

Vulnerability: An uncomfortable means to a positive place

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Abstract:

In this chapter, as three women in academe, we share our metaphors of transformation. Metaphor has provided a powerful tool for capturing, making explicit, and thus transforming our tacit understandings of ourselves as individuals and the continual revisiting and reformation of our professional identities. Metaphor has been a vehicle operating in the creative space between our private and public worlds (Hunt, 2006). Our initial metaphors shared with openness and an acceptance of a vulnerable state provided each of us with the self-confidence and ability to transition from “set mindsets” regarding our views on teaching and learning towards “growth mindsets” (Dweck, 2008). We share and analyse new metaphors through images and conversations (available via YouTube). These metaphors invite further exploration of our experiences, through which knowledge creation and change is enabled in relationship with each other. Through the process of sharing and analysing our metaphors, we have found that the metaphor images become embodied. Their significance to us, as colleagues, becomes carried forward and is often applied to new personal and professional situations.

We have come to believe that accepting the state of vulnerability and working within it enhances the quality of relationships, positive interactions and connections. Through doing so, we have a far greater understanding of our roles and responsibilities within a shared teaching and learning context. Accepting, and working with our vulnerabilities, supports relationships absent of fear, ridicule and harassment, and results in greater creative expression, exploration and imagination.

First connections

In 2010 we came together as 10 early childhood educators who delivered our courses via print-based documentation and an academic developer for the purpose of redesigning our courses. At the time, the university put the print-based handbook, study guide, and readings on a CD-ROM and sent these to students. We often had little contact with students until the first assignment was due. Despite teaching students about constructivist educational theory, we realised that we did little to promote a deep understanding of constructivist philosophies. This was unsatisfactory to us. Using online tools (LMS) effectively to stimulate student-student as well as teacher-student interaction was a new experience. We achieved our goal through a process of collaborative workshops involving all team members. Enthused by the camaraderie developed through the process, a smaller group decided to continue weekly meetings to design the online presence for each of the units. We decided to trial the Sakai LMS, which provided a more interactive system than the university chosen Blackboard tools. At the time, Blackboard was used by most of the university staff as an extension of the CD-Rom and print-based system. Very few academics designed learner/activity-centred programs. Our group of six women in academe formed a learning community, meeting

weekly to challenge and support each other in the process of refining our thinking about interactive online learning. During these meetings we challenged each other to rethink our philosophies and practice. Nicole shares her metaphor of her experience; one which we describes the common experience.

Chicken skin and the Napali Coast

In 2016, I visited the beautiful Hawaiian island of Kaua'i with my family. Remaining with me is a vivid memory of the moment my eyes focused on the stunningly beautiful Napali Coast from the height of the helicopter I was sitting in. Chicken skin... goosebumps... appeared as I stared at the beauty and expanse of this rugged, lush coastline.

My memories of our reconceptualist work at [UNE], too, are strong in terms of emotion, feelings, associations and relationships, and less vivid in terms of the actual events and timelines. The emotions, feelings, associations and relationships cause the same degree of chicken skin...goosebumps...as the Napali Coast.



Like the chicken skin which appeared at the sight of the Napali Coast, I long for the goosebumps of an exciting pedagogical conversation that challenges me to look anew and/or re-examine and replan teaching and learning.

I long for the goosebumps of regular get-togethers with colleagues who share a common purpose of collaboration rather than competition. My sense of belonging within the research team was profound and I enjoyed moments of leadership and true collegiality and professional connection.

When I share the experience of our reconceptualist work with academic colleagues at my current institution, I first discuss the incredible devotion of time and energy we gave to the inquiry, and the incredible feelings of professionalism, respect, integrity and positivity I experienced in return. I long for the return of chicken skin...of the bodily reaction of goosebumps to reconceptualist work.

