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## **PRESUMPTUOUS METHODOLOGY**

*Troubling success, failure and research design*

### PRELUDE

In Melbourne, the month of May signals the end of autumn and that the academic semester is in full swing. The mornings are chilly and it's difficult to get out of bed. At the other end of the day, the clocks have been wound back and it gets dark early. Like the lightness of summer, all the welcoming events for new students have disappeared and across the campus the first years are assumed to have settled in to the rhythm of university life. To-do lists in iPhones and on scraps of paper pinned to notice boards detail all the reading that needs to be done; the meeting times with other students to complete assignments; the lab report due dates and essay criteria. The gloss of being a new university student has dulled and the faults of new friends are becoming apparent. It's the season for catching colds, and for whatever other lurking health concerns to come to the fore. There are fewer parties now. The once distant exams no longer seem so far away, and most have turned their attention to their studies as the pressure to measure up, to perform and to produce intensifies.



*Figure 1*

*M. Vicars et al. (eds.), Discourse, Power, and Resistance Down Under, 161–173.*  
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Jean's evocative photographs delighted the whole research team and early in the project we spent time examining, prioritising and selecting different images. The photographs depict sites around our University: the tables in the agora, the long open air corridors, and the electronic glass doors, which readily identify La Trobe and establish (or so we thought) a connection between the students and 'their' space. It was much later, when there were no participants, that we returned to the photographs and thought more closely about the assumptions they contained. And in turning the lens inwards (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) we noticed how we had inadvertently predetermined the narratives we were expecting to hear from those young people – those who had registered with the Diversity and Equality Centre, and who had ticked the box on the enrolment form that said 'Yes, I have a disability.'

#### INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports on a small funded project that did not go to plan. In the first part of this chapter the design of the study is outlined and the research team is considered. This is followed by discussion of the ethics approval process in the context of global higher education reform and what this means for researchers. However, in troubling the processes and performances involved in gaining ethics approval in universities, and in determining what constitutes success and failure in research, we are also troubled by the presumptions of our methodology. The second part of this chapter draws on a recorded discussion with the researchers on the failings of the project. The main argument put forward here is that 'good' research requires more than the gathering of evidence and the implementation of a neat and HREC approved design. We argue that projects that go wrong contain valuable knowledge which is often overlooked as a consequence of narrow definitions of what constitutes successful research. Further, we argue that failure is, in fact, an opportunity for researchers to critique university processes and practices and to scrutinise and learn from their own.

#### THE PROJECT

The purpose of the Narratives of Transition in Education (NOTE) project was to investigate the experiences of students who registered with the Equality and Diversity Centre as having a disability. How students with additional challenges of disability experienced their first year in higher education was the focus, and we hoped to identify, through this project, what helped and hindered these students in making the transition into the university. Further, we hoped to do so in ways that would recognise their perspectives and their voices. In the process of designing the study and applying for funding, we decided to offer workshops and a website where students could reflect on their experiences and share them through narrative and arts-based forms. Staff at the Equality and Diversity Centre offered support for recruitment and were consistently positive and helpful.

## THE RESEARCHERS

The research team promised a rich collaboration as each researcher brought a different disciplinary background to the project. Julie White, from the Faculty of Education focuses her research on identity and social justice and recently finished working on a large study funded by the Australian Research Council that investigated identity, friendship and schooling experiences of young people with chronic illness. Jean Rumbold's background in counselling psychology, participatory action research and arts based inquiry is reflected in her work in the School of Public Health and at MIECAT, an organisation focused on education and research in the tertiary sector related to experiential and creative arts. At the time of the study Bruce Rumbold was the coordinator of a core first year subject within the Health Sciences Faculty. He is published in three fields: health sociology, physics and theology and has PhDs in each of the second two disciplines. Jane Grant was employed to work on the Note project. She has a PhD in Literary Studies and a research interest in biography.

