What Advice Would We Give Ourselves on the Threshold of a VUCA Environment?

An International Collaborative Memory-Work Project

Dawn Garbett, Rena Heap, Linda Fitzgerald, Ronnie Davey, & Lynn Thomas

Self-Study   Memory-work

The memory-work we have done over the past 2 years is synthesised as advice we would have given ourselves at the start of our careers and what we profess to know now that we are transitioning away from our institutions. The data is drawn from writing memories evoked by 6 prompts; 8 recorded Zoom discussions and re-interpretation of the data through dialogic inquiry. Our purpose is to offer our insights as we look back on our careers. We have focused this chapter on two prompts to discuss our collective memories of what research, teaching, and service have meant for us as academics and teacher educators. We also consider the advice we would give our younger selves now, in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment.

Context of the Study

At the time of this study, we were five senior or recently retired teacher educators in three different countries, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States. We have worked collaboratively and independently on self-study research projects connected to teacher education over our careers (see for example, Garbett et al., 2020; Davey et al., 2011; Tolosa et al., 2016). We have used collaborative memory-work, which we have explored in more detail in the companion chapter in this publication, as a self-study method to systematically and rigorously process collective insights. Ham and Kane (2004) wrote that self-study is a means to "see one's participant self through alternative lenses... It derives not from a passive romantic remembering in tranquility of a single experience but from the iterative and consciously self-analytical reflection on, repetition of, and gathering [of] data" (p. 129).

The memory-work we have done over the past three years has aimed to "unmask the rules of the game that lurk beneath the surface rationality of academic meritocracy" (Morley, 2013, p. 116). This chapter synthesises the advice we would like to have given ourselves at the start of our careers and what we profess to know now as we stand at the end of our institutional careers, in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). It draws together common threads that have resonated with us all as we have shared during our memory work, despite differences in the standing of teacher education in Universities in our respective countries. Our purpose is to communicate our new understandings and offer our insights as we look back on our lifetimes of being... teachers, students, academics, and humans.

Method(s)

We have used memory-work (Haug, 1987, 2008) to focus our attention on what we can learn collectively through reflecting on our scholarly careers as teacher educators. Using their guidelines, our memory-work followed an iterative process as described below.

1. Independently write, for no more than 30 minutes and in the third person, an individual memory account of an experience, event or scene related to the given prompt (collaboratively decided).
2. Share and interrogate these accounts within the collective (for us, on Zoom).
3. Analyse the accounts within the collective to seek out meaning and understanding (Crawford et al., 1992; Vasudevan, 2011).

Our data includes our individual writing, transcripts of recorded monthly 2-hour Zoom meetings (eight to date), and frequent email interchanges. We decided on and responded to six prompts that we formulated as the project progressed, each time writing for no more than 30 minutes:

1. a memory of being mentored.
2. a memory of being a mentor.
3. a memory of receiving an unanticipated kindness in academia.
4. [framed into a 3rd person prompt] If she could only carry a small bag, she wondered what self-care strategies she would pack.
5. a note to your former self with three key pieces of information that we wish we had known.
6. what advice do we give ourselves as teacher(educator)s in a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) environment.

Because we have found memory-work as method to be so valuable in raising awareness of issues, concerns, and successes in our professional lives, we have written a companion chapter (Garbett, Fitzgerald, et al., 2023) that focuses specifically on the method. In that chapter, we discuss in more detail the process we used, illustrating each of the steps to give life to the method. This chapter offers us the opportunity to detail some of the outcomes we felt to be important and to draw together the salient themes. The data is drawn from writing, discussion and re-interpretation of the data so as to advance our understanding. Where we have used one another's words to capture the consensus, we have not identified or separated individual contributions. Rather we have merged our contributions to make the text flow more naturally, and have italicised all data for clarity. It has been a deliberate choice not to identify individual contributions to this collaborative project.

