

Unravelling in a VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) Environment

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Self-Study

VUCA Environment

Horizontal Relationships

Wellbeing

Structural Violence

I could not have imagined when I started to unravel 2 years ago, that my workplace could become more disturbed. I am a teacher educator in a research-intensive university in a large metropolitan city. I described my workplace as VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) even before the Covid-19 pandemic. This was the new normal in tertiary education according to Wallace–Hulecki (2017). The characteristics were initially used to describe an environment identified by the US Army War College after the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s (Barber, 1992). They resonated strongly with how I perceived my workplace. Events then, as now, unfold with increasing vehemence but little clarity. Problems, solutions, repercussions, and ramifications are multi-layered and intermingled. There are no clearly defined foes and no clear winners. It is a turbulent and stressful environment to navigate. Successes and failures, wins and losses all take their toll. This self-study was born out of rising desperation and a sense that I was no longer able to cope, that I was not fit for purpose in the new regime, that I would be supernumerary if I did not meet the institution's standards. But this self-study project has also been a lifeline and stabiliser. It has helped me understand that I can and do influence my own “normal” and that I am not alone in my struggles.

Unpacking the VUCA acronym with pertinent examples from my specific context illustrates the position I found myself in. The environment is Volatile, with rapid, unforeseeable changes. I have worked in the university for many years and have worked through the systematic procedures for introducing new courses or making changes to existing courses. There are regulatory hoops to pass through, steps on proformas to follow, requirements to be met. It was, therefore, a bolt out of the blue for faculty to be informed three months prior to the start of a new semester that face-to-face teaching hours per course would be reduced from 36 to 27 hours. The rationale given was to manage staff workload and enable small class delivery of curriculum subjects rather than require a component of them to be delivered as mass lectures. In fact, time since then has shown that it had a minimal impact on reducing staff workload but added to the challenge of providing a high-quality programme in less time. Of course, the challenges this change wrought were completely overshadowed by the institution's response to lockdown requirements in the global pandemic in March, 2020.

Uncertainty in this environment abounds. There have been two recent restructurings in 2012 and 2018 in response to falling enrolments and disproportionately high academic staffing costs. In the most recent restructuring, criteria were established to identify staff who were supernumerary. The most senior academics (i.e. Professors and Associate Professors) and senior Professional Teaching Fellows (at Grade 4, the highest grade) were excluded—or protected, depending on your viewpoint—from the process by edict from the Vice-Chancellor. One in five of those staff members who were not excluded from the process were made redundant. Regardless of whether you were inside or outside the ring-fence, it was an uncertain time for staff and the ramifications continue to linger.

These are two examples - one sudden and unforeseen, the other more protracted and anticipated. Other forces coalesce to give rise to a Complex situation. There are reducing numbers of students enrolling in our teacher education programmes for numerous reasons - be that the economic climate, the way the programmes are marketed, competition from other providers, or the perception of teaching as a career. The profile of the faculty is changing in response to the University's strategic plan and the Teaching Council's requirements. There are multifarious challenges impacting our work with no single cause or solution.

There is considerable Ambiguity or lack of clarity around what events or decisions might mean or the effect they may have in months or years to come. An example was the decision to move the starting date of the secondary graduate teacher education programme forward by 3 weeks to align more closely with the school terms. As a result, this programme's semester start and finish times no longer aligned with the rest of the University's. An unanticipated consequence was to disrupt previously approved research and study leave plans for some staff members who found themselves unavailable to teach from the beginning of the course.

As is typical in many institutions, change is one of the few constants in my workplace. I know that this is not uncommon or an aberration. While the examples may be specific to my institution, the volatility, unpredictability, complexity, and ambiguity are not. Nor is the fundamental shift in the way universities justify their existence in a neo-liberal environment unique. Olssen and Peters (2007) reported an increasing emphasis on measurable outputs, performance indicators, and quality assurance measures in universities around the world. Kinman (2014) wrote that the rise of neoliberalism "has created increasingly complex and unpredictable working conditions where academics are viewed as 'knowledge workers' and educational outcomes 'economic goods'" (p.220). The need to be accountable in all aspects of our work as academics has become more and more prevalent. I know I am not the only one expected to demonstrate my competency (I am loathe to write "excellence") in teaching, research, administration, and pastoral care. I have enjoyed the variety of these different roles but the expectations and demands of each often pull me in opposite directions resulting in a negative impact on well-being. Again, I know that I am not alone in this regard. Kinman and Johnson (2019) note that research in the university sector "suggests that the resources that have traditionally protected academic employees against stress and burnout, such as tenure, autonomy, collegiality, and role clarity, are diminishing rapidly" (p.159). According to the Times Higher Education (2014) report, 4 in 10 academics claimed stress was affecting their health.