Thus each of us brought different perspectives to the project. We anticipated learning from each other in ways that would enrich the project as well as inform our individual research practices. Julie could draw on her recent experience in the longitudinal study that used narrative and visual approaches. Jean would draw upon her experience in participatory arts-based research, and could support any participants wanting to use photography. The team agreed that her counselling expertise would be helpful in this study as we anticipated participant vulnerability and realised that particular sensitivities would be required. Bruce would bring insights from his recent work in the common first year Health Sciences program as well as his wider interest in the transition to university honed by participating in the 2008 European First Year Experience Conference. His research in spirituality and his role as Director of the La Trobe University Palliative Care unit also indicated different research perspectives. And Jane brought her considerable skill and expertise in writing biography that would support students to shape their narrative texts. All four of us had children who were, or recently had been, undergraduate students, so we thought we were sufficiently attuned to issues of first year students.

## ETHICS APPROVAL

With the timing of the project in mind, Jean and Julie began working on the application to the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) in November 2009, at the end of the Australian academic year, although we did not complete it until late January. The timing of the project was always going to be important. We submitted the HREC application on January 30, 2010. The detailed 21-page checklist anticipated all sorts of unlikely events and took us several days to prepare. It didn't really address any of the sensitive and complicated issues we have subsequently been forced to consider, but asked specific questions related to storage of data, number of participants, research aims and other issues related to

the general issue of design and conduct of the research. Contemporary qualitative research is deeply complex and uncertain, and yet the documentary requirements HRECs impose have been informed by protocols and principles designed to protect the institution from risk (Cannella & Lincoln, 2007; Halse & Honey, 2007; Sikes & Piper, 2010). Derived from the Belmont Report (Department of Health, Education & Welfare, 1979) Australian HREC processes are based on ethical principals for biomedical and behavioural research, and the continuing relevance of this philosophical frame for contemporary research has been questioned elsewhere (White & Fitzgerald, 2010). Why all ethical issues in research are expected to be addressed before, rather than during or after the conclusion of projects, warrants further consideration. Arguably, ethical and moral considerations occur at every stage of research, but in the contemporary university HRECs take a compliance and checklist approach.

We received a memo from the HREC on April 14 requiring attention to three issues before approval for the study would be given. Our response was sent to the HREC on April 24 and final approval was granted for the project to proceed on May 3, 2010. A summary of the concerns raised by the HREC was:

1. The correct form was not used to explain the project to the participants and there was a minor concern about the wording used;
2. The HREC admonished the researchers for not proofreading the document adequately, for a number of typographical errors had been identified;
3. The researchers were required to include a statement in the 'Participant Consent Form' pointing out that additional permission needed to be sought to include in academic publications any images produced by participants;
4. Concern was expressed that there was potential for conflict of interest if any of the participants were also students of the researchers.

We dutifully made the changes required, as this is what researchers are required to do in the contemporary university. Like Halse and Honey (2010) we wanted to behave ethically 'in terms of complying with institutional ethics policy and being morally and ethically responsible' (p. 123).

The HREC requirements for this particular study did not ask us to think about the ethical and moral implications of the study beyond those that relate to design and potential conflict of interest – the latter predicated on a distrust of researchers' capacity to behave appropriately. However the HREC requirements had significant implications for the study. Firstly, the beginning of the Australian academic year is March, and by the time we received final approval for the study, it was too late to successfully access new students. As Sidani et al. (2010, p. 106) point out, 'The importance of recruitment is well recognized ... The timing and strategies for recruitment can influence potential participants' decision to enrol in a study.' Secondly, one of our researchers, Bruce Rumbold, coordinated a large first year subject in the Faculty of Health Sciences involving 1600 students from all health science disciplines, across all of the university's campuses. Because of perceived 'conflict of interest' we could not recruit through this subject, and effectively could

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not include any students from Health Sciences, the largest Faculty at the university. In hindsight it might have made sense for Bruce to withdraw from the project at this stage, but this option was never discussed.

To expand a little further on this point, problems with recruitment frequently occur due to the researchers' failure to liaise appropriately with the stakeholders who will be involved in recruitment. This was not the case with our primary stakeholder, the Equality and Diversity Unit, who were engaged and supportive. But the other stakeholders we needed, staff members who worked with student groups that included students who had registered a disability, were actually taken out of the equation by an ethics committee interpretation that characterised teaching relationships as inherently coercive. In hindsight, again, it would have been prudent to have challenged that ruling.

Finally, it can be argued that the methods employed in research should be consistent with the disciplines that inform that research. Here again the ethics process focused upon a linear, risk-reducing recruitment strategy that stood in marked contrast to the actual work we hoped to undertake with the students.

#### HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

How universities 'work' has undergone significant change in recent times and the terms 'modernised' represents the new version where the external and internal 'hypersteering' (Brennan & Zipin, 2010) has lessened the autonomy of individual academics. This autonomy has been replaced by audit, quality, managerialism and performativity in a global higher education shift (Fitzgerald, White & Gunter, 2012; Marginson et al., 2009; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Few academics can escape being 'managed' (Blackmore, 2003) and this applies to research and ethics processes as well as what counts and what is valued in research practices. Australia has recently followed the lead of universities in England and New Zealand, where England's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE, now called the REF) and New Zealand's Performance Based Research Fund (PRBF) have had significant impact on most aspects of university work and culture. Australia's Excellence in Research Australia (ERA) measures the worth of universities, who in turn measure the worth of individual academics and their research, often in terms of metrics rather than contribution to knowledge. The mantra of 'publications out, grants in' has become increasingly loud and insistent. Ethical behaviour in research is 'addressed,' once the correct boxes have been ticked in the long HREC forms that focus on anticipation of technical problems. Once 'approval' has been gained, HRECs do not show interest in research projects beyond eliciting regular progress reports, unless there are issues with compliance or breaches of conditions.

#### WHILE ROME WAS BURNING

We met regularly throughout the months between January and May, developing recruitment flyers, working out timelines, outlining the workshops, and drawing up lists of the equipment we would purchase, depending on participant interest and

choice. The meetings were also an opportunity to raise problems and obstacles. Our lively, free-ranging and forthright discussions were informed by our very different backgrounds and perspectives and, if they led inevitably to the odd territorial dispute, these exchanges were always stimulating and a great deal of fun. In all, we believed that we had developed good research questions that would guide the study and had thought through the design of the study. We agonised over the recruitment posters and the photographs we would use. We were confident that our methods, processes and timelines allowed for participants from regional and rural campuses of the university to be included, and had discussed the issues of power and the need for sensitivity, although we have needed to revisit this more recently. At no time did it occur to us that we may not successfully recruit, and we worked diligently on detail of the study design while waiting for HREC approval.

However, it was Jane who drew our attention to the likelihood that students with issues of anxiety or mental illness could be reluctant to 'go public' in a project such as ours. And, over time, it dawned on us that we were actually asking a great deal of the participants. Instead of anonymously reporting on their experience to one researcher during an interview, with all the privacy involved in that, we were asking them instead not only to join a group of other students, but also to be prepared to express their challenges and concerns publically in images or narratives. An additional layer of presumption, on the part of the researchers, was that not only would these potentially vulnerable participants be willing to participate in workshops with strangers, and to do so in a group setting, but they would also be willing to write about their lives, or visually represent their challenges. We assumed perhaps that representing their experience in art forms would be easier than articulating them explicitly – that presentational knowing would be an attractive alternative to propositional knowing (Heron & Reason, 1997).

#### SCRUTINY AND METHODOLOGIC PRESUMPTIONS

What follows is an extract from a conversation recorded in April 2011, in which, using 'scrutiny' as a method of inquiry, the research team turned its attention to its own presumptions and processes.

JR: I think we were interested in trying to understand something of the experience of first year students. Our funding was from Equity and Access so we took that particular slant of students who had registered with Equity and Access and their experiences of first year.

JW: And to get the perspective of the young people themselves which we took into arts-based activities to try and get that, but we really wanted to get their perspective not the system, not the policy.

JR: And we went to arts-based methods – it's ironic really – because we wanted to get a richer account of their experiences, you know, rather than

coming out with some sort of preformed survey where you tick the boxes. But I think it is probably one of the reasons, one of the many reasons, why we asked too much of the students.

... I do realise that I was thinking with a kind of educator hat on rather than with a researcher hat and I've had no difficulty recruiting people to do this kind of arts-based stuff [in the past]. And again the people doing that, obviously they knew me and have listened to me. When I got to think about that I don't think I would have responded to [the NOTE project].

JW: But I have had so much faith in that poster. I thought it is so beautiful and I thought how is anyone going to resist? I thought they would think 'That's my experience out there. I'm going to sign up for this.'

