Chapter 6

You've Got to Put Your Stamp on Things: A Rippling Story of Success

Robyn Ober and Jack Frawley

Introduction

In a recent report into the transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into higher education, it was stated that 'success exists on a spectrum defined by individual and collective terms, as well as a range of measures utilised by universities and government departments'. Success was viewed not so much as measured outcomes but more as a 'ripple effect of many small successes' (Kinnane et al. 2014, p. 10). In addition, the report identified that successful transition into higher education through targeted pathway programs critically depended upon supportive family and community relationships, dispelled myths and raised expectations. Throughout Australia there have been many 'small successes' of Indigenous individuals who have completed higher education, but these stories are largely absent from the literature. There has, instead, been a strong focus on the barriers and challenges to Indigenous participation (e.g. see Andersen et al. 2008; Ellender et al. 2008; Oliver et al. 2015; Thomas et al. 2014).

Policy concerns about addressing equity in higher education have been debated and refined for a number of decades. While increased support for equity groups is both necessary and highly valued, it is becoming increasingly evident that targeted programs and activities, which are tailored to the needs of each separate equity group, are also required. Arguably the most disadvantaged equity group is that of Indigenous higher education students. Indigenous people face multiple disadvantages in education and employment where race, disability, gender, location and economic status all contribute. Higher education has a critical role to play in improving

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the socio-economic position of Indigenous people, their families and their communities. However, pathways into higher education are often complex to navigate, and the systemic and practical challenges and restraints faced by Indigenous students can ultimately hinder their participation in higher education. They often involve concerns relating to equity and social inclusion. Inherent to pathways is the issue of student transition defined as the capacity to navigate and engage with change without having full control over and/or knowledge about what the change involves. Research shows that the transition to university represents a period of disequilibrium as students move from a familiar environment into an unfamiliar one, resulting in significant life changes.

To cope with these life changes and to attain a sense of success requires a high level of self-efficacy. Social cognitive theory (Bandura 1977) proposes that learning occurs in a social context with a dynamic and reciprocal interaction of the person, environment and behaviour. Self-efficacy, as a key element of social cognitive theory, is a significant variable in student learning because it affects students' motivation and learning. Bandura (1977) defined self-efficacy as beliefs about one's own ability to be successful in the performance of a task. The four sources of self-efficacy are mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion and emotional arousal (Bandura 1977). Self-efficacy is not created by easy success; it requires experience in overcoming obstacles and difficult situations through continued effort and persistence. Academic persistence can refer to students continuing with their studies despite facing obstacles, setbacks and challenges. Self-efficacy requires authentic successes in dealing with a particular situation. This provides students with authentic evidence that they have the capability to succeed at the task. Resilient learners are willing to give it a go and persist with their learning (Deakin-Crick et al. 2004). Students obtain information about their own capabilities by observing others, especially peers who offer suitable possibilities for comparison. Students often receive information that affirms and persuades them that they are able to perform a task and this is most effective when people who provide this information are viewed by students as knowledgeable and reliable, and the information is realistic. West et al. (2014, p. 14) suggest, 'relationships, connections, and partnerships are critical elements of creating a welcoming and supportive environment'. Also, a positive outlook drawing on positive emotions strengthens students' self-efficacy. Research shows that confidence in one's relevant abilities can play a major role in an individual's successful negotiation of challenging situations, and that students who hold high expectations for themselves do so in part because 'they trust in their capabilities and in part because they see the world, and their ability to respond to it, as less threatening' (Chemers et al. 2001, p. 62).

Approach

Carlson (1991) states that the narrative mood of social science research allows researchers 'to illustrate not just events but individuals' perspectives on the nature and meaning of the experiences in question' (p. 257). LeCompte (1993) agrees, stating that the promotion of the narrative is 'a postmodern remedy to the positivistic canon of conventional science', in that it overturns 'old dichotomies between the research/practice, author/text, subject/object, knower/known, method/procedure, and theory/practice' (pp. 13–14). Narrative inquiry is the study of story, interpretation and discourse, and an investigation of what happened, the significance or meaning of that and how it is told or shared (Thomas 2012). Narrative inquiry describes human action through stories which may be oral or written, may be accessed formally through interview or informally through naturally occurring conversation, and may cover an entire life or a specific aspect of a life (Thomas 2012).

