Metaphors for, in and of Education Research

Edited by

Warren Midgley, Karen Trimmer and Andy Davies

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS

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CHAPTER ONE

'WALKING THE LABYRINTH':
A METAPHORICAL UNDERSTANDING
OF APPROACHES TO METAPHORS FOR, IN
AND OF EDUCATION RESEARCH

WARREN MIDGLEY AND KAREN TRIMMER

Abstract

In the literature on education research, the word labyrinth is often employed to refer to complexity in processes and/or contexts, most commonly with negative connotations: a place of dead-ends and frustrations. This chapter draws on a model of the unicursal labyrinth, a design known since the Bronze Age in Europe, Asia and the Americas, in which there is only one path which leads to the centre. This design is used in some traditions as a tool for personal reflection, self-discovery and spiritual renewal: adherents 'walk the labyrinth', knowing that it will lead them on a winding path that takes them at times very near to, and at times very far from, the centre they seek. They continue with the belief that if they continue to follow the path, they will not only arrive at the centre, but also will have discovered much along the way. This chapter applies the walking the labyrinth metaphor to introduce this volume of chapters on the use of metaphors for in and of education research.

Introduction

Metaphors can be useful conceptual tools for, in and of education research. One common use of metaphor in education research is to illustrate or explain a concept in a way that will communicate effectively to the intended audience. For example, Freire's (1985) metaphor of *banking* has proven to be a useful tool for understanding his conceptualisation of a

transfer of knowledge approach of pedagogy. However, metaphor can also provide a useful tool for analysing dimensions of a complex concept or phenomenon that might not be so clearly available for examination. For example, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) used the metaphor of a *rhizome* to explain their conceptualisation of the complex system of connections that make up the internet. Buchanan (2007) then used this same metaphor as a critical framework of analysis to interrogate the nature of the complex system of connections of the internet, concluding that in many respects, the internet was not as decentralised as the rhizome metaphor. Thus, metaphor can be employed to suggest new avenues for investigation of phenomena.

This chapter employs metaphor in this second way. In this sense, metaphors are conceptualised as mechanisms for exploring abstract, novel and speculative ideas (Yob, 2003), that can lead to new forms of conceptual insight (Zhao, Coombs, & Zhou, 2010). They not only provide a framework for enabling people to make meaning of their lives (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), but they can also help researchers make meaning of their work, professional identities, and the worlds they inhabit as researchers. This chapter begins by briefly telling the story of the metaphor of *walking the labyrinth* and then articulating a framework of analysis suggested by this metaphor. Then, the framework developed from the walking the labyrinth metaphor is applied to introduce the chapters in this present volume and suggest possible ways of reading them. The chapter concludes by outlining ways in which this framework might be applied more broadly.

Walking the Labyrinth

In the literature on education research, the word labyrinth is often employed to refer to complexity in processes and/or contexts, most commonly with negative connotations. Often it is a metaphor used to express frustration. As an example, Green, Camilli and Elmore (2006) write, "Having survived the labyrinth of AERA committees" (p. xi) to communicate the difficulty they experienced in negotiating their way through a complex series of committees and their associated requirements. Similarly, Watkins and Tisdell (2006) use the metaphor to describe the complex role of degree program consultants in adult education. In these ways, labyrinth is being used to refer to a maze that has a series of confusing and frustrating dead-ends. Whilst this is an acceptable use of the word in everyday speech, this is not the meaning of the word labyrinth that is employed in this chapter.

The *labyrinth* that forms the basis of the metaphor in this chapter is the unicursal labyrinth that has been known since the Bronze Age in Europe, Asia and the Americas (Pennick, 1994). This labyrinth is a pattern that traces one single pathway from the entry point to the centre. The pathway is not a direct one; generally it weaves in and out, near and far from the centre. However, there is only one pathway, and following that one pathway will inevitably lead to the centre. The unicursal labyrinth plays an important role in some spiritual traditions to guide journeys of self-discovery (Visser, 2000). *Walking the labyrinth*, as this devotional practice is sometimes known, requires a person to literally walk along the path of a unicursal labyrinth. The journey of this walk becomes a sacred space in which the person engages in self-reflection, with the hope of achieving greater awareness. A similar understanding of labyrinth has also been found to be useful in the development of therapeutic tools for problem solving and achieving mental focus outside the various spiritual traditions in which it was originally developed (Peel, 2004).

