



Making a difference and self-efficacy: Interviews with Jude Carroll, Kate Chanock and Marcia Devlin

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Abstract: *This paper is based on the assumption that we as Language and Academic Skills advisers aim to make a difference to student learning. Many of us do this work with individual students and so develop insights into what facilitates or hampers student learning. With these insights we could be involved in developing learning opportunities for many students. In this paper I consider that developing personal agency is one way that LAS advisers could increase opportunities to positively influence the teaching and learning at our universities. In order to learn more about the attitudes of those whose work has been influential in developing the learning environment both within their own universities and also the academy as a whole, I interviewed Jude Carroll, Kate Chanock and Marcia Devlin. During the interviews these women reflected on who has influenced them, their mistakes and their achievements. The interviews were analysed using Bandura's theory (1986) that self-beliefs and in particular self-efficacy can explain achievement behaviour. In most cases the women demonstrated attributes of self-efficacy. They provide models of vicarious learning for LAS advisers who need to be resilient if they want to make a difference to university teaching and learning.*

Key words: *academic skills advising, self-efficacy, university, learning,*

Introduction

Underpinning recent discussion about whether language and academic skills (LAS) advisers should be classified as academics (Chanock, East & Maxwell, 2003; Zeegers, 2003) is the concern that learning assistance and the development of learner skills is undervalued in academe. This matters for the continued development of academic skills and whether or not language and academic skills advisers are able to use their knowledge to make positive differences to the teaching and learning practices at their universities. It is the latter point that is the focus of this paper. And while I do advocate this development at an institutional level, in this paper I have pursued the notion of personal agency. For many of us making a difference has involved a few students; for others it has meant improving the learning experience of many. With insights and knowledge gained by working down at the student level we have much to contribute to the understanding of those in our universities who work at higher levels removed from hearing students' perceptions. My discussions in this paper rest on the claim that, while we as LAS advisers do important work, developing personal agency is one way that we could increase opportunities to positively influence the teaching and learning at our universities.

In order to learn more about how the attitudes of those whose work has been influential in developing the learning environment both within their own universities and also the academy as a whole, I have interviewed three such women. The insights of Jude Carroll, Kate Chanock and Marcia Devlin provide a vicarious learning opportunity. Vicarious learning, when we learn from others by thinking about what they do, is an important principle of Albert Bandura's concept of self-efficacy (1986). This concept explains why some people achieve more than others.

In this paper I briefly discuss Bandura's concept of self-efficacy. Then I introduce the three protagonists and present extracts from their interviews which have been categorized and analysed using the principles of self-efficacy. Finally I discuss what we can take from this in the context of our individual development and the role that LAS advisers could develop in the academy.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is a theory about human behaviour that takes into account 'self-beliefs' (Pajares, 2002, p. 1) and most particularly the effect of people's thoughts on what they actually do. Bandura defines people's self-efficacy beliefs as being their 'judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances' (1986, p. 391). These self beliefs affect the processes leading to capability and action (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175), so that those who believe themselves to be capable of achieving a certain task will be motivated to find out what to do and how to do it in order to succeed in that action. It can be concluded from this that our self-beliefs and thoughts are very powerful in terms of our cognitions and behaviours.

Bandura argues that thought is the most powerful factor in human performance. He explains that this is why people can have skills and knowledge yet still not achieve; just as people with limited skills can achieve remarkable outcomes. 'Thought can thus be a source of human failing and distress as well as human accomplishment' (Bandura 1986, p. 19).

Thoughts enable those who have high self-efficacy to make positive constructions of likely outcomes, so that even when faced with the reality of obstacles, the highly self-efficacious will persist. Bandura explains 'The stronger their perceived self-efficacy, the higher the goals people set for themselves and the firmer their commitment to them' (1989, p. 1175). Being robustly confident as opposed to being self-effacing is an important key to this, and those who are aware of their strengths and are optimistic will access thoughts that in turn self-refer to these. On the other hand, being low in self-efficacy influences emotional reactions to situations so that a person might see things as harder than they really are (Pajares, 2002, p. 5), and further distress themselves with continued anxious thoughts (Bandura, 1989, p. 1177).

