

## **Entering the academy: Perceptions of scarcity and abundance**

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## **Chapter 5: Entering the academy: Perceptions of scarcity and abundance**

**Jeanne Allen**

### **Introduction**

While my professional life has in a sense been defined by an ongoing engagement with higher education, I remain a relative newcomer to the sector as an employee. Until 2005, my association with tertiary education had been predominantly as a student involved in undergraduate and postgraduate degrees over roughly 25 years. My transition into work in higher education followed a lengthy career as a secondary teacher and administrator in secondary schools overseas and in several Australian states. In navigating my way through, and playing a role in the management and leadership of these numerous workplaces, I experienced and contributed to the organisational mindsets of abundance and scarcity by which they were strongly influenced. I also developed a “from afar” perception of organisational mindsets in higher education as engendering among people more flexibility, adaptability, innovation, futures-oriented thinking and the like than what I had previously encountered in the secondary education sector. In short, I had envisaged mindsets of greater abundance. In the sections that follow, I discuss how my lived experiences in my first higher education appointment mediated this perception in different ways.

### **Staff silos and the Image of Limited Good in higher education**

I was initially employed in higher education on a two-year contract as a “seconded” teacher from the secondary education sector. The transition represented a sideways career move for me from that of Assistant Principal (Curriculum) in a large secondary college to that of “teacher practitioner” in the Education Faculty of a rural, multi-campus Australian university. My appointment was one of a number made as part of the university’s partnership arrangements with both the State and Catholic Education Departments of Education.

The major goal of the teacher secondment initiative resonated with that of similar arrangements throughout Australia and internationally: that teacher practitioners would draw on their knowledge, skills and classroom expertise to complement the work of Faculty staff in order to offer under-graduate programs suited to emergent educational challenges (Allen, Butler-Mader, & Smith, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2006). The initiative, through its (one-directional) shared staffing arrangement, was also intended to enrich partnerships between the sectors. It was anticipated that teacher practitioners, upon returning to their substantive positions in schools, would be able to impart to others their understanding of current practices in higher education and engage school staff in related professional development activities.

One of the most immediate and certainly most enduring impressions I formed on entering the Faculty was that of the hierarchical and seemingly absolute demarcation of roles between general



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staff, teacher practitioners and academics. While such role demarcation might be considered normative in an organisation of this type, I found it disorienting and somewhat frustrating, particularly given my professional self-image as that of a teacher and school leader. I was suddenly confronted with “teacher practitioner” organisational and cultural expectations that were ill-defined and largely tacit. However, such is often the lived experience of transition between places and types of employment and I accepted that the onus was on me to adapt to the requirements of the role. This was not necessarily an attitude shared by my teacher practitioner campus colleagues. Of the four of us who began, only two completed the two-year contract (the others returning early to schools) and my longer-term colleague did not complete the research higher degree that was an expectation of the role. As I describe later, my aspirations were, however, different from theirs.

My personal struggle with adjusting to role aside, I was perplexed by what I will refer to for the purposes of this book as the scarcity mindsets in and between the three “silos” of higher education professionals and the corroborating scarcity vocabulary that seemed to prevail. Where was the free-thinking, the free speech, the robust debate I had always associated with the academy? Where was the abundance of ideas – of original thought even – that is surely synonymous with our highest educational institutions? For the most part, in this university at this point in time, silenced. I turn to Foster’s (1965) Image of Limited Good to hypothesise why.

Foster (1965, p. 293) upheld the belief that members of any human society share a common understanding or “common cognitive orientation” which comprises “an un verbalized, implicit expression of their understanding of the ‘rules of the game’ of living imposed upon them by their social, natural and supernatural universes.” The Image of Limited Good exists where members of the society conceive of the desired or valued things, both tangible and intangible, within that society as “in *finite quantity* and ... *always in short supply*” (Foster, 1965, p. 296; italics in orig.). Further, it is understood that it is beyond the power of the society to “*increase the available quantities?*” of the valued things (Foster, 1965, p. 296). In other words, there is only so much to go around and the gain of a valued thing by any one individual in the society must necessarily result in the loss or diminishment of that same valued thing by other/s. Accordingly, individuals seek to maximise their security through preserving the valued things they own, which traditionally they do in one of two ways: through complete cooperation or extreme individualism (Foster, 1965). The latter is what, I argue, I encountered within and between the silos of higher education professionals in 2005, a claim which I support below.

I suggested above that the siphoning of people by themselves and others into distinct role groups can be viewed as a norm of organisational life. Following Foster (1965), it can also represent a way of delineating ownership of the valued things. In higher education, as in all organisational and social groups, the valued things change but, for most academic (as distinct from general) staff, they can broadly be categorised as inputs and outputs in research, achievements in teaching and learning, and engagement in the community/external environment. As a teacher practitioner, my workload structure followed the academic model of 40% research, 40% teaching and learning and 20% administration/community engagement. However, my lived experience of the teacher practitioner role differed from that of the profiled academic staff member in a number of ways.