The narrative mood of this chapter was established by the two authors having a 'yarn' around the topic of 'success'. Yarning as a research method is flexible and adaptive and allows participants to 'become partners within the research process, not just individual contributors' (Dean 2010, p. 7). Robyn Ober is a Mamu/Djirribal woman from the rainforest region of North Queensland, and Jack Frawley is a non-Indigenous Australian with extensive experience of living and working in remote Aboriginal Australia. Robyn provides her story:

Innisfail is my great grandmothers' traditional country, and we are of the Bagirigibara clan. I spent most of my early childhood years growing up in the beachside township of 'Flying Fish Point'. The 'Point', as we affectionately call it, sits on our beautiful homeland, where the rainforest meets the sea. Growing up in a large extended family in a small community meant you were never alone, your cousins were your best friends, we looked after each other, we understood about our responsibilities to look after younger ones, we knew how to share what little we had. These are the values that were instilled in us from an early age from our old people. Values of respect, reciprocity and relationship in all aspects of our life, personal or professional. Education was especially important to our old people, because many of them were denied a quality education, leaving school at an early age to work as cane cutters or domestics to help their families. They fought hard against racist government policies of the day to invest into the future for their children and grandchildren. This type of teaching, and way of life, set me up with a strong foundation to build on and move onto greater, more ambitious things. After I completed grade 10 at Innisfail High School, I enrolled at the local business college, and undertook the office and business administration course. However, with employment opportunities very scarce in a small town, I soon found myself unemployed for 12 months, before I finally won a position as a library aide at the local Catholic School. This was my first experience of working in the education profession which in fact actually prepared me for future positions as an Aboriginal Education Liaison Officer, primary school teacher, adult educator and academic researcher.

Robyn and Jack's personal and professional relationship spans some 25 years during which time they have collaborated on research projects and research publications. The topic of this chapter grew out of a national seminar in which Robyn was a member of an Indigenous higher education graduates panel that discussed a

number of questions around the concept of success. Questions to the panel, and later to Robyn in a recorded telephone interview, were:

1. What constitutes success for you?
2. What motivated you to be successful?
3. What does success look like in higher education?
4. What were some of the challenges you faced in your higher education journey?
5. What measures provided by your family, friends and community assisted you in your successful higher education journey?
6. What measures provided by the university assisted you in your successful higher education journey?
7. What would your advice be to universities to facilitate success for Indigenous students?
8. What would your advice be to potential Indigenous higher education students to facilitate success in their study?

The interview was transcribed, and line numbers were added to allow for coding and reference. The two authors then conducted a thematic analysis of the interview and then discussed the emerging themes. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) state that 'thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data'. The thematic analysis followed these steps:

1. Familiarising ourselves with the data: transcribing the interview, reading and rereading the interview, noting down initial ideas
2. Generating initial codes: coding interesting features of the interview in a systematic fashion across the entire data set and collating data relevant to each code
3. Searching for themes: collating codes into potential themes and gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
4. Reviewing themes: checking if the themes work in relation to the coded interview extracts and the entire interview, and generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis
5. Defining and naming themes: ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme with reference to the self-efficacy literature
6. Producing the chapter: selecting compelling interview extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, and collaboratively producing a paper (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 87)

Results and Discussion

The focus of the narrative is initially on pathway experiences leading to a decision to undertake higher education studies, the experiences of transition and reflections on success. Robyn's story is woven through the discussion.

Pathways: Stumbling in

Unlike the present day where career advisors are part of the Australian educational landscape and are a coordinated effort by Australian and the state and territory governments, vocational guidance in the mid-twentieth century varied from state to state and was 'concentrated in metropolitan areas rather than in rural and regional areas' (Wright, 2012, p. 333). Situations still occur where Indigenous students have 'a lack of appropriate careers advice in schools that prevent them from achieving their goals' (Shah and Widin 2010, p. 31). This often leads to students making either ill-informed career choices or none at all, and with very little formal direction. Robyn explains:

I kind of stumbled into education without really trying after high school. You know, there was no work in the town I was living in and then a position came up as a Trainee Library Aide and so that got me into the education – it was a local Catholic school and so from a Library Assistant to a Teacher Assistant to a Liaison Officer. Even at 17 and 18 I kind of stumbled into the education field, if you like.