Bandura (1986, p. 369) perceives that humans can have control over their thoughts, and so in the interaction of thoughts and behaviour have some control over their environment. On the one hand, this emphasis on self-process is powerful because self-beliefs and self-reflection enable humans to make their environment more fortuitous (Bandura, 1998). On the other, there is the danger that the individual bears

responsibility as the agent of change, when in fact, social and environmental conditions constrict opportunities. In the case of universities, these conditions can be obvious and formidable, for example the hierarchy of position; and they can also be invisible and powerful, for example how some work is unseen and unrewarded (Eveline, 2004). Bandura does not claim that self-beliefs are the only factor determining what we do and how we do it. In his social cognitive theory, he argues that people do what they do because of an interaction between environmental, behavioural and personal factors (Bandura, 1986, p. 23). This allows for a number of influences, which for the LAS professional could include the environment in which we work, our ability to understand that environment, our work preference and our belief in our own capabilities.

Using Bandura's notion of self-efficacy as the framework for the following interviews has given me the opportunity to learn from these women whose work I have admired. Pajares (2002, p. 7) points out that 'people seek out models who possess qualities they admire and capabilities to which they aspire'. Jude, Kate and Marcia provided a vicarious learning experience for me, and in presenting their comments and reflections I hope to share this experience.

The Models (in alphabetical order)

Jude Carroll moved from midwifery to university work and is now an educational developer and course leader for the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education at Oxford Brookes University, UK. She is highly influential both in the UK and internationally as an educator and consultant on deterring and reducing plagiarism. Her work has achieved changes in policies and practices in the area of academic integrity in a number of universities. She has written extensively on this topic and is well-known for her book 'Handbook for Deterring Plagiarism in HE' (2002).

Kate Chanock, named in this conference as 'the pioneer of the Australasian LAS profession', is the head of the Humanities Academic Skills Unit, La Trobe University, Australia. Her work has ensured that formative learning tasks are built into a number of first year undergraduate subjects in the Humanities & Social Science Faculty. Her writing has been highly influential and acclaimed; she was the winner of the 2004

Dialogica award (Chanock, 2004). She writes for students and lecturers on a variety of topics including language, first year experience, plagiarism, identity and disability.

Marcia Devlin studied primary teaching and psychology and now works as an educational consultant teaching lecturers about student learning. Her workshops and publications have changed practice for a number of lecturers. She has published widely and notably and was the winner of the 2003 Dialogica award (Devlin, 2003). Her publications include 'Assessing Learning in Australian Universities' (James, McCinnes & Devlin, 2002) and numerous university guides for staff about teaching and encouraging student participation.

The Interviews

Bandura (1994) describes a number of ways in which people can be understood as self-efficacious. Such people will make great use of vicarious learning, so they not only learn from others, they will seek proficient models who are skilled in areas they aspire to. They will also be able to cope with setbacks and mistakes, which is vital for the perseverance that is needed to succeed. This coping requires a resilience and the ability to reflect and then have positive foresight, so that positive future performances can be visualised. Self-efficacious people also have a sense that they can make a difference and that what they are doing is effective and worthwhile. Using these characteristics and the key features of the interviews, I have categorized the interviews under the following headings: Vicarious learning, Making mistakes, Ability to reflect and have forethought, Attainment and the environment and Self-efficacy perceptions.

Vicarious learning

In response to the question, 'Have there been people who have been an influence?', all three women had no trouble in referring to models who had been important to them.

Jude Carroll: 'There have certainly been influential people and people that I've worked with that have taught me a hell of a lot... I suppose [an important influence is] Sally Brown who is a really well known education developer in the UK. I run workshops a lot like Sally does.'

Kate Chanock: ‘Hannah Bock who was doing this kind of work in the Faculty of Social Sciences when I first started was very much a model because she was a very strong advocate for students...also Dawn Mendham, my predecessor in the job. I always remember that she told me that there were quite a few students that she would have given up on and in every case she would have been wrong to do so, and I’ve always felt that she was right and, however much I think something is not going to work well, not to give up.’

