Hero, survivor or stuck: A narrative analysis of student constructions of persistence after failure

Rola Ajjawi[1]*, Mary Dracup[1] and David Boud[1-3]

[1]*Centre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning, Deakin University, Geelong, Australia;* [2]*Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia;* [3]*Work and Learning Research Centre, Middlesex University, London, UK.*

*Corresponding author:

A/Prof Rola Ajjawi

rola.ajjawi@deakin.edu.au

Twitter: @r_ajjawi

CRADLE, Deakin University

Tower 2, Level 12, 727 Collins Street

Melbourne, VIC 3008

TEL: +61 3 924 43824

Rola Ajjawi ORCiD: 0000-0003-0651-3870

Mary Dracup ORCiD: 0000-0002-5678-4145

David Boud ORCiD: 0000-0002-6883-2722

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Abstract

Academic failure is commonplace in higher education. Some students persist and go on to complete their courses. However, some do not, and this creates a problem for themselves, the institutions in which they are enrolled and more generally for society. If we could understand students' lived experiences of academic failure and persistence, it may be possible to design strategies that assist others to more effectively navigate the demands of higher education. A narrative inquiry was undertaken with students who failed and persisted with their course to understand how identities and agency influenced persistence following failure. Using figured worlds theory and narrative analysis, three patterns of persistence were identified characterised as: a hero's journey, surviving failure and stuck in the system. The positions students adopted in relation to other actors within their narratives ranged from active to passive, highlighting different agentic responses of students. Implications for supporting students to recover from failure are discussed.

Keywords: failure, persistence, undergraduate, agency, identity

Introduction

Failure of individual subjects or units is commonplace in higher education courses (Ajjawi et al. 2020). Many students retake them and successfully graduate. However, this is not the case for all: many do not experience a retrievable failure, but one that has social and economic consequences for themselves, the educational institution and more widely for society. Academic failure is multifactorial and individualised, much like the pathways that follow. An understanding of how students construct their identities following academic failure and how they persist in their studies may lead us to strategies that assist those who follow to more effectively navigate the demands of higher education. Academic failure is a manifestation of more than an inability to successfully complete assessment tasks; it emerges from the whole experience of a student within a course, institution and social environment, what Kahu and Nelson (2018) referred to as the 'educational interface'. An appreciation of this complexity—the influences and students' responses to these that might lead them to persist or not—is needed if the experience of students is to be improved.

Whilst there has been a long tradition of researching the factors that improve retention (a focus on the 'supply side', according to Yorke, 2004) and persistence (the student decision to stay or leave), this research has not teased out the significant role of subject failure in students' persistence (i.e., for the large subset of students who fail one or more subjects, but subsequently continue in their course). The

work of Tinto (1975, , 2017), Sandler (2000), and Kember and colleagues (2021) has aimed to determine the factors that might influence student retention (e.g., academic integration, social integration, demographics, attendance mode, remoteness index, etc.) which could potentially then be influenced to promote student completion. Others have explored persistence based on students' lived experiences and their focus and drive to persist despite being 'othered' (O'Shea et al. 2016), including how students construct their defence to remain at university when facing an academic progress committee (Jevons and Lindsay 2018). What this research shows is that persistence requires effort and commitment, renegotiation of possible selves and trajectories, as well as convincing self and others about the value of persisting (Delahunty and O'Shea 2020). This often involves the construction of narratives about one's identity and reasons for persisting.

Once a decision to persist is made, the nature of this persistence and actions it involves differ for different students. For example, in our own work with students who chose to persist following failure, we find that some students made adjustments to succeed whilst others did not, even though they all continued to re-enrol (Ajjawi et al. 2019). Therefore, what we seek to examine in this study is the nature of students' persistence following failure of subjects or units where it might signal a change in approach by the student. Persisting but continuing to fail is a costly and unsatisfying situation for students and the institutions that seek to support them. Understanding how students persist requires insight into the stories students tell themselves about their current and future identities that help them to recover, and thus learn, from failure.

What do students do after academic failure?