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First, there were multiple opportunities for me to work in ways that drew upon my classroom experience and expertise and this work was generally positively acknowledged by others. For example, I was invited to serve as a tertiary education panel member on the consultation committee reporting on the State's senior secondary school curriculum. I was also granted institutional funding to lead a series of professional development seminars for Education Faculty and partnership school staff. Second, and much less salutory, were my attempts to work outside of my (albeit ill-defined) delineated role.

For example, I was informed of my unsuitability for membership of a variety of Faculty committees, these being the province of academics and members of the general staff; my requests to change from an EdD to a PhD were met with resistance in some quarters, on the pretext that the applied research inherent in an EdD was more within my teacher practitioner domain; and my approaches to general staff with quite mundane requests, such as a tutorial room change, were frequently met with qualified refusals – I should first seek approval from “an academic.”

Less tangible were the negative emotional reactions I seemed to elicit in others. Foster (1965) refers to the suspicion, distrust and jealousy that are evoked when valued things are perceived to be under threat. Unwittingly, it seemed that I posed a threat to members, both within and outside of my group, through, as one teacher practitioner colleague often remarked to me, being “overly ambitious.” Many challenged my motives and questioned my right to act in certain ways. Clearly, I was seen to be encroaching on valued things to which I did not have the right of ownership.

Although contextualised in a personal and therefore subjective narrative, I would argue that the set of experiences and responses touched on above were symptomatic of an environment of scarcity mindsets and that scarcity thinking is used by many within higher education institutions to restrict ownership of the valued things, which is to say, preserve the *status quo*. However, I now turn to a first-hand account of how mindsets of abundance have initiated for me a whole other set of experiences and aspirations in higher education.

## **The research higher degree student experience and the abundance mindset**

I referred above to my 25-year engagement with higher education as an undergraduate and postgraduate student and to the mindsets of abundance that I had perceived to exist within the sector during that time. In this section, I provide a personal account of my “insider” experience as a student once I began working in the academy.



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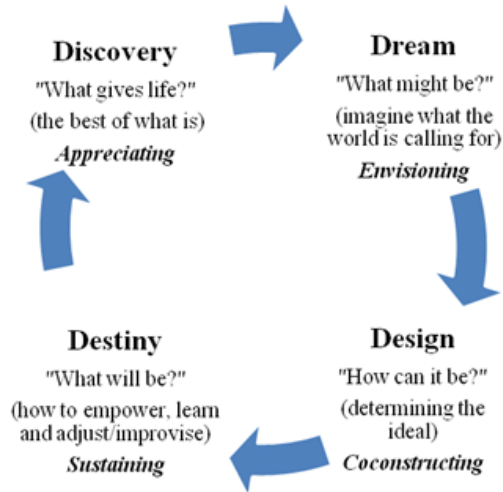


Figure 1: Appreciative Inquiry “4-D” Cycle (based on Cooperrider, Whitney, Stavros, & Fry, 2008, p. 5)

There were several key motivating factors behind my decision to move from the secondary to tertiary sector seven years ago. It had always been my aspiration to work in higher education and I envisaged, correctly as it turned out, that a two-year secondment would equip me with the requisite skills, knowledge and experience to apply to remain in the area. I was also keen to undertake a research higher degree and one of the provisions/requirements of the secondment was to pursue a degree at this level. My enrolment in an EdD, which I later articulated into a PhD, was not only the most personally rewarding aspect of my beginning tertiary years but also allowed me to bear witness to how mindsets of abundance can foster efficiency, creativity and excellence in higher education. I use Cooperrider, Whitney, Stavros and Fry’s (2008) Appreciative Inquiry model to frame this part of my narrative.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a cyclical model that can be used to examine and contribute an understanding of organisational life and processes of change (Cooperrider et al., 2008). It comprises four dimensions (see Figure 1), namely, **Discovery** or the act of appreciating and valuing what currently is; **Dream** or envisioning the ideal; **Design** or the process of reaching for and (co)constructing the ideal; and **Destiny**, which involves learning, empowering, and improvising to sustain the future.

The process of *Discovery* for me as a returning RHD student was twofold. First, there was the re-adjustment to undertaking study at this level and in this particular work construct. I had completed a Master of Education by coursework four years earlier and a Master of Arts by research a decade before that. Coupling study and research with the demands of other core elements of my new role, such as teaching a whole suite of undergraduate courses for the first time, inevitably presented challenges. While there was a 40% time load allowance for research in my work schedule, I was also expected to use some of this time to participate in collaborative research projects, not necessarily associated with my RHD work. Therefore, part of the discovery process for me was to evaluate and manage the time available to me. Second, like many fledgling doctoral students, I had doubts about my capacity to realise success at such a high cognitive level.