Following our time together we have each changed work locations, yet we each have sought to recreate the joy and excitement of working within a “connected” team. Like Nicole’s Napalie Coast, an inhabited island with a coastal range, which can only be accessed by hiking, sea or helicopter tours, we have come to feel that exhilarating professional experiences that produce “chicken skin” are out of reach. The coastal range is breathtaking, yet tourists and trash have taken their toll, just as the pressures, conflicts and compounding duties take the toll on our professional interactions. Our professional lives are missing the relationships that arose from working closely together. In each of our new environments, we would like to share the collaborative spirit. This “powerful means of significant and lasting personal growth may, through our other relationships, lead to substantial organizational [and social] change” (Christenson, Eldredge, Ibom, Johnston, & Thomas, 1996, p. 188).

Patchwork metaphor

In this section, Cherry shares her metaphor describing her search for the “tie that binds”:

Since I can remember, I have always been interested in joining pieces of fabric to seeing what I could do with them. I hated to leave even small cut-offs unused and experimented designing with scraps. Some years ago, I grew tired of the traditional piecing methods for creating a patchwork quilt. At that time I had an animal print that I felt could be enhanced through patchwork techniques. I randomly cut out each animal and then began to add ‘scrap’ strips left over from my strip piecing days. As each individual piece grew in size and random shape, I began to wonder how they would ultimately fit together. I could not find a way that could be used to bring each of the individual pieces into a pleasing whole. I put the pieces away, thinking that I would approach the task again when I could visualise the finished product. The pieces are still sitting in my workshop. It has become a UFO; in the patchwork world—an unfinished object.

This UFO has become a metaphor for my learning design team experiences, that is, many learning design team experiences have been fractured and unpredictable with lots of unresolved diversity in personality perspectives. Some of these experiences have been quite successful while others have been indisputable disasters. Very much like my ‘bits and pieces’ quilt effort, teams often do not find the mechanism that binds their personal perspectives, engendering cooperation and a collaborative culture.



Figure 1: Found image of incomplete patchwork design

The missing link

As I thought about my 'team' experiences, I am not sure why my mind reflected back on my UFO or became 'attached' to the found image (Figure 1). For whatever reason, the image represents the unpredictability and incompleteness of team experiences. My initial response was to focus on the individual blocks with their unique colours and individual compositions. I likened these to the unique qualities that each team member brings to a learning design

project. Some may have more dominant personalities, while others are subdued. For each, the threads of daily life may create distractions limiting the group task.

As I reflected on the composition of Figure 1, I realised that all the 'blocks' were different sizes and widths, and that stitching the quilt together would be difficult without 'cutting them down'. Doing so would make the compelling attraction of the whole quite unappealing. It is the diversity that invites the viewer to look more deeply. Similarly, without thoughtful consideration towards how each person's contribution might enhance the team's efforts, achieving goals to a high standard becomes a frustrating experience.

I eventually verbalised the hidden thought: "What holds these "bits and pieces" together and makes the quilt a captivating image?" The query led me to focus on the stripped fabric used as 'filler'. I became fixated on the 'filler' – "Why does it work so well?" "How does this relate to effective teams?" My mind took over the asking and answering while I pondered the image. It has continued as we shared our metaphors and as we investigated why our collaborative team experience is such a memorable working and learning experience. Just as the 'filler' in the quilt connects the pieces producing a creative and innovative design, so the connection between us created a productive working space based on a willingness to be open and sharing, trusting each other as we shared our innermost thoughts and challenges; even when we felt exposed and vulnerable.

Connecting through vulnerable spaces

Meeting and discussing regularly were our primary focus during our early ECE meetings. These were meetings where we focused on communicating for decision making. Initially, we thought collaboration would be achieved through our constructive talk; however, as we moved into the smaller group focused on making pedagogical transformations, we found that our talk became something different. This new 'talk' was about learning, particularly self-learning, rather than suggesting and convincing. We began to expose our unique 'self' and came to understanding rather than arguing for one's point of view. Christenson et. al. (1996) describe this as dialogue as opposed to discussion. Through the connection of dialogue tensions might arise resulting from differing perspectives and opinions; yet, the pain of ambiguity and marginality are resolved through a sharing of trusting and respectful emotions, and empathy based in personal accountability. Our personal and group reflective activity resulted in valued personal growth. Our interpersonal experiences contributed to realigning our synaptic networks, reshaping how we viewed our contexts and how we, in turn, approached our daily interactions with others outside our dialogue cohort (Siegel 1999).