A specific failure is a personal event that can trigger changes to life trajectories, such as dropping out of a course; but for some students, failure may be a positive learning experience, signalling that they need to change their habits or their aspirations (Peelo 2002). Our previous research, including analysis of institutional data (n= 9285 students) and an online survey of 186 undergraduate students who had failed at least one subject during their course, similarly highlights the multiple adaptations that students make following failure. The majority of students who fail and persist respond by making a number of adaptations at individual, situational and institutional levels (Ajjawi et al. 2019). At an individual level, students report changing their study habits, prioritising study, joining study groups, and asking more questions in class. At a situational level, they report moving home, reducing hours in employment, and seeking help of peers and even family and friends. And at an institutional level, they adapt by reducing units of study taken, seeking special consideration earlier or engaging with university support structures such as counsellors, librarians, and learning and language advisors. It is unsurprising that adaptations to failure are diverse, given the diversity of factors leading to failure (Ajjawi et al. 2020; Bowles and Brindle 2017).

Surprisingly, nearly a third of students who responded to our survey persisted with their studies but reported making no changes in response to failing (Ajjawi et al. 2019). Given the survey nature of our previous research, we were unable to fully understand why this might be the case. Psychological 'attribution' theories of motivation described by Weiner (2000), and Dweck's (1999) 'mindset' theories might offer an explanation for why some students seek help while others do not. Weiner (2000) proposes that the ways people attribute failure and success impact heavily on their expectations for future success and therefore, their future actions. For example, if they attribute failure to a lack of ability, a factor that is internally located, stable and uncontrollable, this will lead to a feeling of hopelessness. However, if they attribute failure to a lack of effort, a factor that is internally located but unstable and controllable, this leaves open the possibility of future success if they just work harder. Dweck (1999) suggests people may tend to see an ability as fixed and stable (a 'fixed mindset') or amenable to cultivation (an 'incremental' view or 'growth mindset'). Effective learning goals rest on a growth mindset, which involves being open to accurate information about their current level of ability and recognising the value of investing effort in challenging themselves.

It is likely that a number of factors are at play in attribution. Rogers (2002) suggests that both relatively stable personal and more variable situational factors influence the way a student attributes success or failure in any particular learning situation. Research highlights diversity in the patterns of attribution and therefore the responsibility students accept in relation to their academic success (and failure). Unlike the Winston et al. (2010) study where students accepted responsibility for their poor performance, Cleland et al. (2005) found that students in their study took little personal responsibility for their performance and were reluctant to seek help. Patel and colleagues (2015) also found that students tended to attribute failing to external reasons, acting as a barrier to taking up formal support and seeking informal help from peers. These studies show that attribution and responsibility-taking in relation to performance can vary and may negatively influence students' willingness to seek help and engage with support and remediation strategies. In other words, whether failure is attributed to internal or external factors will influence their subsequent actions.

Unlike the linear approach of attribution then action, sociological theories of agency assume a complex and dialectical relation between the individual and their support environment. The application of this approach to studying failure involves taking into account the individual *in relation to others*, including teachers, assessors and support services. This opens a multitude of positionalities in relation to others (e.g., hero, ally, mentor, victim, bully, etc.) that extend beyond dichotomous constructions of internal/external attribution or fixed/growth mindsets. Students may position themselves as passive recipients or even victims of assessment practices or assessors; or indeed may adopt agentic positions of resistance and power (Rees et al. 2020). Or they may position themselves as 'hopeless' underlings in relation to the teacher who acted as a saviour or hero, for example: 'He [the tutor] never gave up on us, even though we may have given up on ourselves' (Winston et al. 2010).

To promote persistence following failure, it is posited that teachers should model the view that students have the necessary level of ability to eventually succeed through application of particular strategies and effort: 'the key to dealing with failure in higher education is to accept it as a normal and desirable part of the learning experience' (Rogers 2002). Presumably, this would position the teacher as an ally who may prompt student motivation and engagement.