JG: I wanted to ask you about the photographs because I think they are brilliant photographs, but I also think they make a statement about alienation, loneliness, depression; they are laden with assumptions which trouble me when I'm thinking about them now.

JR: That's right.

JW: And if you are having a good day and you are a first year student you say 'I don't want to go there!' I never thought that at the time though.

JR: And if you were there, you wouldn't want to ...

JW: Stay there.

JR: And the action of meeting up with strangers, you know.

JG: It was an open ended project where you didn't know anything about the experiences beforehand, but the more we have been talking and the more we look back on the design, it was making a lot of assumptions wasn't it?

JR: Yes.

JG: What do you think are some of the other reasons behind the project's failure to secure participants?

JR: We have covered timing;

JW: Insensitivity;

JR: Well the business of identifying as disabled;

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JW: The recruitment; not being able to invite;

JR: Not being relational;

JW: And the poster flagging a whole lot of things.

JR: The Y Generation stuff: the fact that we were asking these people to commit to how many sessions ahead of time? I can't imagine them committing to coming to a party that far ahead!

JG: They were also first years.

JW: They are so unsure of themselves.

BR: The other thing I registered was the mental health aspect. Most of these kids are struggling. They are not going to take on other commitments when sometimes they can't even meet the deadlines the University imposes.

JG: In what ways do you think non-participation reflects the first year experience?

JW: We can only speculate, and they didn't sign up for a whole lot of reasons: one of them being that they were first years and it was all so much and all so overwhelming. I mean I have caught so many [of my own students] in tears ... It's just all too big.

JR: Ironically we were trying to offer them a smaller place to belong, but of course they wouldn't have known that until they got there.

JW: We also had a whole lot of strings attached. We wanted them to bare their soul and tell us about things that they were not game to reveal possibly even to themselves. We wanted them to spill their guts and paint it, and photograph it ... when you think about it, it was a bit of folly in a way.

BR: They didn't know this at that stage though did they?

JW: No.

JR: No they didn't ... and it could have been as low key as taking a few snaps.

JG: So half the La Trobe students who register with a disability do so on the grounds of a mental health condition.<sup>1</sup> Do you think this might have any bearing on the issue of non-participation?



BR: Yes, judging by [a student I knew] with bipolar disorder. Tutorials were almost impossible for him because when he was manic he would be so over-engaged that people were scared of him, and when he wasn't he was seen as not participating. He couldn't cope with the tutorial system and he would never have been able to get through our re-designed curriculum, because it is based around enquiry and people are assigned to work in enquiry groups. 40 to 50 percent of their assessment is based around it and he would not be able to contribute appropriately to it.

JR: But even without people having a mental health diagnosis...

BR: Introverts don't like it.

JR: Absolutely. So many people's learning style is not going to suit discussion based [learning].

JG: So what you are saying is that for people with complex mental health needs it is bad enough being in the tutorial system without signing up for a research group which was sort of tutorial based?

BR: Yes.

JG: Any thoughts on visibility, exposure and stigma in relation to the non-participation by the students?

JR: That's what we didn't find out about, whether they were experiencing any of those things.

JG: I meant in relation to their non-participation in this project; why they did not want to be involved.

JR: Well it would be consistent with Julie's research [from the Keeping Connected Project] ... Students want to pass muster as ordinary and are not going to want to identify [themselves as having a disability]

JW: That was one of the earliest things to come out of the Keeping Connected Project.

JR: And if that was really strong in school age kids I doubt it is going to be very different in first year students.

JG: People with invisible disabilities find it harder to reveal them.

JW: The more obvious and the more external ... I think framing our discussion in terms equity rather than disability might take us further.

BR: That is the way medical thinking operates. You have normality and then you deal with deviance from the norm and the University runs on the notion of able-bodied participating students. Anything which is a divergence from that is treated as a deviation from the norm.

JW: There are people who say they know about the first year experience. There is the literature. There is a journal or two and conferences and all the rest of it, but first year experience using arts-based inquiry to explore that? There's buggers all. We have plenty of surveys. It is difficult. All universities should make allowances but what allowances do they make? What allowances should they make? We will never get there if we are not allowed to ask questions about these experience, which was what we aimed to do, which was 'Who are you? And what's it like being in your shoes at this point in time?'