In this chapter, we draw from the metaphor of walking the labyrinth to provide a possible framework for engaging with the chapters in this book. The dimensions of this framework are:

- Purposeful engagement
- Ongoing reflection
- Embracing unfinalisability

Purposeful engagement

The practice of 'walking the labyrinth' requires the participant to make the choice to follow the path all the way to the centre. At any time, the participant could simply step off the path, and walk straight to the centre, or indeed straight back home should he or she so desire. The conscious and proactive choice to follow the path from beginning to end can be seen to be a metaphor for the concept of purposeful engagement (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; McMillan & Forsyth, 1991) which points to the commitment to and belief in the intrinsic value in engaging in an activity for the purpose of personal growth and learning, as opposed to simply completing a task to achieve an extrinsic goal. Clearly, the reader has made one kind of decision in starting to read this book. To purposefully engage would involve more than simply reading to the end for the sake of completing the task (or skipping to the end to get it over with). Engaging purposefully involves actively seeking to follow the path where it leads – in this case, actively choosing to follow the lines of thought prompted by the different ideas presented in different ways throughout this book.

Ongoing reflection

The goal of walking the labyrinth is to create a space for personal reflection. To read the chapters in this book with this metaphorical understanding in mind indicates an attitude of ongoing reflection. This kind of reflecting encompasses more than merely revisiting past actions; a more critical reflection (Yost, Sentner, & Forlenza-Bailey, 2000) will also explore the personal beliefs, values, assumptions, aspirations and goals that underpin those actions. It is the hope of authors and editors alike that the different ideas explored in the chapters that follow would be a catalyst for this kind of ongoing engagement.

Embracing unfinalisability

One of the potential concerns that might be raised with seeking to purposefully engage in ongoing reflection is what Markova et al. (2007) have called the dilemma of dialogic heterogeneity. They note that the process produces what might be seen to be an infinite regression in cycles of reflection, such that no kernel of truth can ever be identified. In the writings of Bakhtin (1981) this phenomenon is called – in English translation – unfinalisability. Rather than lamenting the lack of definitive conclusions, this attitude to reflection, and indeed to research more broadly, allows for the opportunity of continuing to develop and learn.

Therefore, whilst walking the labyrinth of this volume, we would encourage readers to be purposefully engaged in ongoing reflection with a mind that is open to always discovering something new. This new discovery might be something that the reader adopts as a personal belief, or it might be something that the reader chooses to accept as a perspective that is different to the one he or she holds. In either case, it will lead to a fuller understanding of the world in which we operate as researchers, educators, and human beings.

Journey through the chapters in this book

Our journey begins with a toast of wine, traditionally an appropriate way to begin an adventurous quest that may be arduous, but also exciting with challenges and lessons to be learnt along the way. Chapter 2 explores the expressive and evocative nature of metaphorical language in the context of wine tasting notes. The introduction of Conceptual Metaphor Theory gives a sound basis to the beginning of our journey and assists in providing a framework that may also be reflected upon as we venture into further

chapters. We also become aware that the journey, and the use and meaning of metaphor, will differ for each individual who enters the labyrinth. The chapter considers cross cultural studies and how meaning of metaphorical language, its intent and interpretation may be impacted in different socio-cultural contexts.

We next venture closer to the core of this labyrinth in Chapter 3 to investigate the value and use of metaphor in education and also research. Metaphors enable teachers to bring personal and social understandings to the fore to engage their students and make meaning of less accessible knowledge. This powerful link to personal dimensions of knowing through the use of metaphor has also been used by teachers in narrative research to support reflection and collaborative inquiry. Chapter 4 continues this path through consideration of metaphors in mixed methods research. The use of metaphor to promote innovation and insight through challenge of entrenched views of traditional methods and provision of multiple perspectives assists researchers to develop robust approaches to mixed methods research studies.

The next phase of our journey, through Chapters 5, 6 and 7, takes us deep into the labyrinth where we come up against challenges to our quest. Taking on the role of heroine we confront our nemesis, which takes the form of completion of a PhD, and come forth victorious from the vortex transformed, wiser and with the aim of enlightening and empowering others taking on the challenge of doctoral study. Chapter 5 explores the complexity of the doctoral research journey as a transformative process from novice to expert through the metaphor of Persephone's journey through the ancient Greek labyrinth. Metaphor is shown as a powerful means for interpreting the lived experience of research, and the chapter articulates the inchoate experience of personal transformation, to make manifest the underworld of the doctoral journey. Chapter 6 uses a different metaphorical journey to elucidate the author's lived experience as a doctoral student. This chapter likens the doctoral quest to Harry Potter's with decisions to publish throughout candidature being the horcruxes experienced as goals along the way in his journey to defeat his nemesis, Voldemort. Chapter 7 considers the nature and impact of stressors faced by doctoral students and early career researchers through the metaphor of a spiralling vortex that is all consuming of time and emotion. Strategies to assist with navigating safe passage and achieving the central goal whilst maintaining well-being are highlighted.

