arts practice draws on the same qualities of passion, drive and creativity that are the hallmarks of effective teaching. It requires of me a confronting honesty, for I must concede to student teachers that teaching was a career choice made not in isolation from my arts practice, but was viewed almost as an enabler of that practice. Having established a culture of trust, it is then

possible to describe some of the experiences I have had as a teacher in which I have created environments of belonging where risk-taking, high standards of achievement, multi-modal thinking and individual responses were and are encouraged.

It was difficult to obtain a job in the metropolitan area close to where I had completed my teacher education course, and I eventually accepted a position in a rural area in south-west Queensland. In a situation that almost mirrored my first years at university, I was consumed by a sense of my unpreparedness for this role, which brought with it immediate leadership responsibilities. My feelings of inadequacy stemmed from the aptly titled "imposter syndrome" which refers to the feeling of not being as adequate or as capable as other people perceive or evaluate you to be (Brems, Baldwin, Davis & Namyniuk, 1994; Brookfield, 1995). To face the 'unknown' I relied heavily on the 'known'. I based almost my entire pedagogy in those first few years, when so many of my fellow teaching graduates had left the profession, on my studio art knowledge. Instead of my teaching becoming the enabler for my arts practice, in fact the reverse had occurred. My survival as a teacher was facilitated by my skills and passion as an artist, a situation I could never have envisaged. It was not merely the pedagogy that offered familiar touchstones, for the students and I shared a common heritage having been born and raised in a country town not dissimilar to the one I now taught in. In retrospect however, there was gender stereotyping which went unquestioned and unchallenged. The phrase 'boys will be boys' was often used by male parents to excuse bad behaviour, an ideology which found a ready audience amongst the wider school community. This perception was considered to be normal because a boy established his normalcy not in spite of his misbehaviour, but because of it (Adams & Walkerdine, 1986).

The critical event which transformed my identity from artist to artist teacher occurred during my second year of teaching. The Principal indicated during a staff meeting that he considered it important for student artwork to be showcased at the local show. At a subsequent meeting I broached the possibility of submitting a whole school entry, one which would require contributions from a much wider section of the school community. The submission, which took the form of an installation, had as its integrating device a representation of a child dreaming of the fictional worlds created by authors. Each student collaborated in the creation of bookmarks, posters, a school port filled with books and book reviews. Due to the physical separation of the art room from the rest of the school, and the compartmentalisation of the curriculum, it was the first time that I had really engaged with the staff as a whole. It was an ambitious plan, both in conception and execution, but the participation of the teachers could be relied upon both as an act of collegiality and of understanding of town pride.

Any sense of personal or professional isolation quickly dissipated in the harsh glare of co-ordinating a school wide project, a task made more challenging by the fact that I was offering direction to staff who were much more experienced and who were often my senior in the school hierarchy. The most challenging, and most rewarding aspect of the collaborative process was liaising with each of the year levels and their teachers, and in observing the growing dialogue between all stakeholders. The benefits of this experience has now spanned almost two decades, for it was the catalyst for my later doctoral work into the nature of the collaborative process. I was confident of the artistic merit of the work which was informed by my artistic expertise, a reaction heightened by the pride I felt at having overseen a project which had dwarfed the school's previous efforts. In the course of the project, I had transformed my perception of my role as a classroom teacher charged with the dissemination of skills and knowledge to an educator who understood the positive contribution of art to an entire community which had revelled not just in the creation of an artwork, but also in the sense of *esprit de corps* engendered by a common cause.

This sense of community was exacerbated by external recognition in the form of three ribbons of achievement including the 'Grand Champion for Open Schoolwork' , a 'First Prize - Secondary and Secondary Departments' and a 'Second Prize - Primary School with Greater than 100 Students'. As

Bandura (1986, 2001) and Maslow (1943) note, recognition of artistic merit increases self-esteem and if this is reinforced over the course of a student's education it contributes to a robust, resilient and healthy sense of self. It proved to be a moment of revelation, for I saw the value of art extend far beyond the confines of an academic or artistic discipline. I began to see the potential of art to create a positive sense of self both for the students I was teaching and for myself as a teacher. The success of this first venture in a truly collaborative process emboldened me I began to feel more comfortable in my role as a teacher after such a public success. Maslow (1943) also reveals that there is a relationship between artmaking and identity, but even more crucially noted that the discovery of one's identity comes from engaging the self. Such a transformative experience saw me break the shackles of my restrictive paradigm of the teacher as instructor, and assume the more complex, and ultimately more rewarding role of artist-teacher.