Often it was a case of circumstances, of being in the right place at the right time and making a decision to grasp the opportunity. Often supportive workplaces encouraged staff that showed promise. Robyn states that it

was through circumstances ... I was offered it. It was an Aboriginal identified position and I won it and then other opportunities happened in that school and so that – the funding for that closed and then they said, oh, but there's – we'd like to keep you on as a Teacher Assistant or a Liaison Officer, so it was the workplace that provided like a pathway for me within the school.

Changing circumstances can result in adjustments brought about by geographical relocation or introspection. Relocation can sometimes be a strategy 'to find employment or to just generally improve living conditions' (Arthur 1999, p. 19). This was the case for Robyn.

We left Queensland and then I followed my family up to Western Australia and then eventually to B¹ after that, so it was a little bit of everything happened along the way.

Introspection suggests an awareness of the need for change and that during a period of change and uncertainty 'we naturally take comfort in our enduring connections with friends and family' (Ibara 2002, p. 43). Robyn's enduring connection was with her auntie.

I wasn't happy in Kununurra, where I was living. I wasn't working and so my auntie M suggested B, so again, you know, these people just crossed my pathway and one thing happened after the other, but people like auntie M they were role models for me. She encouraged me to go into Teacher Education.

¹ Personal names and institutional names have been anonymised throughout the chapter.

Transition: I Know What I Wanted to Say

Transitions into the academy require developing the capacity of students to change and students seeking support to enable that change. Students entering the academy require a sense of purpose and engagement with their peers and with university life (Naylor et al. 2013). Often this also happens through circumstance. Robyn explains:

My family, they were really excited about me doing some sort of tertiary study from things like that, and then as I started in the course, I began to get really motivated because of the ... just working with other people who were passionate about education. They were experienced people who came from school. Where for myself, although I worked in a school and had that experience, I didn't really have a classroom, but I was with people who actually were experienced teachers. I saw them as role models and just their passion working with older people like E and B and P, and people who were currently in the education field and I think that rubbed off on me. And so their passion about education, and about Aboriginal education, and seeing how our kids succeed, I suppose, I think again, it was just I'd get lots of involvement and it kind of happened. When you're around people like that, that rubs off on you and you begin to see things the way they see it.

Engagement with the multiple discourses of the disciplines requires 'communicative competencies' which are critical to persistence and success (Day et al. 2015). Students, like Robyn, face a range of challenges (Devlin 2009) when they enter the academy, and chief among them is the ability to develop a repertoire of academic literacy abilities, including reading and writing for academic purposes.

Some of the challenges were around academic writing. I found that especially in the B course, they – not that it wasn't in the B course, but we were doing our Bachelor of Arts in Education and it was the same course that was being run in D University and I just felt there that there was – I couldn't – I just have problems with being able to write in an academic way. I didn't have the repertoire. The linguistic repertoire of the words, the vocab. I knew what I wanted to say, but I didn't quite know how to say it in an academic way, in an academic writing style and so that would frustrate me and I knew that I spent nearly hours with the lecturers, with J and R and people like that would just sit with me and we had quite a lot of discussion about, just extra – trying to get – getting there to express myself and try the words – what my position was or what my standing was on certain subject and then working with me to try and get that on paper, but at the same time helping me with words that might have been unfamiliar to me. Trying to expand my vocab in that whole way and that was challenging. Also reading academic text. I found that – I still find that quite challenging. Not as much now, but I found it hard to focus and concentrate on reading academic articles that I'd have to have a thesaurus or a dictionary with me to try and work out what these authors were saying, but that worked hand in hand, too because the more I found the more I read. The more academic texts that I read, the more I became confident in writing in an academic way.