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However, my anxiety and doubts were allayed as soon as I began seeking supervisory and collegial support. Specifically, the interactions and conversations I had with my supervisors and other researchers were, from the very outset, engaging, challenging and provocative. Dialogue was rich and debate was rigorous. The mindsets and vocabulary of scarcity that I was constantly encountering in other facets of my work were now absent. By way of example, I draw on Jansen and van den Heuvel's (n.d.) vocabulary of scarcity and abundance (see Table 1) to illustrate my experience of the sharp contrast between the closed mindsets I habitually encountered in higher education (e.g. in teaching /learning and administration) and those I met in research and through RHD study. In the former, connotations were limited, structured, closed and factual; in the latter, they were ambiguous, unstructured, open and experiential.

Scarcity in higher education	Abundance in research/RHD study
Limited	Ambiguous
Structured	Unstructured
Impersonal	Personal
Fear	Vision
Clear	Diffuse
Closed	Open
Control	Curious
Fact	Experience

Table 1: Contrast between mindset vocabularies in higher education (adapted from Jansen and van den Heuvel (n.d.))

Thus, I found myself in a positive space and one in which, to return to Cooperrider et al.'s (2008) AI model, I was enabled to *Dream* and envision an ideal future around research and to *Design* and co-construct ways in which to best seek to determine this ideal.

There were both pragmatic and more esoteric motivating factors that determined how I envisioned the future. First, to be eligible to apply for an academic position at the end of my secondment, I needed to complete my doctoral work in a timely manner. Second, I wanted to produce work at the highest level of which I was capable and, third, I believed it important to win the esteem of others in the academic field. This then was the *Dream*. The *Design* was an iterative process. I sought out sound advice from my research supervisors and built upon their advice throughout the course of my degree through my own experiences and through interactions with others. A summary of the *Dream* and *Design* dimensions of my doctoral research can be found in Table 2 (at chapter's end).

Inevitably, the realisation of the ideal was at times fraught. Some elements of my design, such as doing some thesis work every day, were unrealisable. While able to seek funding, I was only successful to a limited degree and, while gaining the support of my supervisors, I found it difficult, as a teacher practitioner, to articulate from an EdD to a PhD. However, as I describe below, my outcomes were, for the most part, positive.

Cooperrider et al. (2008) define *Destiny* as the active empowerment of the *Dream* and the *Design*. My *Destiny* as a researcher/beginning higher education employee was realised in a number of ways. In the spirit of abundance, I focus briefly on the three most productive outcomes. First, although my candidature was part-time, I was able to devote 4000 hours over three years to my



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RHD study and was admitted into the PhD in 2009. Second, I have been able to develop, both during and since my RHD work, a reasonably strong early career researcher publication record. Third, within one week of my PhD conferral, I was appointed, in my sixth year in the academy, to the (now tenured) position of Senior Lecturer in an inter-state university.

These outcomes, while achieved through my own sustained hard work, would not have been possible, or indeed imaginable, without the liberating and empowering forces that emanated from the mindsets of abundance in research management and leadership in the higher education institution in which I began my academic career.

## Conclusion

Through providing above a first-hand account of my transition into higher education, I present no more than my own perceptions of how scarcity and abundance have influenced my seven-year engagement in the sector. While the argument could be raised that my perceptions of mindsets in the academy are merely representative of, and heavily influenced by, my own professional inclinations and aspirations, I would argue that they nonetheless elucidate to some degree the lived experience of the academic. I certainly make no claim to objectivity. Further, as Jansen and van den Heuvel (n.d.) point out, what matters in adopting and interpreting a particular mindset is the way in which one *perceives* certain situations.

I have presented above an essentially binary view of mindsets of scarcity and abundance in higher education. Others refer to the mindset continuum – ranging from extreme scarcity to extreme abundance – but this was not my experience in entering the academy. As is generally the nature of personal narrative, I have referred to specific sets of circumstances in a particular environment at a nominated period of time. None of the points of my argument can be extrapolated or considered in any way generalisable. For example, in the university in which I now work, I operate under a whole new set of tenets emanating from an entirely different scarcity/abundance paradigm. Nevertheless, it is my contention that closed and open mindsets, stances of scarcity and abundance, are primary influences in limiting or fostering growth and in stymieing or advancing positive and reconceptualised futures in higher education.

**Table 2: Summary of the Dream and Design dimensions of my doctoral research**

Dream	Design
Timely completion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Say “no” to other tasks/requests where possible</li> <li>• Be totally committed to the task</li> <li>• Do some thesis work every day</li> <li>• Write every day</li> <li>• Meet regularly with supervisor/s</li> <li>• Submit some polished written work to supervisors well before every meeting</li> <li>• Keep meticulous records of progress and constantly assess progress</li> </ul>
Quality research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seek good supervision</li> <li>• Accept the hard knocks</li> <li>• Persist</li> <li>• Read voraciously</li> <li>• Be self-critical</li> <li>• Seek out funding</li> <li>• Get to know the library staff</li> <li>• Get to know the Office of Research staff</li> </ul>



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Peer esteem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Submit to the best journals</li><li>• Accept and act upon feedback</li><li>• Submit abstracts for the most esteemed international conferences</li><li>• Attend all institutional research seminars, workshops, etc</li><li>• Articulate from an EdD into a PhD</li></ul>
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