In terms of students' relations with support services, universities offer a variety of services including counselling, psychological services and language and learning support, but students must choose whether to engage with these. A learning or progress plan might be drawn up after multiple fails that draw the attention of an academic progress panel, but even a personal learning plan requires the students' active engagement to be successful. As mentioned, in our earlier research, almost 30% of students reported making no changes to aid in recovery even though they persisted with their studies and were able to access the same university support services as other students (Ajjawi et al. 2019). Hence, understanding persistence following failure as at least partly the interaction of the student with the assortment of supports available to them (whether within or outside the university) is a useful point of exploration. These perspectives highlight a need to look beyond the individual to their constructions of themselves in relation to the educational environment. If a student constructs themselves as agentic within their learning environment following failure, then it is likely that their actions might follow suit.

The interplay between students' constructed identities, positioning and engagement with available supports led us to the identity and agency literature. 'Figured worlds' theory by Holland et al. (1998), which draws from Bakhtin, Vygotsky and Bourdieu, is a sociocultural practice theory of self and identity where figured worlds are a social reality mediated by relations of power that form sites of possibility (in terms of agency). This theory enabled us to view identity and agency as in continuous dialogue with what the social world throws up, rather than agency being an act of free will on the part of the student such as in discourses of 'earned failure' (Fassett and Warren 2004). Hence, we ask: how do students position themselves and others within narratives of academic failure and persistence? We do this in order to better understand student constructions of agency and self-authoring in persisting following academic failure.

Theoretical frame

Figured worlds theory seeks to understand identity and agency as a dialectic between the individual and the social world, eschewing the primacy of either. It takes account of both the continual emergence of identity through activity in cultural settings and the more durable aspects of identity that have formed over time in those settings (an individual's 'history-in-person' that is brought to current situations) (Holland et al. 1998). According to Urrieta (2007), figured worlds are cultural phenomena

that individuals join, they function as contexts of meaning for activities, they are socially organised and reproduced/performed, and they are populated by familiar social types.

Applying this theory in the context of higher education, students will have pre-figured identities that are powerfully shaped from previous experiences of schooling and life, and these are constantly shaped and reshaped through their experiences of university. Students construct a figured world of being a learner at a university in relation to the social types that populate this figured world. Their figured world may be disrupted through academic failure, leading to re-negotiation of identity. By virtue of persisting following academic failure, participants construct a figured world of persistence (of being a student who persists following failure) that helps them to make meaning of their experiences and gives shape to their future identities and actions. These figured worlds create different possibilities for student identity and action.

According to Holland and colleagues, there are four contexts for the production of personal and social identities: figured worlds, negotiations of positionality, space of authoring, and world making. We address each, in turn.

1. Figured worlds

Figured worlds are the 'socially and culturally constructed realm[s] of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others' (Holland et al. 1998: 52). A figured world is a socially constructed cultural model, a distillate of reality, a thinking tool that relates to social practice; figured worlds can be thought of as individuals' taken-for-granted theories about the way things are. Figured worlds are organised through cultural means, through narratives or storylines. Thus, narratives provide a significant backdrop for interpretation. For example, a student may have a particular figured world of being a successful student that is disrupted/interrupted by failure.

2. Positionality

Positionality refers to identity in practice. Identity is about 'how people come to understand themselves, how they come to ''figure'' who they are, through the ''worlds'' that they participate in and how they relate to others within and outside of these worlds' (Urrieta 2007: 107). Figured identity is an imaginative framing of self in typical narratives; positional identity (how one is positioned in relation to the other) is about inclusion and exclusion, entitlement, silencing, distance and affiliation. Therefore, positionality is 'inextricably linked to power, status, and rank' (Holland et al. 1998). For example, a student may position themselves as active in relation to their teacher who may be an ally, helper or mentor; or as absent. Alternatively, a student may position themselves as a victim of a negligent or victimising teacher.

3. *Agency – space of authoring and creating new possibilities (or making worlds)*

Agency refers to the space of authoring where people make sense of self through multiple internal dialogues. The social world creates a position for the individual that they must accept, reject or negotiate. People must author themselves in the world, but their responses are not predetermined (Urrieta 2007). This is how agency is constructed in response to the challenges of the social world.