Discussion

Each of the six prompts yielded valuable insights and understanding. Due to word constraints, this chapter focuses on just two of the prompts, Prompt 5 and Prompt 6. However, given the iterative nature of memory-work, responses to other prompts are indeed revisited in these two. In particular, our responses to the prompts about kindness (Prompt 3) and being mentored and mentoring (Prompts 1 and 2) re-emerged when we wrote and talked about being teacher educators in a VUCA environment (Prompt 6).

The adaptation of Brookfield's (1995) survival memo technique (Prompt 5) to synthesise understandings from our memory-work was particularly generative in consolidating the insights we had garnered to that point. Here we wrote the three most important pieces of advice we wished our former 'naive selves' might have known as academics. This introduction from one memory creatively captures the process we each went through, imagining what we might have said.

> *When Frannie stepped out of the telephone box, she found herself again in the mid-1990s, and there was her younger junior faculty self, walking across the campus toward her time-traveling self. After a moment of extreme confusion, while Older Frannie was explaining 21st century time travel to Younger Frannie, they sat down in Adirondack chairs under a leafy tree and had a chat.*

From our data for this prompt, we highlight here aspects that resonated most from our collective memories for each of the triumvirate of research, teaching, and service. In relation to research, we agreed that we would advise our former selves to research areas that were personally meaningful and related to their practice, not necessarily those that ticked the institutional boxes. *Write for the audiences you want to reach, sharing the research you have done on your practice.*

We agreed with the truism that *not all research in the academy is considered of equal importance*, and that to be able to pursue research and contribute to the greater good through the development and dissemination of knowledge was an aspirational goal. We recognised the inevitable tension between research considered personally worthwhile, and research that the institution deems worthy. Researching our own teacher-educator practices was deemed crucial to enhancing our educational influence on the learning of teachers. For us, self-study research has spanned both personal and institutional imperatives. As Garbett (2013) has written, "self-study provides a means to examine our lives, to challenge and question the assumptions that underpin our actions, to gain new perspectives and to inform our own and others' practice" (p.117).

Regarding teaching, our common advice was to continue to hold teaching in the highest regard despite the ever-increasing stressors, detractors, and constraints. We all recognised the privilege and joy of teaching. *You have been given the opportunity to influence and inspire countless teachers who will go into the profession as thinking, caring, reflective practitioners*. Even though we each bemoaned the reduction in face-to-face contact time with our student teachers, we all agreed that we should *pack as much fun and interactive experiences and laughter as you can into your teaching. The students will remember who you are and what they experienced in your class—not what content you cherry-picked to tell them!*

Service wore each of us down and we each gave words of grave caution to our younger selves. *Academia has all kinds of hidden agendas, invisible work, damaging mind-sets which you must learn to identify and not obligingly tolerate. So, key information? It really is important to learn to say no! Do not accept a heavy administrative load at the beginning of your career, no matter how threatening the administration and professors' union become. No one will tell you this at the beginning of your career. Don't allow yourself to drown in minutiae of administrivia and meetings that waste your time and your will to live.*

We recognised that within this triumvirate, ideally, each would inform the other. Self-study research enabled this in the latter part of our careers. We urged our younger selves to be mindful that *your research will have informed your practice and made you even more accomplished as teachers. Make your service count for you by investing in what you consider to be important committees within the institution and wider community; make your service to students of worth, through pastoral care and career advice; serve your colleagues in the form of mentoring and caring. It may not be exactly what the institution values or measures but—carry on!*

Interrogating our advice, we saw that since it was the institution that determined the performance indicators in each of teaching, research, and service, our overarching advice to our former selves could be distilled to: recognising your own self-worth; identifying your values; and maintaining a healthy balance. *The measures of success in academia are defined by academia—but you will have to decide what success is in your life.* While we might each define success for ourselves differently, we agreed it was important not to *sacrifice your self-esteem for the number-crunchers, selection panels, review boards… This is only work and it should be measured in terms of being just that – not a measure of you as a person.*