Marcia Devlin: ‘Lorraine Ling who’s the Dean of Education, she taught me to teach, and has stayed in touch with me ever since I was here about 14 years ago. And her husband Peter Ling gave me my first job on her recommendation...he marked my Masters thesis. So those two, they’ve got very very high standards, and they’re very interested in quality and quality in writing, and [from them] I’ve got really good attention to detail and, sometimes when I’m writing something I think what would they think if they read it. And that’s my way of editing...And a lot of senior women, women who have kind of made it up to the top echelons. I’ve informally interviewed lots of them, because I’m really interested in how women manage with children...I’ll go to a talk they’re giving, even if it’s on a topic I’m not interested in. And I sidle up to them at the end and I ask them, you know not all of them, but the ones who are approachable...’

Making mistakes

Like everyone, these women had made mistakes. In this part of the interview there was a lot of laughter, gesticulating and even blushing. Jude talked about how she had confidently taken on a job which at the time had been beyond her capability. Kate admitted that she quickly recovered from feeling bad about the mistakes she made in her job, even though in general she had a tendency to ‘brood’ on her mistakes. Marcia was frank in admitting where she had done a poor job, and talked about her plans to learn how to be a better manager.

Although the women were ‘mortified’ by their mistakes, as Jude and Marcia put it, they were not overwhelmed by their errors. Bandura explains that everyone feels bad when they make mistakes but ‘those who are assured of their capabilities heighten their level of effort and perseverance, whereas those who are beset by self-doubts about their capabilities are easily dissuaded by failure’ (Bandura, 1989, p. 1180).

Jude Carroll: 'I've made spectacular mistakes!! ...People see me as a confident articulate person and they assume that I'm competent. Well, I'm bold and people endlessly ask me 'Jude will you do this?' and I say yes I can do that...I walked into this national voluntary organization at the local level and I thought I can run this place in two years, and virtually I did. They handed me their in-house magazine to edit. I'd never edited anything in my life and I suddenly found myself with a staff of six and a budget of 45,000 pounds and a world wide readership, and the first edition I edited had three spectacular mistakes in it. But nobody died. I didn't die. It all went away... It was mortifying, and for quite a long time.'

Kate Chanock: 'All the time! I wish I hadn't done them. Look I try to learn something from them if I can...There's usually a good reason for doing the wrong thing, so if I can think what the good reason was then I don't feel bad about it. If I've done it for a bad reason, then I feel crummy about it. '

Marcia Devlin: 'I made huge mistakes when I was managing staff ... I look back on some of the things I said and did to people and I'm absolutely mortified... If I continue to have a career in academia I'll do a management training course...it's not just something I can do naturally. It's not something I'm good at.'

Ability to reflect and have forethought

It was particularly interesting that the women used their experiences from the past to access the symbolic capacity of forethought and so deal with the discomfort of the present. In other words, they had reflected on their concerns and had developed strategies that worked for them.

Jude Carroll: *(Here she articulates her self-talk)* 'I think: you know you could have been a bit more humble, you could have been a bit more listening, you could have been a bit more helpful. You know better than that. And then you move on. You get used to it. I mean when I have done something that really really makes me cringe inside I now know it hurts a lot for a day and less the second day and by the third day something usually takes my mind off it. I just think, just wait. So if I'm driving back from an event where something's happened or somebody's done something and the tape in my brain is just going round and round, I just know that by the time I get home something else will be beginning to take my mind off it. And I'll live to tell the story to a few people. I might need to write it down, I might need to write it down and screw it

up and put it in the fire. But by tomorrow or the next day a new crisis will have come up. And it'll just go away. And the trouble is sometimes it goes away without learning, but usually it just goes away.'

Kate Chanock: 'I don't feel crummy for very long, usually in the next half hour something else comes up that I really need to put my mind on. You can't brood on anything in this work...really even just to make up for the thing you did before; you've got to give your full attention to what ever problem comes up...I am something of a brooder in life, yes I am. But in this job it wouldn't be helpful.'

Marcia Devlin: 'Maturity's a great thing you know. To stand back and think, I've got to be strategic about this, do I care enough about this to get something done? Yes, OK, what's the best way to do it...And it's not always pleasant, like you sometimes have to deal with people who you don't like and who don't have the same ideas as you.'