For a person to take control requires not only understanding the world but also developing a new understanding of their selves and their lives, and reinterpretation of their own pasts. To enter a new figured world, a new frame of understanding is needed. In these new figured worlds lies the possibility for creating new ways of being and doing – which ultimately become their figured world. This view of agency does not accord with it being an act of free will of independent authorship, but one of building new social competencies in newly imagined communities. That is, human action is directed to and shaped by the 'playing field' and improvisation involves playing with cultural resources and in so doing making them consequential (Holland et al. 1998). This attunes us to students' resourcefulness and improvisation rather than constraints, hence overcoming the deficit discourse typical of research in failure in higher education (Devlin 2013). For example, a student may reach out to friends and family, seeking help and thus authoring themselves as actively recovering from failure.

4. *World making*

World making refers to future possibilities as practices and identities shift in response to the demands of the social, and so remaking the social in the future. People 'figure' how to relate to one another over time. For example, based on the renewed actions, the social world will throw up further demands that will dialectically influence the student's response as they move forward. This figuring out of how to be a student who persists following failure may open a different figured world for each student.

Narrative inquiry method

We employed narrative inquiry to unpack student constructions of their experiences of academic failure that illuminated the role of agency in their overcoming of that failure. Narrative inquiry methods focus on the story, its underlying values and construction of meaning (Reissman 2008). Narrators position themselves and others within a story to project a particular vantage point using various linguistic or narrative devices such as embedded plotlines, character tropes and metaphor. The plotline, or point, of a story comprises the logic of the story and why events happen; for example, a quest plotline might be about a student who overcomes multiple barriers and adversity to succeed. A plot weaves together 'a complex of events to make a single story' (Polkinghorne 1988).

Character tropes are common stereotypical portrayals linked to attributes or types of actions particular characters perform; for example, villain, victim, hero, judge, martyr or bully.

'The importance of the different positions in which individuals' character tropes are portrayed within the narratives sheds light onto the various identities narrators attribute to themselves and others. Such positioning can also influence (empowering and inhibiting) future social identities (possible selves) and, therefore, possibilities for behaving in the face of similar events' (Monrouxe and Rees 2016).

In other words, paying attention to the characters that students construct in relation to other actors (e.g., teaching staff, the university, peers or friends) gives us insight into future actions and identity construction but are not predictive of these.

A diverse sample of 14 undergraduate students who had failed at least one unit of study and persisted with their studies responded to our invitation and were interviewed. One member of the research team first extracted sizeable sections of the interview transcripts that contained the interviewee's story of experiencing, feeling and responding to academic failure(s), and placed these into chronological order as 'concrete stories about particular events', or 'event stories' (Sandberg 2016). These event stories had dimensions of context (time and place), chronology (ordering of events) and theme (meaning), which provided coherent units of analysis. The defining feature of a narrative that is key to its use in this study is the consequential linking of events to create meaning and give shape to things that might otherwise appear random. One event story was constructed per participant.

The research team each reviewed one participant's event story and met to discuss their interpretations of the story and the narrative devices that could be identified within it. The remaining 13 re-storied versions of interview transcripts were divided amongst the team and interpreted through analysing the narrative devices within each. Our analysis template included devices described by Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) such as plotline, character archetypes, settings, turning points, resolutions, emotions, tropes and overarching image, which we adapted from our previous narrative research. The analysis template acted as a preliminary step to gaining an understanding of each student's narrative. The authors then worked in pairs to critique each other's analyses, and subsequently shared refined versions of each analysis as a group. At this stage we introduced figured worlds theory and the four sensitising contexts mentioned above in order to make sense of the data and to structure our interpretations.