The woods: Artist Teacher to Sessional Academic

After teaching full time for six years, I began to explore the possibility of postgraduate study, and to this end began the process of choosing an appropriate course, a process that seemed a world away from the disempowered role I played in the earlier decision to study science. Discovering that in order to upgrade my Diploma of Art to a Bachelor of Art I had only a one year window of opportunity left, I enrolled in a degree course majoring in fine arts. I thoroughly enjoyed being re-immersed in visual art, so much so that shortly after its completion I enrolled in a Masters of Fine Art which I in turn converted to a Masters of Art (Research) the following year. Though I was able to make these decisions without being unduly influenced by financial or family pressures, I undertook relief teaching and short term contracts. This was as much about my fear of cutting myself off completely from the financial certainty offered by high school teaching as it was about any pressing monetary needs. I was also employed as a sessional academic in the visual arts faculty, an experience which makes my eventual shift into academia seem an inevitable progression, logically thought out and single mindedly pursued when in fact at the time it was essentially opportunism.

I was quite unprepared to be asked to teach at the university level. Although I was comfortable as a school teacher, having managed to survive the high attrition rate of beginning teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Johnson, 2007; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). I was asked by the Head of Program if I would like to assess some student assignments for the Faculty of Education. I agreed and found that my prior experience in schools had provided me with enough knowledge and expertise to comprehend and grade the students' work effectively. Ironically, my experience in high schools equipped me with skills that at times seemed to be lacking in the career university lecturers who had progressed direct to University following their undergraduate degrees. In the same year I was offered a teaching position in the Faculty of Education, one which would utilise my visual arts expertise as part of a visual and verbal literacies module. This critical event provided me with a fascinating insight into the link between what was happening in the pre-service teacher preparation course to what I was experiencing in the classroom. What was particularly striking about the two faculties was the marked difference between the manner in which the students engaged with the course and the pedagogy used to deliver it. The art students were on the whole quite accepting of course direction, pedagogy and assessment instruments. In contrast to this uncritical demurring to the wisdom of the faculty on almost all matters of importance, a small group of mature age students were particularly vocal about various aspects of their teacher preparation course which they carried into the module. In hindsight it became evident that these pre-service teachers had constructed a concept of effective teacher education from their own schooling. As Stout (1993, p. 34) observes pre-service teachers are "discerning participant observers ... hold[ing] strong opinions about effective instruction." This view is also supplemented by the conservative nature of socialisation that takes place for pre-service teachers through the cultural representations of teaching they encounter on school practicum (Armanline & Hoover, 1989; Champion, 1984; Giroux, 1981).

My developing identity as a teacher artist made it impossible to offer profoundly different pedagogical experiences to pre service teachers and arts students, even if I had felt it warranted. As a result I offered an integrated pedagogy which utilised my teaching skills to provide students with explicit instruction and demonstration. Yet it was also one which permitted me the luxury of using my artwork to communicate ideas to students, a pedagogical tool not incompatible with the belief that effective communication as a teacher relied on being able to present information succinctly, being sensitive to student interests and providing authentic assessment. As I moved between sessional teaching work in the fine arts and education school it became apparent that some of my fellow lecturers maintained a very clear delineation between the two styles, whereas my background informed a far more cohesive and integrated approach. In fine arts creativity and risk taking are encouraged, but ultimately the life of an artist is a lonely and competitive one. In education pre-service teachers are being prepared to create environments of learning and a sense of belonging. As I had learnt from my own journey, and as I am reminded daily in my teaching and research, the capacity for art to empower students has implications across all curriculum areas. Its potential as a tool to guide students to a fuller and richer understanding of their place in the world is too often ignored, or dismissed by those entrusted with the ultimate decision making powers at a grass roots educational level – the timetablers, the budget managers and the curriculum heads. As Freedman (2007, p. 214) states: “Art educators have long known that art helps students understand the human condition through their investigation of themselves.” It is time that we as artist teachers became more proactive in challenging ingrained thinking about art and demanded a more sincere integration of the incredible potential of the arts.