A consequence of feeling increasingly powerless in a VUCA environment, exacerbated by incidents such as the first one I outline below, triggered an unraveling and headlong dive into distress. Fortuitously (or perhaps out of necessity) I embarked upon a self-study of two complementary strands. One strand, with an international colleague, focused on how we could support one another to live well in the academy through an intercollegial friendship (Garbett and Thomas, 2020). The other strand, this project, gave me the impetus to learn about myself as a senior female academic pitted against structural violence (Graeber, 2012). My focus was to renegotiate my relationship within an unforgiving, turbulent workplace. Initially, I was desperate to understand the forces that were operating to destabilise me. Now, with the benefit of having read more, thought more, discussed more, and enlisted the help of professional therapists and critical friends, I am not so much desperate but determined to take a stand and claim my space in the VUCA environment.

My focus in this chapter is to detail my response to two incidents – one that triggered my distress and the other that marks a victory of sorts. I use both literature and colleagues as critical friends to support how I reframed my initial reactions and learnt from each experience.

Method

This project bears the hallmarks of self-studies. It is driven by a desire to improve my practice as an academic. It is qualitative and collaborative in as much as I have created a safe space with critical friends and the literature to make explicit to myself the tensions in my workplace (La Boskey, 2004). By sharing my insights here and making them available for critique, I seek to validate my understanding of contemporary academic life (Fletcher & Ovens, 2015).

My data sources include notes and personal reflections captured in a professional journal (Holly, 2003). Journals are used in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons by many self-study researchers (Ovens & Garbett, 2020). Tobin and Kincheloe (2006) for example, wrote that they used journals: to enhance their critical consciousness and to document observations and lived experiences, along with pondering on them reflectively and inadvertently creating a text that had the possibility to enact transformational change. I have used an electronic journal to record my response to articles, blogs, books, and chapters. I have described events and their impact on me in this journal as a way to reconsider their meaning and to wonder how else I could have interpreted them. As a way to further explore and reframe my thoughts, I have interleaved the literature, often commenting on chunks of text that have been particularly important. I have also used a paper and pen journal to reflect on counselling sessions and discussions. My journal entries are a messy, disorganised data set only some of which I have shared with critical friends. Their responses have caused me to review and reframe my thinking and subsequent journal entries.

I have used on-line apps such as Telegram and WhatsApp to express my feelings to critical, virtual friends. These virtual friends are an extension of an inner circle of confidantes and are separate from my immediate colleagues. Reiterating and venting my frustration, amazement, and astonishment at how actors play out their roles in this on-line environment often provides comic relief from a turgid situation. I have become the queen of memes, gifs, and acronyms – shorthand to express the full gamut of emotions.

Analysis of this data has been iterative and is on-going. I admit that it is not a systematic analysis. There are some themes that have not so much emerged as swamped my writing. Those that I have dwelled on, tussled with, and come back to in multiple fora have become the backbone of this chapter. I am well aware that this may be seen as solipsistic and self-indulgent but it is an honest and personal account of my learning journey. I have become more aware of the stressors in my academic life. My intention is to share these insights so that others may be encouraged to reflect on their own position and power within contexts.

Incident 1 (May 2018)

Our institution requires all academics to compile an electronic summary of teaching, research, and service and to set goals annually. This forms the basis of a conversation with a line manager. I had had my annual conversation several weeks prior to receiving an email from my line manager who wanted to talk to me. There had been nothing untoward in our conversation reviewing my summary so when my line manager told me that my performance on a one-to-five scale was rated as four—poorly performing—it was a shock. My line manager needed to give an explanation to the Dean. They added that the situation was unprecedented in their experience. What was at issue was that I had not published three peer-reviewed research outputs in the preceding 12 months. The 20,000-word chapter I had worked on for an international handbook (Garbett, et al., 2020) had counted as one output (as would a single 6,000-word article in a reputable journal) but editorials and other research was deemed of marginal academic rigour. I took from the meeting that I was the only underperforming Associate Professor in the department—possibly in the Faculty! I did not attempt to argue with the evaluation or defend my record of accomplishment. I mumbled something about outputs in the pipeline and left my line manager's office with the word "underperforming" ringing in my ears. No one else witnessed the exchange. I never saw that my line manager had completed any report to pass up the managerial chain. I never emailed to follow up or give myself some closure—I was humiliated. The exchange continued to fester in my mind, unchecked.