Attainment and the environment

In response to the question, 'How much effect do you think an individual can have on improving the teaching and learning at a university?', the women were well-aware of the environmental effects of working in a university. They knew the limits and were not unrealistic reformers, yet all three saw ways of attaining influence and so were able to persist in the face of obstacles.

Jude Carroll: 'I learned long long ago there is no point in pushing on closed doors, you have to push on open doors. So you find somebody who's got a problem you can be helpful with...You put a team together, try and look for some fun, you boast a lot, you just boast like mad. You find anything that's working well, and then you try and say, 'have you heard about the good things they're doing in architecture?' with x or y or whatever and those sorts of conduits would be the best. But you can't do anything on your own.'

Kate Chanock: 'I think you can have a lot of effect, but it may have to be really slow and gradual...On the way that the institution operates I think there's no point exaggerating the effect you're likely to have, but there's also no point in thinking that you can't and therefore not doing it, because you know even what I have managed to do I think is significant, although it's not huge.'

Marcia Devlin: 'I think in a university you have to work collegially and you have to work with committees and all the structures that are in place. One person can be really inspiring I think, and one person can make a big contribution, but I know one person can't do it all. What I tend to do is try and find people of like mind, who have a similar teaching philosophy to me.'

Self-efficacy and the environment

The self-efficacious can remind themselves of their successes. The three women were aware of where they had made a difference. Jude and Marcia expressed a strong sense of personal efficacy, while Kate was far less spontaneous in conjuring up positive judgments of her ability.

Jude Carroll: 'Sometimes it takes a long time to know whether you are having an effect. I had a person come back to me about a month ago who talked about an incident that happened over 10 years ago. And so sometimes you have to wait. Sometimes what you do, the effect that you do is to remove a negative rather than to build a positive. You can't always judge your effect by the positive actions but I used to think that if I get rid of where the shoe pinches that would be a good thing and if people could walk without a shoe pinching then they wouldn't say how comfortable these shoes are they'd just get on with things. But I think one of the ways the world measures input is by reputation. And there are lots of things I could cite that have given me a reputation, and I guess at the moment plagiarism is one of the most striking ones because 'Oh you're Jude Carroll' is one of those things that people say to me all the time.'

Kate Chanock: *(Kate talked about her experience of helping a student with dyslexia, setting up study skills lectures and, with prodding, her work on dealing with plagiarism.)* 'One of the first students that I had was quite dyslexic and I didn't know much about dyslexia at the time but I was really interested...I taught her to read phonically...and she pulled herself up into Ds and then Cs, and six years later she graduated. And we were both rapt...'

During the first year that I'd worked here it seemed to me that offering lectures on common questions and common problems would be a good way to reach more people...it made a difference in the way that academic skills are tackled. Before this it hadn't been done in my unit.

The university has been revising its academic misconduct policy and I got involved in this ...because most of the thinking [about plagiarism] is kind of moral outrage that the students are doing it on purpose...I didn't wait to be asked, and I think that the important thing about trying to influence university policies is that if you are in a structurally unimportant position, which academic skills advisers are, you are not going to be asked to most things, so if you can think of a way to put your oar in without being asked it's useful...I spoke to the chairperson of the working party on plagiarism and said that I'd like to have some input and then wrote up what I wanted the working party to consider, and they did, and it has made its way into the policy in the sense that the policy recognizes that the university has an obligation to educate students [about using sources]...'

Marcia Devlin: 'The first [experience of making a difference] I can think of was when I wrote the book on assessment with Richard and Craig McInnes... that was a DEST project and when that got launched the reaction to that was amazing...You know I couldn't believe people found it so useful and were so grateful for it, and would ring us and email us. Every time I go to university people say this book's fantastic, or you know it's really helped me, and I really like this bit and that bit, and I was a bit blown away by that. I felt really good about it, good but also shocked - I just didn't think it was any great shakes. I mean I wrote it, I wrote the guides the five guides for academic staff - that was my bit and I wrote them really carefully, but.... I kind of thought it was commonsense. I obviously knew more than I thought I did, and was able to communicate it. So it was really exciting.'