While the institution might determine performance indicators, we ourselves must determine how we wanted to be as academics. We came to see that whatever work we did in the academy must be underpinned and driven by the values we held dear. We wanted to urge our younger selves to *find your core values, and here in academia, remain true to these core values. Let them be your true north, your touchstone. Know yourself. Really. What are these core values, the principles that guide your decisions and motivate you to action? Take some time to understand who you are, who you are becoming, or who you want to be. Interrogate yourself about the qualities, actions, roles and events that motivate and that guide your decision making. What do you care about? What gives you heart and purpose? Ask the hard questions often. Whose interests are actually being served? Do you have any choice around decisions to be made or*

actions to be taken or are you merely following institutional norms and role expectations? The conscious thinking is what is important so you are not mindlessly sucked in or blindsided.

Interrogating our values led in turn to thinking that nurturing a life outside of work was vital for our well-being. *Work and life are not dichotomous. Work will be a huge and fascinating part OF your life, but don't let it dominate to the exclusion of all the other things you love. At the end of the day, all those courses, stacks of marking, articles, conference presentations, etc., really don't matter. You have a life to live outside of work hours. Don't let work consume all your thoughts and energy and time. The important things in life are really the important things, and that's what you should focus on. No work, even wonderful work, should consume all your energy, focus, and time or displace time with family, friends, being with others, and being with yourself.*

As we neared the end of this phase of our project we wanted to position ourselves in the current VUCA environment, cognisant of myriad new and recurring issues. This led to Prompt 6 to consider the advice we would give ourselves as teacher educators in a volatile, uncertain, and ambiguous environment with all its attendant complexity. We thought it important to acknowledge what we knew we had lost and missed about teaching in today's climate. Several themes kept (re-) emerging in our writing and discussion, viz: mentoring, lifelong learners, self-efficacy, values, and relationships.

Mentoring

Our promptss on mentoring and being mentored had caused us to consider the different trajectories we had taken from being teachers to teacher educators in the academy. For those of us in New Zealand, we had been teacher educators in recognised, standalone Colleges of Education. When these were subsumed by Universities at the Government's directive, we went from being respected professionals to 'being among the least welcome guests at the educational lawn party of the establishment of higher education' (Ducharme, 1993). In Canada and the United States teacher education had been part of Universities' programmes for much longer. And yet, we came to remarkably similar conclusions. How we were enculturated or mentored into the academy impacted on us—particularly at the beginning of our academic careers, when we were impressionable.

Some of us had been lucky enough to find a kindred spirit when we first entered the academy. These informal mentors quickly became confidantes, *providing endless support, encouragement, and enviable opportunities to teach and research together, opportunities to work collaboratively -- and deep valued friendship. At the end of the warm late summer afternoon, she had gotten to know and trust her mentor, and had a good start on an annotated cognitive map of her new work world.* Another *worked harder to create a relationship with a new and important colleague over the first semester—sharing ideas led to the best conversations about learning and pedagogy she'd ever engaged in.* Another recognised a colleague at the end of her career had been a mentor: *Paths crisscross but her mentor seems to know the way and leads with confidence.*

However, there was also a strong feeling that formal and/or assigned mentors were most often placeholders for the position. *She'd been partnered with a 'self-appointed guru' figure who had no desire to work with her at all, so she worked alone. She realised that even at a university that prided itself as having an inclusive, humane working environment, it was impossible to find mentorship that was truly supportive of the one seeking it. There hadn't been many mentors in her professional career at her own institution.* We recognised that most of our Universities did not have formalised or effective mentoring systems, and most of the effective mentoring that took place arose informally.