Having established our need to promote well-being along our way, we next move on to the spiritual dimension of our journey in Chapters 8, 9 and 10. We remain on our PhD journey in Chapter 8 but also move on to

explore how authentic Yoga teachers incorporate spirituality in their teacher training programmes. This chapter also assists in making the distinctions between metaphor, simile and analogy, introduces the narrative analysis technique of restorying, and uses the metaphor of the Kosher model to analyse the layers of self in the journey to find transcendence at our spiritual centre. Chapter 9 continues the doctoral journey with the use of restorying. By embracing the madness of method in educational research, the metaphor of rhizomatic thinking is introduced as an alternative to the arboreal metaphor of the tree of knowledge. Meaning is made in relation to teenagers, musicking, schooling and literacies through rhizomatic restorying that that recognises complexity and weaves together discursive threads to acknowledge new imaginative ways of thinking. The arboreal metaphor of the tree of life is the focus of Chapter 10. This metaphor, symbolic of the interconnectedness of life and earth, has ancient roots in many cultures and religions. The Native American worldview is explored and also the view of Indigenous Australian culture. The metaphor is applied to working cross culturally to elicit learning and grow knowledge and understanding in participatory action research.

Our journey with metaphor now takes another turn as the following four chapters 11, 12, 13 and 14 demonstrate the use of metaphor as a conceptual tool to assist in constructing meaning in a diverse range of educational research contexts. Chapter 11 explores the tool metaphor as a way of understanding and conceptualising the use of digital technology in teaching students with Autism Spectrum Disorders. This is done through consideration of case studies of lessons utilising interactive white boards. It highlights the need for teachers to be constantly aware of their pedagogical goal as complex digital technologies have the potential to become the focus of instruction and distract from the true pedagogical goal. We then take a sharp turn in Chapter 12 to consider the use of metaphor in a quantitative research context. The use of metaphor as a conceptual tool is used to communicate and interpret how the quantitative approaches of complexity theory and probability theory were used to develop a model of risk-taking in decision-making by school principals. Researchers in educational leadership are increasingly using complexity and chaos theory as a tool to provide greater understanding in dynamic educational environments. The use of metaphor assists in making these complex tools accessible to all educational researchers irrespective of preferred methodological approach by using familiar concepts to link to unfamiliar concepts and thereby create new meaning. This use of metaphor as a tool to bridge conceptual understanding is again applied in

Chapter 13 in the context of whole school development and change. The Innovative Designs for Enhancing Achievement in Schools (IDEAS) school renewal process is the focus of speculation on the power of metaphor to assist in the facilitation of cognitive connection and development of new knowledge required to promote positive and unified change in schools and their surrounding communities. This phase and our journey ends with Chapter 14 where metaphors extracted from a collection of transnational students' own accounts are analysed to explore the impact of international orientation, mobility, adjustment and adaption to foreign environments, such as new schools. The identification of the many metaphors used to help elucidate such a lived experience, are used as tools to gain an improved understanding of the student experience and as a means to consider ways to better support parents, teachers, schools and community services that contribute to transnational students' social and educational development.

Our journey through the labyrinth reaches its destination at the centre with the construction of meaning in these final chapters where diverse aspects of our adventure and varied uses of metaphor as a conceptual tool in education research are explored. The value and nature of metaphor, its challenges, and its spiritual and pragmatic dimensions provide challenges to consider on our journey's path to assist and guide future forays in your own education research.

Walking the labyrinth of this book

The journey outlined in the preceding section is, of course, just one possible pathway through the chapters of this book. The reader may choose a completely different path through the chapters and sections presented. The metaphor of walking the labyrinth introduced in this chapter is not intended to suggest the most appropriate order of reading through the chapters. Rather, the metaphor is used in the broader sense of providing a suggested model for engaging with some or all of the various ideas presented throughout this volume.