The three women did not all meet the descriptions of the self-efficacious. Certainly, Jude Carroll and Marcia Devlin reflected on their behaviour and attributes in ways that indicate they could be self-efficacious. By articulating their capabilities, they symbolically affirm their strengths. Jude reported that others see her as competent and gave examples of how she had been able to take on big jobs. Marcia recalled positive comments on her work and talked about how she had been successfully strategic. Having this capacity to remind themselves of their efficacy is valuable. Bandura argues that this is because

ordinary social realities are strewn with difficulties. They are full of impediments, failures, adversities, setbacks, frustrations, and inequities... Some people

quickly recover their self-assurance; others lose faith in their capabilities. Because the acquisition of knowledge and competencies usually requires sustained effort in the face of difficulties and setbacks, it is resiliency of self-belief that counts. (Bandura, 1989, p. 1176)

In Jude and Marcia's case this resilience also allowed them to be insightful about their own shortcomings. Jude was open about her pleasure in being 'a big cheese' and open about her need to control this. Marcia was open about her impatience in dealing with staff and open about her need to do better, and at the same time she spoke generously about the virtue of the people she had worked with.

When asked to recall her achievements, Kate Chanock referred to the work she had done with individual students, hardly the stuff of public acclaim. And while she has made important contributions to policies and practice which have changed behaviour and teaching in her university, she only spoke about one such example after I reminded her. Kate was able to clearly detail the work she does, and why she thinks it is important; for example, she explained that making a difference for an individual student is 'not just a matter of somebody getting a better grade, it can change their whole life prospects, their understanding of themselves, the way they feel about themselves...' She also explained that her work is 'about -ographies, the ways that academic communities write to fulfill their particular purposes...that brings all sorts of problems with it which are to me intellectually interesting...' However, nowhere in the interview did she refer to accolades she has received, nor did she describe herself in ways that suggest success and achievement. In fact, rather than being self-efficacious she could be described as self-effacing. Despite this, Kate has persisted to make a difference in an environment where change can meet any number of obstacles. I suggest she is able to do this because, rather than concerning herself with her capabilities she focuses on the needs of the students and perceives the intellectual exploration of academic skills as a worthwhile and engrossing pursuit. Interestingly, this is reflected in her admiration for the advocacy work of her role model (see above).

The practice of making a difference

The interviews demonstrate that Jude, Kate and Marcia see themselves as competent practitioners who have made positive changes and who will continue to be influential. And while I chose to interview them because they are influential, I also learnt that they have a perception of themselves as people whose work is worthwhile and influential.

For those who are new to language and academic skills advising it is not always easy to gauge the value and impact of our work. Jude, Kate and Marcia had a body of achievements that they could call on to affirm their efforts and to demonstrate that others valued their efforts. Marcia said she felt really good about people saying her book was 'fantastic' and it helped them, but before such praise she was unsure that she had anything to say of value and worried that what she knew was just common sense. Kate pointed out that a major obstacle she had confronted was the negative perceptions of others about the academic value of the work academic skills advisers do. This indicates that LAS advisers, in particular, need to be resilient in the face of impediments and frustrations. In Kate's case her strongly held opinion about the academic value of the work of academic skills advising, which she supports with reasoning and research, assures her in the face of ignorance from others. These examples indicate that newcomers to the LAS profession could be dealing with insecurities about the value of their work and whether or not it has any academic standing in the eyes of others. In order to advance self-efficacy and belief in their work, LAS advisers could find someone who will encourage their actions, and they can develop an awareness of the academic value of knowing about academic skills either through a mentor or research about the discipline of academic skills.

On the other hand, there are limitations in relying on the appraisals of others. If you are not sure of what you want to achieve or how much effort a task requires it is hard to judge your expectations of your performance. You then have to rely on what others have done and the assessment of others (Pajeres, 2002, p. 6). In trying to meet the expectations of others, one is then more vulnerable to negative assessment of outcomes, and unfortunately, negative appraisals can have major impact on one's self-belief. This is particularly so if one has a self-effacing or pessimistic bent on life (McCormick & Martinko, 2004).