Despite recognising that producing a narrative account of one's actions is itself an agentive act (Nieminen and Hilppo 2020), it was apparent that some students did not construct themselves as agentic. Instead, their positionality indicated a victim or powerless position, whilst others described clear networks of agency. We identified three recurring manifestations of figured worlds of persistence among the narrations of our 14 interviewees. These manifestations refer to broad patterns of student experiences, in relation to components (or contexts) of figured worlds theory; i.e., positionality, agency and world making; though many variations in the patterns were identified. Here

we present a description and constructed narrative of each in relation to these contexts. These figured worlds should not be assumed to be fixed for individual students. Over time, with repeat experiences of passing or failing and new positionalities with different actors, students might 'figure' a new way of being a student who persists following failure. A limitation of narrative is that these are constructions by students and researchers; but the world exists through story – so although told to researchers these may also constitute the stories that students tell themselves (Reissman 2008).

Findings

The participants were diverse, recruited from undergraduate Commerce (C), Education (E) and Nursing (N) courses. Of the 14 students, 12 identified as female (F), 2 as male (M), there was 1 online student, 1 international student, 1 Indigenous student, 2 with a disclosed disability, 7 first-in-family, and 4 mature-age students. They had failed a range of units: 2 having only failed one unit of study, 8 having failed two units, 1 having failed four units and 2 having failed more than five. All described multiple factors leading to their academic failure, including language, motivation or financial difficulties; mental health issues (e.g. exam anxiety); caring responsibilities (e.g. having a sick son); and isolation (e.g. geographical, racial or social). Some expressed a person-in-history position as a lazy student. However, these contributing factors to failure, other than being multiple and compounding, did not seem to predict specific patterns of persistence.

Hero's journey

We *characterised* five students' persistence narratives as a **hero's journey**. These students describe a range of backgrounds and challenges including language difficulties, carer responsibilities, low motivation and perceived irrelevant unit content. They *author* themselves as assuming control of factors that have been causing them to fail; even though most have failed more than one unit, they cast themselves as on their way to success. Others such as friends, peers, family, teachers, course advisers, the student association and work supervisors are *positioned* as mentors and allies. The students *author* themselves as agentic learners, using strategies such as widening their network, actively seeking support, forming study groups, and/or learning about themselves as learners. They have *figured* how to persist through recognising and addressing problems over which they have control: stopping others damaging their self-confidence, putting in more effort, and ensuring they understand subject matter/terminology. The university does not figure as an important character in these stories. (CF1, CF2, CM1, NF1, NF3)

A reconstituted narrative from these students' accounts is as follows:

> Athina did well in her first year at uni but then had a relationship breakdown and a family member became ill. She felt she needed to focus on other priorities and stopped attending all of her classes—she didn't like some of her subjects anyway, but thought she would scrape through. When she failed two units she was shocked as she hadn't failed anything

before. She sought comfort from family and friends and spent summer reflecting deeply on her direction. At the same time she talked to the faculty student course advisers and chose a different major, and when the trimester started again she formed a study group with some peers. She attended all her classes and studied in the library in between. She made a big effort to overcome shyness in class and started asking more questions to make sure she understood important points.

Surviving failure

We *characterised* six students' persistence narratives somewhat less heroically, as simply **surviving failure**. These students had all failed multiple times, due to significant difficulties such as mental health issues, low motivation, low perceived ability and stresses in their personal lives. These are causes they tend to externalise. They *position* their struggle in relation to inflexible university systems and negligent teachers, but they are not hopeless as they manage to work around and survive these injustices. They have *figured* how to persist through making changes to their study load, subject pathways or where they live to improve their chances of success; and have mostly sought help with study skills and/or their mental health. However, they *author* themselves rather humbly as ingenues, apprentices or cogs in the bureaucratic university system. For example, EF5 authors herself as a player learning to navigate the system more than necessarily achieving learning requirements, whilst NF2 persists through attempting to normalise her failure and seeking exam adjustments through the Disability Resource Centre. These students continue to lack confidence as learners, but their vocational goals keep them motivated to find ways to inch forward. Teachers and parents are sometimes positioned as helpers but may also be part of their problem; friends, course advisers, psychologists/counsellors and the church provide vital emotional support. (NF2, NF4, NF5, EF1, EF3, EF5)

A reconstituted narrative of these students' accounts is as follows:

> Darcy has always wanted to be a nurse and has mostly done well in her placements but has some mental health problems that sometimes impact on her ability to study. After first year in a country campus she has moved with her family to the city, where she doesn't have a strong support network. After failing one placement and one core unit twice she has lost confidence and motivation but she doesn't see herself as a quitter and her counsellors have helped her to control her mental health conditions better. She has reduced her study load and each time she does the unit she understands the content better, but finds it difficult to connect with other students with whom she could study as her first group of peers have moved on. She has worked with study support advisors to develop better study strategies, such as note taking and doing past exams. She is determined to complete her degree and become

a nurse, but regrets losing friends because she has often stayed home to study instead of going out.

Stuck in the system

In contrast to heroes and survivors, we *characterised* three students' persistence narratives as **stuck in the system**. They seem stuck against seemingly immovable barriers, unable to move either backwards or sideways, with little hope of eventually succeeding. Two (EF2, EF4) *position* their struggle in relation to intransigent bureaucratic obstacles including a hurdle exam (for a student with severe exam anxiety); and inflexible timetabling, poor curriculum and insufficient choice of placement schools (for the other). These students do not lack initiative, having reached out to teachers, peers, friends, family, a psychologist and/or the disability resource centre, but none have been able to remove the barriers they face. They have *figured a way* to persist as merely continuing and repeating, even though they are not confident of succeeding, because they cannot see another pathway and have already completed much of their degree. They *author* themselves as competent and motivated to work in their chosen vocation, if they can just overcome what they see as, the irrational hurdles placed by the university system.

A reconstituted narrative of these two students' accounts is as follows:

> Bec feels she has been repeatedly mistreated by the university and is disillusioned with the system. She perseveres as she really wants to become a teacher, and her placements have gone well and shown she has the ability to do the job. In her first year she was forced to travel to a country campus for classes even though she lived near the city campus, as she enrolled late. She suffers from severe exam anxiety and has failed a core unit with a hurdle exam twice. Her disability liaison officer tried to negotiate an alternative assessment but failed. Now she is taking the unit again but still not confident of passing the exam. If she fails again, she may have to give up her dream of becoming a teacher.

The third student (CM2) *positions* himself as imperilled as a student by his lack of self-insight and motivation to change his study habits/lifestyle sufficiently to succeed. He has sought help from teachers and friends in the past with some success, but currently is not seeking any help. As he has failed several units the academic progress committee (APC) have recently forced him to reduce his study load. He seems to have *figured* a way to persist as simply to continue till the option disappears, because he is 'not a quitter', he does not want to let his mother down, and has not developed an alternative plan. He *authors* himself as someone who is performing the motions of being a student but allowing himself to be distracted by other things in his life and not really working out what it takes to succeed at university.

Discussion

We have identified three characteristic ways in which students constructed their personal stories of persistence, and in the process their agency, or lack of it. Students draw on three stark imaginaries of being a student. In the first two narratives students adopt an agentic position, either in the case of *the hero's journey* taking control to build their path to success, regardless of what the university does; or, in the case of *surviving failure*, negotiating the system and their individual challenges as best they can and holding on to their vocational goals as beacons of hope. In the third *stuck in the system* narrative, students adopt less agentic position, as a victim either of a system that is inflexible and uncaring, from which they could emerge successfully if only they could overcome the unreasonable barriers placed in their way by others; or their own inability to mobilise their personal resources to make real progress towards their degree.

We do not intend to present these patterns as exhaustive or comprehensive, but merely as an indication of the story lines from which students in our sample drew to construct their figured worlds of persisting following failure (Reissman 2008). In addition, the chosen research approach (with a small number of participants but in-depth interviewing) does not enable definitive linkages to be made between particular student characteristics and patterns of persistence. In fact, what struck us in immersing ourselves in the data is the heterogenous nature of failure. The value of using figured worlds for this analysis is that these three patterns typifying the narratives that the students deployed or constructed afford particular types of actions and responses that are malleable and dynamic, rather than focusing on the students' more essential features or traits. In terms of the attribution literature, this approach opens possibilities for learning conversations that extend beyond dichotomous constructions of internal/external attribution (Weiner 2000) or fixed/growth mindsets (Dweck 1999).