Conclusion

The intention of introducing the metaphor of walking the labyrinth was to serve three purposes. Firstly, it was selected as a useful metaphor for presenting the various chapters in this volume, which include a broad range of different ideas presented in a range of very different ways. The principles of purposeful engagement, ongoing reflection and embracing

unfinalisability – drawn from the metaphor itself – provide a useful framework for thinking about and responding to the ideas presented herein. This same framework might also be applied to education research more broadly, and in this second sense, the metaphor is also a useful mechanism for introducing a collection of essays about metaphor in, for and of education research. Thirdly, employing a metaphor to introduce this volume that is about metaphor, seemed an appropriate way to set the tone for the chapters that follow. We invite you to walk the labyrinth as you read this volume.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Lindy Abawi (lindy-anne.abawi@usq.edu.au) is a Senior Lecturer in Curriculum and Pedagogy at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. She has taught Secondary Art and English, Primary Music and English as a Second Language. A member of the Leadership Research International (LRI) group, she assists in the facilitation of the Innovative Designs for Enhancing Achievement in Schools (IDEAS) revitalisation project in schools. Lindy's doctoral thesis explored teacher 'language-in-use' and its close links to pedagogical action.

Amy Antonio (Amy.Antonio@usq.edu.au) is an Associate Lecturer for the Australian Digital Futures Institute at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. She is an early career researcher who was awarded her PhD from Deakin University in 2011. Amy is using her humanities background to inform her research interests which include social media and policy, social media in higher education, mobile technologies for student engagement and digital curation tools to build and sustain digital communities. Amy is engaged in a number of upcoming Digital Futures projects including the piloting of a digital curation framework at Griffith University and embedding ePub into course delivery.

Renee Baynes (renee.baynes@usq.edu.au) is a Lecturer in Indigenous Studies with the Centre for Australian Indigenous Knowledges at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. Renee's primary research interest is the engagement of school teachers with Indigenous Knowledges in their classroom teaching praxis. Broad areas of academic interest include critical pedagogy, Indigenous studies and neo-liberalism. Renee is a founding board member of The International Institute for Critical Pedagogy and Transformative Leadership and co-editor of the journal *Taboo*.

Ali Black (a.black@cqu.edu.au) is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education and the Arts at CQUniversity, Australia. An educator for more than twenty years, her experience spans the contexts of early childhood to tertiary. Ali's areas of research expertise include education research, curriculum theorising, arts-based and narrative inquiry and early childhood

education. Ali has published for a variety of national and international audiences and has been involved in a number of research projects that inquire into teachers' work and what it means to teach; that explore ways of knowing and identities; and that promote understanding of self and context. Lately, her work seeks to foster connectedness through the building of reflective, aesthetic and creative lives and exploring the conditions that enhance meaning making, wellbeing and community.

Roslyn Cameron (r.cameron@cqu.edu.au) is a Senior Lecturer and Head of Discipline of Human Resource Management at the School of Business and Law at CQUniversity, Australia. She is co-convenor of the *Mixed Methods Research Special Interest Group* of the *Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management* (ANZAM) and a founding board member of the *Prior Learning International Research Centre* (PLIRC). Her areas of research interest include skilled migration, workforce development, labour mobility, vocational education and training (VET), recognition of prior learning (RPL) and mixed methods research. Dr Cameron has received over $1.09 million (AUD) of research funding and has over 70 publications. She has worked on a series of workforce development projects for the Australian rail industry which include: skilled migration; attraction and image; skills recognition; and coaching and mentoring. She has contributed chapters to edited books in relation to the use of mixed methods in DBA theses, VET, career development and in management disciplines and RPL.

Susan Carter (susan.carter@usq.edu.au) is both an educational practitioner and an early career academic. She has a Master's degree in special education and is currently a Lecturer at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. Susan has been an educator for 20 years, 13 of which have been spent as a principal or deputy principal in both rural and metropolitan Australia. As an administrator she has worked in small schools as a teaching principal, larger schools as a deputy principal, a principal of a P to 10 school and also as a principal of a large rural school. Susan is a member of the Leadership Research International (LRI) research team and she is currently working on completing her doctorate. Her areas of research expertise include the subjective well-being of school principals, educational leadership and special needs. She is currently researching the instructional practices and accommodations utilised by teachers for students with disabilities. She recently presented at a national ACEL conference regarding her research on principal's subjective well-

being and is in the process of publishing another paper concerning the decision making utilised by teachers of students' with disabilities.