Reduction of self-doubt and negative emotion is vital for a LAS adviser. According to Bandura's research, the higher the self-doubt the lower the ability to analyse and make difficult decisions (1989, p. 1176), so to improve analytical thinking one needs to put aside 'self-doubts'. Jude, Kate and Marcia all spoke about their capacity not to dwell on their mistakes. After having made a mistake, rather than doubting all their abilities, they had developed ways to effectively deal with their negative thoughts. Jude not only used foresight to reduce discomfort, she described her way of writing about the situation and symbolically expunging it in a fire. Kate, despite 'brooding' in other contexts, was able to quickly recuperate from the pain of a mistake by focusing on the next person's problem, and Marcia focused on how to fix her own shortcoming. Such strategies help to 'reduce negative emotional states' (Pajares, 2002, p. 7), although as their reaction in the interviews demonstrated, making mistakes led to very uncomfortable emotional states for all the women.

Making a difference in environments such as universities requires a (realistic) awareness of what cannot be changed and at times an (unrealistic) optimism that one can set up possibilities for change. Rather than seeing a situation as hopeless, in the face of adversity the self-efficacious will persevere and will change their efforts. 'The successful, the innovative, the sociable, the nonanxious, the nondespondent, and the social reformers take an optimistic view of their personal efficacy to exercise influence over events that affect their lives' (Bandura, 1989, p. 1177). Jude revealed that she no longer bothers to knock on closed doors, but she finds new ways of presenting her message and even play acts to communicate her message. Kate, the LAS adviser, was the least enthusiastic of the women about her ability to improve teaching and learning in her university saying, 'I think there's no point exaggerating the effect you're likely to have but there's also no point in thinking that you can't and therefore not doing it'. In contrast, Marcia was adamant that one person can be 'inspiring', but pointed out the need to work 'collegially' and to be strategic about how you work with others.

People like Jude, Kate and Marcia have learnt from experience and so are in a position to offer advice about how to make a difference to university teaching and learning. Their advice includes:

- finding like-minded people to work with,

- educating other lecturers about the nature of academic skills advising,
- working in conjunction with other lecturers in the faculty,
- being interested in the research of other lecturers in the faculty,
- producing learning guides for students and lecturers,
- promoting your learning materials,
- publishing your research so it is accessible to other lecturers
- taking up and/or making opportunities to be involved in policy making and,
- finally, from Jude Carroll 'find something that's fun. If it's all a slog, if it's all hack, if it's all too much, just stop. And go and find something that nurtures you'.

Conclusion

In this paper three models, Jude Carroll, Kate Chanock and Marcia Devlin, talked about how they have been able to make a difference at both the individual level and the institutional level of academe, and they gave examples of how to be resilient and persist with valuable work.

Although not all the women perceived themselves as efficacious in all contexts, they have all made a difference to university learning and teaching. Certainly, as well as being persistent, they are self-reflective and confident that the work they do is worthwhile, but Kate, unlike Jude and Marcia, presented little account of her own capabilities. This could be Kate's disposition or it could be indicative of the institutional realities of working as a LAS adviser. Jude and Marcia exemplify the power of self-belief coupled with a realistic grasp of how to work within an institution, while Kate, who provides a more self-effacing view of her achievements, still manages to achieve on behalf of her students and her work. This is reassuring for those of us who are less than self-efficacious but still want to be able to use our knowledge to make differences to the teaching and learning practices in our universities.

It may not be possible for all language and academic skills advisers to be self-efficacious, especially in the face of environments that can be resistant to our perceptions, but we can take on some of the attributes of self-efficacy. We can learn vicariously, by listening and learning from others who are like us and who have achieved. In order to be resilient in the face of obstacles, we can use the power of thought to persuade ourselves that it is possible for positive change to happen in universities, so not only can we seek change, we can observe where we would benefit from change, and importantly where others would benefit. Bandura (1989, p. 1176) advises that there are benefits in being self-efficacious and that a 'well-developed sense of our own worth leads to positive speculation, and in turn such speculation increases our sense of efficacy'. On this positive note, I conclude that the valuable work LAS advisers do with individual students provides a basis for increasing opportunities to make a difference to learning and teaching in academe.

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