Denzin and Lincoln's (2011, p. 15) point about the field of qualitative research being defined by 'a series of tensions, contradictions, and hesitations' neatly characterizes our study. Operating with the best of intentions, we wanted to hear about the transitional experiences of first year students with disabilities which we hoped would provide a greater understanding of the effectiveness of university accommodations. And yet we failed to register an inherent tension which should have been obvious both to us and to the Ethics Committee. As Julie and Jean noted, a key finding of Julie's research in the Keeping Connected study into school students with chronic illness was their resistance to being categorised as different from other so-called able students. And yet this was precisely what we were asking the first year students to do in the NOTE project. And in the La Trobe context, where over half of the students who register with a disability do so on the grounds of a mental health issue, visibility and the fear of stigmatisation could arguably be even more of a pressing concern.

As we explored in this discussion, another central and related flaw of our research design was our negative preconceptions about the experience of being a first year student with a disability. While our poster may have stated our aims as wanting to find out what helps and hinders the transition of first year students with disabilities (the good experiences as much as the bad), the tonal browns of our accompanying photograph with its focus on a distant shadowed figure seen through glass electronic doors is an unequivocal statement of loneliness. In other words, from the very start our invitation may have unintentionally excluded those for whom the transitional experience was positive and who may well have had a great deal to tell us about what worked for them.

## CONCLUSION

As Wright Mills (1959, p. 139) exhorted, 'You must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine and interpret it. In this sense craftsmanship is the centre of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you may work.' We can only speculate as to why the students did not participate in our project: we can never know. And yet there is in fact a great deal that we can learn from this project. While evaluating the ethical processes of the University raises necessary questions about the limited involvement and narrow ethical concerns of universities, the need for researchers to keep questioning their own preconceptions and to continually 'examine and interpret' the interplay of their life experience and their intellectual work is perhaps the most salient lesson learnt here.

The process reported upon here raises questions about accountability and power. The HREC ensures accountability by administering ethical assessment processes that focus principally upon managing attribution of fault and blame, should these questions arise. Ethical risks that might arise through relationships between researchers and participants are minimised by requiring that these be constrained to that of researcher and 'subject.' Researching pre-existing relationships, such as those with family, friends, colleagues, clients, students, requires detailed justification: for it is assumed that pre-existing relationship may bias selection and findings, and correspondingly that being a stranger will not. Nor does the HREC envisage situations in which the very process of research leads to 'real' human relationships: relational ethics are not part of the remit of the committee (Ellis, 2007). According to this view, research should not follow the normal pathways of learning or therapy, where relationship is integral to learning and change, and power is seen to have constructive possibilities that can be explored through negotiation. No-one would argue that accountability is unimportant, or that the coercive possibilities of power should not be confronted. But is possible to argue that formalised and stereotyped forms of compliance may in themselves be limiting and coercive (O'Reilly et al., 2008).

These issues come to a head in research that endeavours to be reflexive. Compliance with HREC-style ethical assessment processes becomes a primary concern of the researchers making application, focusing their attention on possible risk more than upon constructive possibility. Further, the reliance upon an exchange of documents works against negotiation between researchers and the HREC. To appeal a condition means delaying implementation by weeks; it is easier to accept further limitations in order to be able to do some research rather than none at all. Clearly, in this case, we as researchers should have been able to look beyond our concerns with compliance and be more aware of what we were attempting as well as what compliance might cost in terms of the success of the project. We should have been able to resist and transcend the approach into which the ethics review process directed us: but we failed to do so. What we now see more clearly is that reflexive research would benefit from more than gatekeeping.

Ideally, the HREC would be competent to supervise the research process and consult to the ethical issues that arise as the project is implemented.

The HREC's unwillingness to engage with relational ethics seems particularly unfortunate in the light of data that indicate that it is distance and indifference, not mutual engagement as a fellow human being, that precipitates harm in therapeutic relationships at least (Francis, 2010, for example). We believe that it is time to revisit both the conceptualisation and practice of ethical review, shaping it in a way that is more appropriate to the participatory nature of the actual research process.

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#### NOTES

<sup>i</sup> Data provided by Equity and Access show that 232 of the 542 students who registered as having a disability in 2010 did so on the grounds of a mental health condition.

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