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Reflective piece

Work, life, illness and the academy: a personal reflection

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I had chatted to her – via email – just a few days before I read the email:

> "There is no easy way to share this deeply sad news. Our editor-in-chief Brenda Leibowitz passed away today at 15:00 after having an adverse reaction to chemotherapy..."

Brenda had shared her diagnosis of cancer with me during our email conversation. This was familiar territory for me, so I related my story of survival, reassuring her that "it will be ok". But it was not …

I did not know Brenda well, but we shared some deep connections – a passion for teaching and learning, a commitment to social justice, and living and working with serious illness. This personal reflection candidly talks about illness and recovery and its impact on me as a teacher and learner.

In her book, *Hemispheres. Inside a stroke*, Karen Lazar (2011) writes about "returning separated parts into a whole and coming home to the self", after suffering a stroke.

This reflection explores my journey back to self after my world was turned upside down by serious illness.

Discovering self: the student and teacher lost

As a student, I thought my lecturers knew everything. They had written books, they appeared in the media and they stood in front of classes spouting knowledge – often oblivious to their audience: 17- and 18-year-olds, fresh from school, who really had no idea how to learn. I sat in class, frantically taking notes. I would stare violently at anyone who spoke, fearing I would miss some precious gem.

Unfortunately, I really had no idea what was being said – I was too busy taking notes, trying to engage and understand the disconnected concepts they spoke of. I was lost in a world of strange terms and theories – few of which were connected. The problem had to be me, not the lecturers, because they knew everything!

Fast-forward, 20 years later, and I was standing before a class in which I was the lecturer. I had secured my first university job straight from industry – I had no real teaching experience and absolutely no idea of how to design a class.

Panic struck me: I was supposed to know everything – I was a lecturer – but unfortunately, I did not know what to do. I felt out of my depth and terrified that people would know this. I was given two courses to teach. So, I threw myself into putting together lectures and tutorial exercises.

Soon, however, I discovered that life as an academic is much more than teaching. I was expected to produce research, engage with the community, seek grants ... And so, my life on the academic roller coaster began – as a middle-aged, past-professional I was in a race to catch up: I had to get my PhD, I had to develop a research agenda, I had to publish or perish and I had to learn how to help students learn.

The difficult path of returning to self

I have now been in academia for more than 20 years. This reflection addresses an issue which many academics face during their careers – largely alone. It is the very real problem of working and learning through serious illness.

In 2006, my life – and the life of my family – was turned upside down. I was diagnosed with cancer. I had been feeling unwell – but I was fit. I was healthy. I didn't look unwell – so the doctors thought there was nothing really wrong with me … however, I was very, very ill.

After numerous tests, I was sent for a CT scan and the diagnosis was blunt – carcinoma. Thus, I embarked on another rollercoaster journey – the cancer-patient one – which was far more scary, and unpredictable, than any I had ever experienced before.

This reflection is not about being a cancer patient or a cancer survivor; it is a reflection on how that experience shaped me as a teacher and a learner. My fear changed. I was not afraid of not knowing things – I was afraid of not making a difference.

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Soon after I returned from illness, I was forced to confront my deficiencies as a teacher, head on. I was charged with overseeing the school's teaching and learning committee. Our school was not performing well. We were among the poorest performing schools in the university. This baffled me, as I knew my colleagues were dedicated academics and I knew our students were smart, committed and ambitious. So, what was wrong?

In short, there was a lot wrong. Basically, we had lost sight of who we were as a school and what we wanted our students to be. We had forgotten the fact that a course lives within a program, that lives within a school, that lives within a university. We had developed individual silos serving our own interests, rather than providing an integrated curriculum that serves the needs of students and society at large.

For days and weeks, I poured over data to better understand what students thought of their learning experience. It is said that data does not lie, but it can confuse. Universities have so much data, but much of it is not accessible. If accessible, the data is not comparable and, at times, it is contradictory. Quality data is essential for building good learning experiences. These data need to be available to everyone – not just academic leaders.

The fallible leader

When I endeavoured to start the conversation around curriculum reform, my shortfalls as a leader became very apparent. Misguidedly, I thought everyone felt the same as I did – if there is a problem, let's fix it. Unfortunately, I had forgotten about the original fear I experienced when I hopped on the academic roller coaster. I had forgotten that others might think they needed to be the experts – the font of all wisdom. I overlooked the fact that they might be afraid or alienated or simply confused.

So, I made some fundamental mistakes. I pushed too hard, thinking that evidence would convince my colleagues that their approaches needed to change. However, I forgot their vulnerabilities and their insecurities and their sense of being lost in a world that was becoming increasingly corporatised and commodified. Learning and teaching excellence was being converted to Key Performance Indicators. Students became clients and academics retreated into safe spaces. We lost our own learning community – it became a competition for impact, rankings and grants.

This world was alien to me: I was drawn to the academy because I had been a confused and disillusioned student who, as an undergraduate, had never really learned how to learn. When I went back to postgraduate study, I discovered the wonder of learning and I knew that I wanted to continue this for the rest of my life. However, when I stepped on the academic roller coaster, my idealism was subjugated by the realities of life as an academic – high teaching loads; pressure to keep publishing; the push to attract external funding, to generate revenue and to continue to innovate and reinvent myself.