Joan Conway (joan.conway@usq.edu.au) is a Lecturer and member of the Leadership Research International (LRI), a research and development team in the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. She is an active consultant, facilitator and researcher of the IDEAS Project, a school improvement process that for fourteen years has been used by over 400 schools nationally and internationally. It is the impact of this process within schools and education systems that forms the basis of research in which Joan's expertise lies in the areas of teacher leadership, schoolwide pedagogical development and implementation, and capacity building for sustainable school improvement. She has a strong interest in school-based research investigating the relationship between teacher leadership, school improvement and teacher professionalism for enhanced pedagogical praxis, with research leadership roles in two recently funded projects for large education systems. Joan is a co-editor of and contributor to several publications including research books *Creating Connections in Teaching and Learning* (IAP, 2011) and *From School Improvement to Sustained Capacity* (Corwin, 2011) and presents at conferences pertaining to educational leadership, school improvement and professional learning.

Allison Creed (u1009065@umail.usq.edu.au) is a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. Her tertiary education and employment have entailed training and assessment of adult learners focusing on language and literacy skill development across various industries. Earlier in her career she trained and worked in the Australian wine industry. Allison began a PhD in July 2012 after completing two Masters Programs at USQ and undergraduate studies at CQUniversity, Australia. Her research focuses on the interpretation of metaphor and evoked sensory experiences elicited by metaphor in wine discourse – specifically Australian wine tasting notes – facilitated by the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU). She takes a trandisciplinary approach to explore sensory embodiment and cross-cultural transfer of metaphor through a textual, conceptual and behavioural analysis framed by Conceptual Metaphor Theory and a situated theory of embodied cognition.

Andy Davies (adavies@sidra.org) is the Education Manager for Critical Care Services for the Sidra Medical & Research Centre, Doha, Qatar, a paediatric and woman's specialty hospital. He is a PhD candidate at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. His research explores how Yoga teachers incorporate the notion of spirituality within their Yoga teacher training programmes. As a long term Yoga practitioner, nursing educator and critical care clinician, he has a strong interest in the notions of care, spirituality and the education of these. He is a member of the Capacity Building Research Network at the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. He is a co-editor of and contributor to the research book *Echoes: Ethics and Issues of Voice in Education Research* (in press). As well he has contributed to several papers for scholarly journals, and presented at several national and international conferences for both educational research and nursing care.

Roselyn Dixon (roselyn@uow.edu.au) is a Senior Lecturer in Special Education at the University of Wollongong, Australia, where she is Postgraduate and Undergraduate Coordinator of Special Education. Her areas of expertise include: social skills for people with intellectual disabilities, culturally relevant education programs in indigenous communities and the sustainability of digital technologies for students with autism spectrum disorders. Roselyn has received funding for projects related to culturally relevant programs in Indigenous communities, professional development for teachers, students with autism spectrum disorders, behavioural interventions for students with ODD and research into the successful implementation of Interactive White Boards and iPads for students with autism spectrum disorders. She also co-authored a text book for undergraduate teaching students entitled, *Teaching in Inclusive Environments* (David Barlow & Associates, 2013).

Janice K. Jones (jonesja@usq.edu.au) is a Senior Lecturer in Arts Education and a member of the Capacity-Building Research Network Faculty Research Centre in the Faculty of Education at the Toowoomba campus of the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. Janice's leadership and teaching experience spans 30 years' of international teaching and management in schools and in the tertiary sector in the UK, Canada, Korea, Turkey and Australia and as a lecturer and Program Coordinator for the Bachelor of Education at the University of Southern Queensland. A Churchill Fellow, Janice's current research and teaching interests include the arts, creativity, literacies and technologies as resources for social justice, and lifelong learning, and their uses in schools

and in teacher education. Janice's publications in these areas include book chapters, scholarly journal articles and international and national conference proceedings.

Warren Midgley (warren.midgley@usq.edu.au) is the Director of the Capacity Building Research Network at the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. In this capacity, he leads a team of 16 academics engaged in many different projects aimed at enhancing learning and teaching outcomes in schools. His areas of research expertise include the education research, sociolinguistics and digital futures in education. Warren has worked on funded projects involving virtual worlds (SecondLife) and Remote Access Laboratory technology for enhancing teaching and learning. He has a significant publication record in fields relating to education research including as co-editor of and contributor to the research books *Sustaining Synergies: Collaborative Research and Researching Collaboration* (Post Pressed, 2010), *Beyond Binaries in Education Research* (Routledge, 2011), *The Role of Participants in Education Research* (Routledge, 2013), and *Constructing Capacities: Building Capabilities through Learning and Engagement* (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013). He has also contributed chapters for several other scholarly books on education research, several papers for scholarly journals, and presented at several national and international conferences.