What is the difference between communicating in an everyday space and a vulnerable space. How is communication in a research meeting, ideas/values, vs stuff. Incomplete and unfinished ideas that are in the process of becoming. Defined boundaries, vs undefined spaces that evolve and grow. Structure and cohesiveness - not predictable and boring. Learn something about the individual's tasks at hand. "Think and rethink for sustenance.

Connections and relationships metaphor

My knitting is the story of my experience as an academic over the past eight years. Every year or so I add more as my story of who I am in this place evolves. It is not the story of successes or failures. It is not the story of my accomplishments. Rather, it is the story of moving from a place of isolation to a place of belonging. The single most important experience that began to shift me from feeling like a fraud who did not belong in academia towards a feeling of belonging was working together with a strong group of women to decide

who we were in our quickly changing academic space. For the first time I began to place myself in a position of vulnerability as I shared my metaphors of teaching and learning. Somehow, having a metaphor to represent my thoughts and feelings and ideas allowed me to enter a shared space of vulnerability. In the end, the connections and relationships that developed as a result of being a part of a group where vulnerability was celebrated helped to make me resolute in my determination to seek out relationships and connections where I could be vulnerable.

Whereas initially the experience of connecting through vulnerability was somewhat chaotic and frightening in my mind, over the years it has become far more harmonious. It has just become a part of who I am around those whom I choose to be connected. This does not mean that I choose to expose my vulnerability to the broader academic community very often but the connections and relationships in which I am vulnerable are giving me the strength to be more vulnerable in the broader academic community. They give me the courage to begin to stand at the steps of the stadium exposed for brief periods of time. For me it is about learning that it is OK to be who I am as an academic rather than the idea of what it is believed an academic should be. It is OK for me to be tentative, caring and reflective rather than to be sure, product focused and deliberate.



Figure 2: Brenda's knitting depicting her learning journey.

The value of sharing metaphors

Investigating the UFO metaphor has provided an avenue to dig deeply into our internal 'states of mind'. Our sharing of found images has supported visualisation, and has brought hidden turmoil and questioning of our personal responses to the surface for deeper examination. These metaphoric images, are interwoven with our identities and have helped to open doors towards self-reflection and self-expression providing a means to 'step-back'

and take note of our academic lives and relationships (Craig, 2009). We have found that the sharing of metaphors invites us into vulnerable spaces.

Locating an image to share did not alone provide powerful insights. Rather it is the interpretations we have given to the images. Our interpretations have brought together our thoughts and feelings associated with our actions and experiences. Putting these concepts into words linked to emotional responses. We placed ourselves into vulnerable positions of uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure (B. Brown, 2015).

Interpreting the image and sharing our feelings are virtually inseparable processes. Thought and emotion are integral – emotion without cognition is blind, cognition without emotion is vacuous (Scheffler, 2010). The critical activities of describing, interpreting, judging and theorizing our chosen images are interrelated and interdependent (Barrett, 2010). The process opens up the space where we examine together 'hard to reach' issues and challenges. They are emotional and embodied elements of experience that are always present, yet rarely directly acknowledge (S. D. Brown, Cromby, Harper, Johnson, & Reavey, 2011).

Our sharing of visual metaphors supported the raising of difficult issues that were largely subconscious or subject to social or psychological inhibitions (Pain, 2012). Reavey (2012) suggests that engagement with the image disrupts the narrative and encourages us to reflect on the social and material context of our experience, not just the when and where, rather brings us back to the *why* (Sinek, 2009). Sharing metaphors engaged a mindful state harnessing the neuroplasticity of brain function thus altering the synaptic connections by disengaging automatically coupled pathways (Siegel, 2007). That is, by coming to recognise the why, we begin to ask new questions and reinterpret the experience in light of new thoughts and actions.

Bringing the light onto these challenges sustained changes in attitude and confidence leading to more effective actions. The sharing of metaphoric images supported our individual mind's ability to free itself from the enslavements of prior learning and practice.

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