I could have survived this if university culture was collegial and supportive. But, sometimes, workplace culture within universities is overly competitive and highly politicised, where egos overtake humanity and individuals vie for attention. In short, universities can be punishing workplaces.

My passion soon gave way to disillusionment – I was no longer a person of value – I was a cog in a massive machine, and I was driving so hard to stay on track that I had no time to be me.

My illness forced me to step outside the academic world: to rediscover the joy of being a person who can change people's lives and make them feel good about the contribution they can make. It is this belief in the transformational role of education that drives me today. We need to provide learning experiences that allow our students to be an integral part of the learning experience, where they share knowledge and help find solutions to real problems. This more personalised approach to teaching means we are all learners – each time we run a class, we learn something new and we can make a difference to our students and our world.

This approach helps develop the thinking habits and problem-solving skills needed for life in the twenty-first century, where the nature of work is changing. Jobs as we know them today will be very different in another 10 years. Learners – academics and students alike – need to understand how to work with intelligent machines to address the big problems facing humankind: human displacement, climate change and security are just a few.

Illness reminded me of the importance of making a difference. It did not make me a better teacher. It made me a better person, which in turn, reminded me of the need for empathy – to put myself in the place of others to better understand how to change things. In some ways illness saved my academic career.

It allowed me to set aside fear; very few things invoke fear like a cancer diagnosis.

It allowed me to be humble and grateful for the opportunities I have – and have had – to make a difference. It helped make me more resilient: if I can survive cancer, I can get through just about everything.

Illness did not change the way I push myself and strive to be the best I can be. Illness did not make me perfect – I still make so many mistakes and, as such, I know I am still learning.

But illness has made me sad, as well. I survived, but many others have not. For colleagues we have lost, let's take some time to remember them with fondness and to honour the contributions they have made to the academy – large and small. Changing the life of one person by helping them to learn and achieve their best is an accomplishment we should celebrate. Here is to past colleagues and their legacies.

This might have been a poignant point to complete this reflection, but it is not enough to acknowledge the people who have not survived. We need to think through the effect illness has on us as teachers and learners, and think about ways to ensure people who suffer chronic illness can contribute positively to the learning experience in a way that does not marginalise.

What sort of support is needed for people recovering from illness?

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Academic work affords flexibility – therefore, it is possible to continue to work and manage illness. However, it is not enough to provide flexibility; people with chronic illness need to feel safe and supported. On the other hand, we need to be mindful of how we are impacting others – our colleagues and our students. There might be times, when we really should not be coming to work, and we need guidance to recognise when this is the case.

However, for me, the biggest downside of illness has been its effect on my career progression. I lost time. As I was battling to survive, my colleagues were publishing, getting grants, engaging in productive collaboration – and I was just too tired to do all this. After exiting the cancer-patient roller coaster, I hopped on the academic roller coaster again – once again trying to catch up and to prove that I was worthy of promotion and career advancement.

I will confess there have been many times throughout my academic career that I have thought of giving up. The academy can be a cruel place for people who do not fit the traditional profile. But then I think of how I can change the life of a student like myself – a confused and lost young person – fresh from school – who had no idea of who I was and what I wanted to be. It is this commitment that spurs me on to continue, despite the ups and downs of life and work as an academic.

But I would like to invite us to talk more openly about the struggles facing academics, particularly those who are battling illness, and how we can support them to thrive – not just survive – in life and work.

Returning to self, but the dichotomy remains

Some of you might be questioning why this reflection is included in the *SOTL in the South* journal. It is because illness is an issue that affects both learning and teaching in positive and negative ways. Illness also causes binaries within the academy that result in inequities in terms of career advancement and opportunity.

More importantly, however, academics who are concerned with transforming the world are out of step with the twenty-first-century university, which is driven by "profit, impact, income, employability, skills and reputation" (Barnett 2017:163). A university's value today is determined by its contribution to economic progress over and above its contribution to improving the quality of life and the environment. This might ensure our fiscal security going forward, but the real challenges of the twenty-first century need more than money – we need to understand and improve our world.

Ronald Barnett (2017:174) believes that universities have the opportunity to become much more than actors in the world by practicing criticality – "critical thought, critical action and critical being". A university needs to understand its responsibilities to the world, namely; "using its resources … to aid, to strengthen, to develop and … to transform" knowledge, social institutions, people, the economy, learning, culture and the natural environment (Barnett 2017:174). In addition to looking after students and stakeholders, universities need to look after their faculty and support them to be the best they can be.

We have a long way to go before universities do all of this well (Barnett 2017:180).

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In conclusion, the reflection reveals deep dichotomies within universities resulting in academics and students, alike, being marginalised. Illness is one cause of division, because it robs us of our autonomy: we are disempowered by our ailments and we are thrown off the academic roller coaster. If we have the courage to get back on, we have to start all over again – but at the back of the line.

Postscript

I have not ever spoken in such detail about my illness or career journey. So, this is a very public way of talking about this experience. I hope my reflection brings to light some important issues which I feel need to be openly addressed. I am sure there are many people like me, whose experience reveals ways in which we can improve the academy and serve society better.

Therefore, I hope this reflection provokes a conversation about illness in the academy. Surviving illness is a learning experience in its own right. Understanding how to "return to self" after a life-altering experience is a form of knowledge everyone needs to develop, particularly in our ageing society. Accordingly, I invite others to share their experiences and learnings in order to value a unique form of knowledge.

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