It also became quickly evident that my teaching experience gave me a degree of credibility often denied to equally dedicated practitioners. This professional credibility has been identified as important in alleviating the initial insecurity that school teachers feel when teaching in the university context (Sinkinson, 1997; Swennen, Shagrir & Cooper, 2009).

Despite a growing sense of my identity as artist teacher, I was still constrained by the uncertainty and instability of being a sessional academic without a permanent location in the university. Though the sense of alienation was keenly felt, it became apparent that mine was not a unique experience. While working in my capacity as the visual arts faculty representative on the sessional academics group I discovered a sizeable underworld of sessional academics experiencing the same sense of disconnectedness and disenfranchisement. As Bassett’s (1998) research reveals, sessional staff have few of the rights or privileges of tenured or contract staff, most notably opportunities to apply for funding grants or paid leave, themselves so often the means of securing tenure. The group’s siege mentality was exacerbated by the constant visual reinforcement of meetings being almost exclusively attended by female staff. The often unrewarded wait for tenure necessitated my acceptance of a full time teaching position in a school, while still maintaining my sessional classes at night. Although I still derived great satisfaction from teaching students in the classroom context, I had relished the challenge of teaching in the tertiary context. It was inevitable that I would give myself every chance of a university career by enrolling in a PhD. Unlike my experiences in Years 11 and 12, and later during my undergraduate study and early university employment, this change did not appear an insurmountable challenge. I had taken the path less travelled, but my destination seemed to beckon through the undergrowth.

The turning road: Sessional Academic to Senior Lecturer

My prior experience as a sessional academic had enabled me to observe and to understand what was involved in preparing unit outlines and assessment tasks. Though I am uncomfortable with a Titanic analogy, this was of course only the tip of the iceberg. The full scope of what an academic did was a lesson I would learn only too well in the coming months. Though I had aspired to join the ranks of the tenured, I was more aware of the benefits than the minutia of an academic’s day to day responsibilities. As a sessional academic I was not involved in or fully aware of such aspects as the

range of committees, administrative tasks, student issues, moderation meetings and the requirement for research publications that regularly confront the tenured academic. What was fully evident to me, however, was that a full-time position at a Queensland university was going to be extremely difficult to obtain. Again in a move smacking of opportunism rather than a coherent plan, I applied for and accepted a position as a Level B lecturer in arts education at an interstate university. Its status as a regional university was particularly appealing to me. My career as a teacher had benefitted from the impetus of regional service and the assuming of leadership positions almost immediately, and I felt that this might well be the case again.

Although many novice university teachers tend to experience isolation in their efforts to comprehend the university context (Barlow & Antoniou, 2007; Zeicher, 2005), I was fortunate to be informed about a program for new academics which provided the type of support required to begin teaching at the university level. The positive environment and the sense of belonging generated by the facilitators of this course was instrumental in allowing me to link learning outcomes, objectives and generic attributes from the earliest stage of my career. Though it might have seemed a haphazard journey, relying more often on the vagrancies of fate, it was clear that each experience had outfitted me for the role I was about to assume. It was evident that academics from other faculties had not received the grounding in teaching basics that I had received through my immersion in the classroom and this observation helped me to consider my own practice and presentation more carefully. An interesting revelation also occurred when I discovered that only a handful of my colleagues had even entertained the thought of attending the course. In their view they were *in* education, and had no need of a course *about* education.

I utilised my visual arts studio knowledge and teaching experience and expertise to provide my pre-service teachers with both a theoretical and practical immersion into engaging children and adolescents in art. We undertook a number of initiatives in the community and also held exhibitions of their work. I was surprised to discover that unlike classroom teaching – although there are several positive developments that might indicate a change in thinking – the university actually recognised good teaching through awards. During the five years I taught at this university I received a series of awards for teaching. However, the critical incident which occurred for me in the identity transformation from sessional academic to senior lecturer was the awarding of an Australian Learning and Teaching Council National Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning (2008). Due to my recognition at the university and national level, my mentor and friend, encouraged me to apply for promotion to Level C Senior Lecturer at the end of 2008. Whilst this process was still being decided I applied for and accepted a Senior Lecturer position at a Queensland university. In a neat conclusion to my five years interstate, one of the last pieces of official correspondence I received was confirmation that my promotion had been endorsed. Though my initial reaction was one of relief and validation, it led to a re-evaluation of how I would approach my new position, which in contrast to every other career development, was one that appeared a natural and logical progression from one situation to another.