Response

Later that year I travelled under the auspices of research and study leave to a Canadian university. While I was there as an international visitor, my host, Lynn, and I developed our self-study project focused on supporting one another to live well in the academy (Garbett & Thomas, 2020). I shared the stigma of being underperforming with her. We discussed at length how our performance (as teachers, researchers, and providing leadership) was evaluated at every turn. Working and being in a different university was a refuge. Returning to my home institution later that year though sent me further downward. I was self-aware enough to realise that I was not coping and sought professional help. Through reading, writing, and collaborating in the aforementioned self-study, I discovered how I wanted to position myself as an academic going forward.

One article (Graeber, 2012) resonated in particular. He had written that “structural violence [was] any institutional arrangement that, by its very operation, regularly causes physical or psychological harm to a certain portion of the population, or imposes limits on their freedom” (p.112). He wondered whether violence was the only form of human action that could be effective regardless of whether you knew anything or nothing about the other person.

Pretty much any other way one might try to influence another's actions, one at least has to have some idea who they think they are, who they think you are, what they might want out of the situation, and what their aversions and proclivities are. Hit them over the head hard enough and all of this becomes irrelevant. (Graeber, 2012, p.116)

I thought about the turbulent VUCA environment I worked in and commented in my journal

[Graeber says that just] the threat of violence serves to stupefy us. Isn't this ironic but so true – with a violent act – telling someone they aren't performing for example - you don't have to know anything about the person, how they will take it or what the ramifications might be. You must know that doing the act of violence will have the effect of making them feel powerless, that the violence/statement was somehow justified, unarguable, incontestable, incontrovertible – however absurd or erroneous it may have been (Journal entry, response to Graeber's article, 9 Sep 2019).

I had worn being an underperforming academic like a sackcloth for more than a year. Now it was beginning to make more sense to me. I wrote in this same journal entry:

Academics are under constant threat – our institution's restructuring meant that the real threat of being turfed out of the institution was so great that we just accepted it and kept our heads down. ...It is as though a stone has been dropped into a bucket of water – a splash and then nothing. All is calm, all is as it was and should be. Carry on, nothing to see here folks (9 Sep 2019).

When I finally started sharing my story with colleagues, they told me about their own confrontations with those in management positions. Given the volatility and uncertainty in our workplace, many had become silent victims - fearful, disempowered, and undervalued. Very few felt they were in a position to challenge the status quo. For me, that had amounted to accepting the judgment that I was not performing at the level expected of an Associate Professor as valid. The intimation that I was the only person who had failed to meet expectations had added insult to injury and kept me even quieter. Through reading more literature and talking to others (former colleagues who were no longer employed at the university, critical friends, and others online) a theme of empowerment started to gain traction in my journal and a determination to take a stand against the structural violence as an academic emerged. I no longer felt cowed into silence. Talking with others led to a thoughtful sharing of strategies and approaches to dealing with the stressors inherent in the workplace that we were all exposed to.

Incident 2 (November 2019)

Towards the end of November 2019, draft workloads were circulated via email to all teaching staff. Teaching, research, and service components are apportioned 40:40:20 as a full time equivalent academic workload. My teaching and related teaching duties component showed 965 hours, excluding a projected further 150-200 hours of post-graduate supervisions. The standard academic teaching component was between 630-810 hours so my projected teaching load looked to be at least 300 hours above the upper limit. I emailed my concern to the Head of School.

I do not want my name put down against courses that I will not have the capacity to teach. I am not prepared to be a placeholder and have this as my responsibility to worry about over the coming months (email, 21 November 2019).

I received an immediate reply reassuring me that it would be resolved. However, from past personal and shared common experiences, I knew how difficult it was to change things once they had solidified. I responded:

[I]n the past, working well overload and being used to "fill gaps" has become a fait accompli if not challenged early. I am not responsible for the staff shortages. I am not prepared to teach above the maximum 810 again [as I had in previous years]. It is stated in the Health and Safety at Works Act (2015): Whoever creates the risk manages the risk. HSWA requires health and safety work risks to be managed. This means consideration of the potential work-related health conditions as well as the injuries that could occur. Health conditions include both physical and psychological acute and long-term illnesses.

It also states in the Foreword of the University's Health, Safety and Wellbeing Policy, 2019 that "the University must go beyond legislative compliance to a culture that is proactive in supporting the health, safety and wellbeing of all its members."

QED I am managing the risk to my health and wellbeing proactively.

If you [the Head of School] have identified a risk as being that non-specialists may have to teach primary science courses, I would respond that the bigger risk is to ask me to teach them above load to the detriment of my wellbeing and my academic performance (email, 21 November, 2019).