Life-long Learners

Despite, or perhaps because, *change is the only constant in life, we wanted to remain open to learning, making the most of opportunities, and keeping ourselves vulnerable. We talked about staying curious and open-minded, being able to make mistakes and to learn from them. This felt much easier to do when we were connected* with our students or colleagues. The reduction in actual hours of teaching and of face-to-face time meant that our practices had to change. Sometimes we *compensated by giving them more resources, when we should have realised it was more important to model what it was to be a good human being in the moment.*

Rather than feeling threatened by change, we wondered how refreshing it could be to consider the potential that change had brought about. It was exciting to add new pedagogical possibilities to our repertoire, such as making our online sessions interactive, using doodly animations to make video presentations, collaborating on Miro Boards. They stimulated our creativity and restored our optimism as we increasingly realised that we were all riding the same stormy seas. Despite its specific cultural context, the Māori whakataukī or proverb– "*He waka heke noa*" (we are all in this canoe together)-- rang increasingly true for us as we navigated turbulent times.

Self-study research helped us to make sense of ourselves as academics and to understand better what was required of us and our students. *As teacher educators we are working with pre- and in-service teachers in an educational environment constantly changing with emerging social challenges, changing government priorities, rapidly advancing digital technologies, a global pandemic, the list won't stop. Our advice to our student teachers is for them to expect change, and to be adaptive and resilient in this constant change.* We needed our students to appreciate that they in turn needed to stay open to *making connections and to being teachable, to embrace the reality that others have a lot to teach them and us.* In other words, we wanted them to know how important their (and our) chosen career was.

Self-efficacy

In this VUCA environment, we recognised that it was still of utmost importance that student teachers and teacher educators develop the self-belief that they were making a valued difference in the lives of their students. *You aren't teaching a subject, you are a teacher. Fullstop! A teacher of young people, of teenagers, of adolescents. You will make a difference in their lives if you can show them that you care about them. If you don't believe in their potential, you're in the wrong profession.* Even in these uncertain times we still needed to give our students the *ability to fly, the confidence to make their own mistakes, to problem solve, to make 'good' teacherly decisions. The belief that one can achieve and complete a task supersedes all kinds of knowledge-building, of content and educational theories.* This wasn't just about confidence or just self-belief. *Self-efficacy is a different cornerstone. Developing this in new teachers is underpinned by relationship building, the development of trust and confidence and openness to new learning so one could face and overcome areas of weakness, avoidance of topics and skills.*

But we recognised that our students didn't necessarily want to hear that. *They want to know what to say, what to do, what is the magic recipe for teaching and how do I hold my hands? If we don't tell them, they think that we are keeping this recipe from them out of spite or something, and are forcing them to guess the magic. But I would say to my student teachers who complain about not feeling well-prepared: "Keep up the great work, you can do this, remember to focus on the pupils, keep asking yourself, 'What is this activity like from their point of view? What are they learning? What is engaging them? What isn't?'"*

As teacher educators, we strove to be caring, kind and supportive cheerleaders, focused on building resilience, self-awareness, and confidence. We needed to encourage our students to look after themselves (and we needed to take our own advice!).

Values

Arguably, successful teacher educators—those who do make a direct difference to individuals —are 'other' focused. We have seen that being successful as an academic (often/usually) means prioritising the individual self. *Staying other-focused in an unpredictable world requires stamina, resilience, a strong moral purpose, a touch of the Pollyanna positivity and a Monty Pythonesque ability to laugh at absurdity.* It required a commitment to maintain a steadfast altruistic gaze on what was of merit to us: championing and supporting our colleagues, our students and important issues.

Revisiting our previous thoughts on values, we took kindness in its many guises to be fundamental for us all within our academic institutions. We recognised that the concept of kindness was usually absent in institutional values, mission statements, goals, strategic plans, appraisal documentation, and student evaluation/satisfaction templates. Instead, our institutions appeared to rate a performance culture over kindness. *What would the experience of being an academic be like if our institutions esteemed kindness and human relationships above accomplishments and research outputs?* If we had the courage and license to practice new ways of being kind in academia—what would that look like? We came

up with many ways that we had intentionally practiced kindness, for example, through emails of appreciation for an article or book we had enjoyed or for thoughtful gestures; gifts of time, kind words; civility and constructive critique in peer reviews; going out on a limb for a colleague; refusing to perpetuate the norm; and refraining from punching down and negativity. As has been oft quoted, "We are all smart – distinguish yourself by being kind."