The role description for senior lecturer makes a clear and unequivocal statement that such a person is expected to make a significant contribution to the teaching effort of a department, school, faculty or other organisational unit or an interdisciplinary area. An employee at this level is also expected to play a major role in scholarship, research and/or professional activities. Many teacher educators initially identify themselves more as a teacher than an academic, conveniently, but to their ultimate career peril, ignoring the expectation to be actively involved in research (Robinson & McMillan, 2006). The pressure on all academics to publish, regardless of level, is becoming increasingly intense given the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative being implemented by the Australian Research Council (ARC). The ERA will assess research quality within Australia's higher education institutions using a combination of indicators and expert review by committees to evaluate research (Australian Government, 2008b).

As part of my probationary period interstate I was compelled to complete my PhD within a specified period. As anyone who has tackled the PhD could attest, all things give way to the ogre which is the projected submission date. When viewed in the context of a high teaching load, the limitations in my research output during this period are understandable, but nevertheless the implications are clear. In an echo of my research on artistic collaboration, the formation of a research group in our faculty and the presence of a senior academic in our university acting as friend and mentor, research requirements became opportunities rather than onerous and ultimately threatening expectations. My mentor encouraged me to engage in a range of research projects, such as a national arts evaluation, and also provided me with the opportunity to supervise both Honours and PhD students. All of these experiences, which began as opportunities which I might have declined, have been instrumental in informing my current identity as a senior lecturer with responsibility for increasing the research profile of our campus. Our campus is relatively new, is located in a regional area and 95% of the predominately early career teaching staff have been awarded their PhD. I have been working to build the research culture on this campus and to this end we have established a research team which has been awarded university research funding to pursue the aims outlined in our proposal. The move from sessional to senior lecturer has taken five years.

The road less travelled: Conclusion

As I consider the three critical events presented in this paper which have related to my journey as an early career researcher, I can identify with the clarity only offered by hindsight, the extent to which circumstances have shaped my perception of myself as an artist, as a teacher, and as a woman. My awareness of this allows me the power to effect change (Diamond, 1991), for as my expertise has grown, I have been involved in increasingly more successful classroom and research experiences (Alsup, 2006). The challenges I have faced in relation to my rural background, gender and choice of career have provided me with important insights which relate to my current context as an early career researcher in a senior lecturer position.

The *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Australian Government, 2008a, p. 10) states that “the failure to capitalise on the abilities of all Australians is a significant economic issue for the nation.” Through this narrative journey I have begun to coalesce my various hybrid identities and see them as essential facets of my life which have provided me with important insights into the student cohort on our campus. Many of the students, like me, are from rural backgrounds, female, have attended government schools, are the first in their family to attend university, like to work collaboratively and are focussed on improving their situation. These descriptors were also evident in the findings from a decade of studies on the first year experience in Australian universities (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005).

It is essential for academics and universities to conduct research on their student cohorts in order to determine what support structures are needed to provide a quality student learning experience for all students including groups who are currently under-represented, “those disadvantaged by the circumstances of their birth: Indigenous people, people with low socio-economic status, and those from regional and remote areas” (Australian Government, 2008a, p. xi). Universities have changed markedly in the last thirty years and can no longer afford to be seen as elitist and unresponsive to social change. Continual observation and reflection on performance is an essential part of a reflective practitioner’s desire to sharpen sensitivity to their practice. As Unrath and Kerridge (2009, p. 283) state “reflection fosters accountability.” The opportunity to reflect on these critical incidents has allowed me to re-evaluate how my skills and expertise in the classroom community, and as a researcher, can be applied to the wider university community context by allowing each learner to have a presence and a voice and to be recognised as an individual. Through writing this narrative account I have also been given a voice which offers a “resistant or counter-hegemonic viewpoint” (Bowman, 2006, p. 9) to the life I may have had without the opportunity to attend university.

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