Stewart Riddle (stewart.riddle@usq.edu.au) is a Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. Stewart's research interests include Deleuzian studies, literacies education, alternative schooling philosophies and music; in particular, forming assemblages between these areas. As an early career researcher, Stewart has contributed chapters to edited research books, papers to international journals and has presented at numerous Australian and international research conferences.

Karen Trimmer (karen.trimmer@usq.edu.au) is the Assistant Dean Staffing in the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. In this role she manages 45 academic staff across a range of education disciplines providing management advice regarding both teaching and research. She has managed small and large scale longitudinal studies in education, including projects in early childhood, primary, district high and secondary schools in metropolitan, regional and remote areas of Western Australia for the Department of Education and

Training resulting in research reports utilised for policy development within the state. She has also conducted reviews and authored reports evaluating outcomes of government initiatives, with impact on legislation, for the Parliament of Western Australia. Her research interests include decision-making by school principals, policy and governance, political pressures on rigorous and ethical research and quantitative methods and she has presented at national and international conferences and participated on national committees for evaluation of Commonwealth Partnership Agreements related to the Digital Education Revolution and early childhood education. Her recent publication record as a sole author relating to the field of education includes: *Independent Public Schools: A Move to Increased Autonomy and Devolution of Decision-making in Western Australian Public Schools* (International Journal of Childhood Education, 2013); *Policy for All? The impact of centrally developed, universally applied policy on decision-making in Western Australian public schools (*International Conference Innovative Research in a Changing and Challenging World, 2012); *Non-compliance by school principals: the effects of experience, stakeholder characteristics and governance mechanisms on reasoned risk-taking in decision-making,* (Curtin University of Technology, 2011); and *Sequential use of Rasch analysis and structural equation modeling to investigate reasoned risk-taking in decision-making by school principals, (*15th International Objective Measurement Workshop, University of Colorado, 2010).

Donna Velliaris (donna.velliaris@adelaide.edu.au) has been based at the University of Adelaide over the past six years and is an early career researcher having completed her PhD in Educational Sociology in 2010. Originally located in the Centre for Learning and Professional Development (CLPD), Donna was an Academic Learning and Language (ALL) lecturer and coordinator of the university's undergraduate Writing Centre. Donna then moved to the School of Education where she was a teacher trainer lecturing many and varied subjects across the Graduate Diploma in Education program, including being coordinator of English Curriculum and Methodology and piloting the first preservice teacher international practicum placement to Peru in 2011. Most recently, Donna has been a Postdoctoral Research Fellow leading a Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) commissioned project investigating Australian higher education research over the period 2007-2012. Donnas' main areas of interest and expertise include academic literacies, human ecological theory and transnational students/Third Culture Kids (TCKs).

Irina Verenikina (irina@uow.edu.au) is Director of Graduate Teaching at the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, Australia. She holds a Masters (Honors) in Educational and Developmental Psychology from Moscow State University, Russia, and a PhD in Psychology from the Russian Academy of Education, Moscow. Irina is a full member of the Australian Psychological Society. Before moving to Australia, she held a research position in the Russian Academy of Sciences, International Laboratory of Communication and New Technologies. In 2002-2008 Irina represented Australia and New Zealand as a member of the Executive Committee of ISCAR (International Society for Cultural Research and Activity Theory). Her research interests relate to the application of sociocultural psychology and activity theory to the study of the effective use of digital technologies in teaching and learning in various educational contexts such as music education, literacy teaching and special education. Irina is the author of more than one hundred publications including three books on Educational Psychology.

Craig Willis (craig.willis@adelaide.edu.au) is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Civil, Environmental and Mining Engineering (Faculty of Engineering, Computer and Mathematical Sciences) at the University of Adelaide, Australia. Teaching large classes of up to 550 students, Craig has developed innovative ways of providing continuous formative feedback using interactive teaching techniques, peer instruction and professional engineering processes. In the space of two years, he was recognised with a total of seven awards for excellence in learning and teaching at faculty, university and national levels. These included the Stephen Cole the Elder Award, the University's premier teaching prize in 2010, which was followed in 2011 with an Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning. His research expertise extends to diverse themes, including the first year experience, active learning strategies, e-learning, engagement with large classes, safety in design, peer feedback, multiple choice assessment and student equity.