Relationships

In addressing what we had lost and missed about teaching in today's VUCA environment, we were unanimous about those things easily lost and most sorely missed: relationships, both with students and with colleagues and time to build them.

When we looked back, it was clear that the *most important thing that had helped us thrive, especially during times of uncertainty and challenge, was our relationships with like-minded close colleagues that made the difference and made it easy to push through.* Mentors, key individuals, and communities were what made the difference to growing and thriving or languishing and feeling isolated in the academy. Our advice to ourselves in a VUCA environment was to *find our people within our colleagues—those who we aspire to learn from and be with. If we can't find them within the colleagues at our institution, seeking these relationships elsewhere is crucial.* In this global world, we didn't need to limit ourselves to the office corridors. National and international committees, interest groups, panels, organisations, and research communities online or face-to-face became the place to find *like-minded colleagues to stimulate, encourage and collaborate with. This is the support we can seek and create for ourselves, professionally. Strategic networking can help us decide what's worth our energy or focus and help us prioritise what matters in the time-poor context in which we spend our professional life.*

We do not know how our lives will play out. No matter how much we plan and organise and set it all out in our Excel files, we have no control. When we look back at the positive aspects of our professional experience, we think about the relationships we built with some of our colleagues and the odd moments in the hallway or the staff room or in a meeting when we were really communicating about something that mattered. Seek out allies, build community, surround ourselves with positive, caring people in our profession.

Relationships with students were also easily lost. We all agreed that for *our students, it's the moments of connection that they will remember most and want to emulate with their own students.* Teaching and learning, whether face-to-face or online, thrive on connection. The most powerful teaching tools (in either a face-to-face or digital environment) centered on human interaction and relationships. We needed to cultivate that connection whenever and however we could. As one of us stated, with others nodding knowingly in agreement, *"I think about those moments in the classroom when my students were absolutely with me as we discussed some important aspect of building good learning relationships with pupils. I also think about the times when they were busy and noisy and laughing while doing an activity that I had created, and those times when they were able to demonstrate during micro-teaching or on practicum that they had really understood what I was trying to communicate."*

We wanted to remind our students often that, *when it comes right down to it, the content, the management, the test papers don't really matter. What matters is that there are 30 human beings in a room together, and there is a whole wonderful world out there to learn about, together.* Whether with colleagues or students, we recognised that it was essential to *focus on those moments when we are really connecting with someone, an individual, a colleague, a small group, a class, and revel in the humanity of it.*

Conclusion

If our original intent was to distill any wisdom collectively from our memory-work, we were affirmed when one of us was called upon to give advice to a new faculty hire, shortly after we had spent two hours discussing the prompt about advice to a younger self. The longer she spent giving advice, the more she recognised that she was drawing on our collective work.

A sobering thought has been questioning whether we would have listened to our own advice. We asked ourselves how we could have made our message understood by our younger, keener, less jaded former selves. We have enjoyed

working long hours, we have found satisfaction in small acts of kindness, we have celebrated the achievements of our students, and we have had our research affirmed by readers' responses to it.

The stakes are incredibly high in the volatile context of a modern institution to ensure that new academics are supported. We see the responsibility of all academics is to relay hard-learned lessons to younger scholars, gently but insistently. *Most of all, be kind to yourself, trust yourself and put aside time for self-care. Only you know what you need. Others only think they do. You listen to others all day yet in the midst of all the noise, the most important voice to listen to when things are volatile, uncertain, and complex is your own. Ignore it at your peril.*

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Dawn Garbett

University of Auckland

Rena Heap

The University of Auckland

Linda Fitzgerald

University of Northern Iowa

Ronnie Davey

Lynn Thomas

Université de Sherbrooke

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