Response

This email exchange, explicitly guarding my wellbeing and performance, confirms a new determination in my sense of self as an academic working in a managerialist institution. I have realised that I can, and must, assert control over what I can in my VUCA context to protect my sense of self. Knowing what I can control is the first step. Having to reduce my classes from 36 to 27 hours of teaching time, or to move to on-line teaching in the pandemic were things I had no control over. Complying with those examples did not diminish my sense of academic self even though much of my identity rests on the relationships I foster teaching face-to-face. If I have no control over something and I cannot tolerate it or negotiate a different position with the institution, then I must make the decision whether it is worth resigning my position over. This mindset has enabled me to feel more in control of my situation. It is interesting to realise that feeling cowed to submit to expectations without protest in the first incident was the start of my unravelling. Shame, fear, and embarrassment kept me silent and stuck – I did not consider at that point that I could resign. Nor did I feel I had the authority to argue. In the second incident, I had weighed up what the institution anticipated I might do against my own goals and expectations. Somewhere in between these incidents, I had reimagined myself as agentic and capable of negotiating what I wanted to accomplish within my role as a senior academic. I had realised the importance of establishing a horizontal relationship between myself and my workplace – at least from my perspective. This had been heavily influenced by my reading of Adlerian psychology, the underpinning philosophy in Kishimi and Koga's (2013) book. I summarised my thoughts to a friend:

Having a horizontal relationship means that I have no need to seek my institution's approval or meet their expectations because I am focused on meeting my expectations and satisfying my own goals. "Your goal is to lead your life", not comparing yourself to others ... we owe it to ourselves to keep trying to make a difference (Telegram, Andrea, 5 Jan 2019).

To another critical friend I explained:

By trying to take a more horizontal approach, I am looking at what I want my work to be based on. They [the university] are providing me with an opportunity to teach students and to make a difference in the way they approach teaching. That is the basis of our relationship [from my perspective]. I do that task because that is what I want to do with my energy and time. (Telegram, Lynn, 16 Jan 2019)

I knew that the institution would always want me to do more but I was determined to avoid the self-induced stress of pretending I could cope with unrealistic and constant demands. As Kinman (2014) states:

Work-related stress has significant costs for the wellbeing of academics, their families, their colleagues, their university and the quality of higher education. Universities put considerable time and effort into

enhancing the student experience, and rightly so, but little consideration appears to be given to the implications of exhausted, demoralised and dissatisfied academics. (p.231)

My university does promote well-being and work-life balance as desirable and attainable. As I had read the Health, Safety and Wellbeing policy, I had noted that the university's role was to work in partnership with the health, safety, and wellbeing representatives to achieve the required level of protection and compliance and develop effective health, safety and wellbeing management practices. However, translated to a faculty level it appeared that promoting well-being was largely confined to raising awareness about the detrimental effect of mental ill-health and providing access to well-being opportunities. All staff had a responsibility for their own health, safety, and wellbeing. I had read Saltmarsh's (2016) article, nodding my head in agreement.

[M]ental ill-health is invoked as an avoidable or manageable malaise, the containment of which is constituted as both devolved responsibility and celebratory occasion. Mental well-being, on the other hand, is constituted as a form of happiness that is simultaneously an unmarked, albeit obligatory duty, as well as a protection against personal crises, relational instability and institutional risk (p. 168).

I emailed to thank her and added:

I am struggling with our institution's discourse that they are doing the right thing by providing staff with the opportunity to attend Pilates classes 2 times a week at a reduced rate... suddenly it is my responsibility to take better care of myself physically.... In this highly performative environment I just wanted to let you know that reading your paper has actually made a difference to me. (email 23 Sep 2019)

I was surprised and affirmed to receive a reply.

Sometimes it's difficult to keep up the enthusiasm for speaking into this higher ed space, especially when there seem to be so many people lapping up the yoga-dance-mindfulness-gratitude koolaid. (email 24 Sept 2019)

Concluding Thoughts

This then has been my response to the challenges that are before us all as we struggle in this "new normal" tertiary environment. Wallace-Hulecki (2017) suggests that leadership in the VUCA environment should be a 2.0 version and show Vision, Understanding, Courage, and Adaptability. To take a more humane approach in what has been an inhumane environment may well be upon us all in a post-pandemic world. The motivation to live well as an academic stems from an intrinsic need to contribute to creating an institution that is a better place than it is now. For me, this will be through connecting and reaching out on my terms to build positive, supportive relationships with colleagues. It will be through maximising my opportunities to make a difference through my teaching and contributing to the research community in meaningful ways. If this fails to meet my expectations, I will have the courage to move on.

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