The Behrendt Report (Behrendt et al. 2012) emphasised the important and essential role of providing student support to ensure that Indigenous students succeed in their studies. Robyn drew on this support. The support takes a variety of methods and modes, including face-to-face and one-to-one support within residential or online teaching and learning. The essential factor of the support is that it is holistic and meets both personal and academic needs.

We had tutors. The higher education student tutors would help us in the B courses, in the undergraduate Associate Diploma of Teaching in Aboriginal Schools. We had tutors who would come in and work with us and that was the D program, we had tutors who would come in and they would be people who would work with us when the lecturers went back to D University, so we had support people like Mr H and people like that used to work with us and just support us. Just like practical things like people to talk to if you just felt homesick and missing your families and things like that. We had people in the student services, residential who you could just yack to....

The support most valued was that informed by meaningful relationships established through connecting with the Indigenous Education Units, other students and with the teaching staff. Robyn's relationships included lecturers, although Asmar (2015, p. 21) believes that 'a key aspect of the supportive learning environment is students' relationships with other students'. West et al. (2014, p. 14) suggest 'relationships, connections, and partnerships are critical elements of creating a welcoming and supportive environment'. Martin et al. (2015, p. 4) believe that effective teachers 'are able to connect with students in multiple ways including emotionally'. Similarly, West et al. (2014) state that culturally aware teachers are often the most effective in providing appropriate support.

... the relationships, just to talk to some lecturers who were there just to support us, so they were approachable if we had problems and things like that we were able to talk about it and that. Part of my ... when I did the D course too, that was quite challenging for me. I found that I was able to contact the lecturers at D University and have a chat with them. There's a few times when I wanted to pull out of the course. I just couldn't do it and they were able to come alongside me and encourage me and talk about, try doing it this way or think about this or things like that ... I think it came back to people who you felt comfortable to talk to. Most of the time it would be the lecturers because you'd built up that relationship and that rapport over the years and it was – it actually became, you know, it was like a little family instead of the staff and student ...

Discussion

In his seminal work on self-efficacy, Bandura (1977) asserted that self-efficacy is developed through four sources: mastery experiences, which are defined as overcoming obstacles through perseverance; vicarious experiences through social models influenced by perceived similarities; verbal persuasions to overcome self-doubt, including exhortations and self-suggestion; and physiological state, which consists of physical responses – including stress, arousal, depression and mood – to threatening environments and situations. The following discussion draws on the work of Bandura (1977) and is intertwined with Robyn's narrative.

Mastery Experiences: Overcoming Obstacles

Persistence and resilience can lead to a sense of achievement and satisfaction and a feeling of academic maturity. Academic maturity can refer to independent learning, self-regulated learning or self-management, and objectives than can be attained by using these modes of learning as steps in the learning process (Engelbrecht and Harding 2002). For Robyn:

It's probably about achieving short- or long-term goals for yourself that you set for yourself. I think success is kind of around that. How you achieve your goals and tasks whether it's small tasks or large long-term goals, but I think success also is about your feeling – there's some sort of satisfaction that you've done something and that there's some sort – you're happy about where you are in life and what sort of things you've done to.

Vicarious Experiences: Mentors and Models

In researching teaching and learning practices that work effectively with Indigenous students, relationships are viewed as being key (Nobin et al. 2013). According to Tolbert (2015), relationship pedagogy requires teachers to be authentically respectful and caring for their students, both academically and socially. Tolbert (2015, p. 1328) states that 'a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations also entails that teachers position minoritised students as agents who construct knowledge in the classroom'. Establishing equal learning relationships with others is part of this, and for Robyn this included relationships with lecturers and other students.

I guess that space that was created for us where we felt comfortable to learn together. To share, to create knowledge together by discussing, debating and yarning. All of that thing in my undergraduate was really just learning together and helping each other and having that support around so when we did have to have that individual part, like writing an essay or write a report, we felt quite confident, if you like, to do those things on our own, so I think that whole thing of collaborative learning, collaborative work, relationship with staff and the students ... There's also room for us to learn from others ... I can come alongside and I can learn from this person and some of the things because I'm an Aboriginal woman I may say, well, that doesn't apply to me, but I would take on board and I would learn from other people what they have to offer and I've found that's the best way for people who want to succeed.

Verbal Persuasion: Putting Your Stamp on Things

There are a number of challenges faced by Indigenous students, including a lack of confidence in their own academic ability (Cairnduff 2015). Research shows that confidence in one's relevant abilities can play a major role in an individual's successful negotiation of challenging situations and that students who hold high expectations for themselves do so in part because 'they trust in their capabilities and in

part because they see the world, and their ability to respond to it, as less threatening' (Chemers et al. 2001, p. 62). Robyn explains:

It's good to have that confidence and it's good to have that strength there ... I set goals for myself like completing my Associate Diploma and completing the degree and things like that ... I think once I knew I was interested and passionate about education then I began to set goals and tasks and that for myself ... I don't feel uncomfortable or awkward or things like that, but I think it's all that part of me as someone who's come through the journey and I've learnt things along the way. I can call on people if I need their help. I would say to see yourself as a learner. That's what I had to learn. It's good that we come in with knowledge and we know – we bring in a rich cultural heritage and what we've learnt in our own lives and our life's experiences, that's good, but there's also room for more learning. We're learning all the time ... but at the same time you know you've got to put your stamp on things.

Physiological State – Overcoming Shame

Indigenous student satisfaction matters (Shah and Widin 2010), and to achieve satisfaction often depends on a range of affective qualities, including persistence, resilience and confidence. Academic persistence can refer to students continuing with their studies despite facing obstacles, setbacks and impediments, as experienced by Robyn. According to Gale et al. (2010), two of the key barriers to higher education are low academic achievement and low motivations/aspirations. This can lead to a range of emotions.

My heart wasn't really in it ... you feel ashamed ... sometimes I get a bit overwhelmed by everything and then you don't want to talk to – you feel ashamed to tell anybody that you're not up to date with your next chapter or the draft and then you go into a little hiding mode and you want to do the disappearing act.

Although support is available, often it comes down to a student's resilience. Resilience has been defined as 'the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances' (Masten et al. 1990, p. 426). Resilient learners are willing to give it a go and persist with their learning even though they may feel confused or ashamed (Deakin-Crick et al. 2004, p. 255). Robyn advises

You've got to look at what your priorities are, but within reason I will take opportunities to say, you know, I'm scared, I'm nervous ... but I'm going to have a go, I'm going to try and I'm going to do it to the best of my ability.

Conclusion

The academy has contributed to this story of success through responsive pedagogy. The concept of 'culturally sustaining pedagogy' describes pedagogy that supports students 'in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities

while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence' (Paris 2012, p. 95), and a pedagogy that requires teachers to 'attend to both marginalised and dominant cultural and linguistic practices that expand minoritised students' opportunities to learn' (Tolbert (2015), p. 1330). This approach, which was part of Robyn's experience, results in students and teachers 'repositioned in an assemblage of interlocking relations and practices that converge in often contingent and non-deterministic ways' (Martin et al. 2015, p. 10).

The whole thing about work, work and shared learning, that was something radical for me because coming straight from the high school, coming straight from a mainstream workplace back home, it was really quite different ... Even the curriculum at that time was very integrated ... when I was a student, everything was integrated. It was one thing led on to the other, so our workshops were very community issues driven kind of workshops and they were, again like I said, quite radical for its time there.

White (2015, p. 14), in reflecting on a teacher education program, discusses an approach that 'nurtured the development of very important ideas' and was 'generative and foundational'. This approach informed the program that Robyn attended. The sharing of community aspirations as well as the 'rich possibilities of collaborative learning' was seen as fundamental to the development and design of the program.

A lot of the things that we talked about and we unpacked, if you like, came from real issues, from the grass roots and I think that drove the course, that drove the curriculum and it also drove us, and as students it was nothing for us to stay up late into the night and talk and discuss and write songs about separate issues.

Success takes many shapes and forms. In this story, success is a ripple of many small successes from at first stumbling into the teaching profession and then, through the right kind of support and with the right attitude, persisting through to personal achievement. Along the way there has been a willingness and desire to engage with the academy, to develop competency in the multiple discourses, to establish personal and professional relationships, and to develop a strong sense of self-efficacy.

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