Our findings highlight how students in the first two patterns responded to the crisis point of failing a unit by creating new figured worlds of possibility. Being in this new figured world created the possibility for different forms of action. Urrieta (2007: 111) describes it thus: 'In these new (novel) figured worlds lies the possibility for making/creating new ways, artifacts, discourses, acts, perhaps even more liberatory worlds'. Therefore, before a student can take an action that leads to change, it has to appear on their 'radar' as a possibility, an action that makes sense. Students might know for example that support services exist, but these may only become a possibility for action within a new figured world of persisting where a student is being a hero or survivor. Students in the third pattern also made efforts but these were not successful, leading to constructions of loss of agency. This pattern may shed light on why many students in our previous survey also said they made no changes post-failure (Ajjawi et al., 2019): they may also have been stuck in the system and unsure how to

recover. This analysis counters individualised deficit narratives of failure (Devlin 2013; Fassett and Warren 2004; Kember et al. 2021).

A recurring motif in our students' narratives is the importance of clear, strong vocational goals as a motivating factor for students to take control, seek help and make adaptive changes to their lifestyle and/or study habits. This aligns with studies by Lizzio and Wilson (2010) and others. For example, mature first in family students persevered through maintaining the future focus of possible selves; these constructions of possible selves were 'fluid and evolving' (Delahunty and O'Shea 2020: 13). We found that having and holding on to vocational intentions appears to have a protective effect that enables students to carry themselves through adversity. This potentially explains why some students who had similar conditions and support to others (but clearer, stronger vocational goals) found more motivation to reach out for help, learn and respond when others were unable to do so. It may also point to the need for work with students to develop their vocational goals. These goals relate to students' figuring of who they are (and want to be) in the worlds in which they participate.

As noted above, the heroes in our study reach out and learn about themselves, gaining confidence through their actions. Those who just survive also reach out, continuing to lack confidence but gaining some insight into what success requires as a result of their actions. The stuck students have not been effective in reaching out, leaving them feeling buffeted by circumstances and hopeless. It is interesting to observe how others are portrayed within these dominant narratives. Typically, peers and friends are positioned as allies and helpers, which aligns with our previous survey findings that the majority of students seek help from peers, family and friends following failure (Ajjawi et al. 2020). Students' positioning of themselves in relation to the university and its staff is more variable.

Teaching staff are positioned in various narratives as allies, mentors or helpers; or as negligent, absent or obstructive. The negative positioning of these staff is particularly notable in the 'stuck' figured world, demonstrating how detrimental these figures can be to student wellbeing and their engagement with the subject if they must repeat it following failure, especially when the same teachers are involved. The ways in which students position teaching staff clearly influences how they relate to the range of supports available to them. This is not fixed, however. Within whatever positioning, there are spaces of authoring. For example, one of our participants (CM1) described not having sought help despite previous failures until he met a teacher whom he positioned as a helper, and who enabled him to recognise the value of seeking help, transforming his narrative into a hero's journey. This highlights the dynamic nature of these interactions, and also illustrates the need to avoid seeing the offerings provided by the university as neutral, simply as services students can readily access when needed. The issue is not whether they can be easily accessed, but whether students see them as part of their own narrative: 'are they for me and my view of my studies at this point in my trajectory?'

The role of the university and what it provides figures differently in the various narratives. For some, the university exists only as a background to what the students see themselves doing. They do not recognise themselves as needing the individual support available from teachers, course advisers, language and learning advisers, counsellors and so on; or even acknowledge what supports the university can provide. Typically, if students had not availed themselves of supports and found them to be effective at an early stage, when times were relatively good for them, once they confronted the experience of failure, they did not have the personal resources to see or reach out to them (or to give them another try, if at first they had seemed unhelpful).

Worryingly, in several student narratives the university as a whole is constructed as an uncaring machine in which the student is stuck or which places obstacles in their path, or in the worst cases which behaves as a bully (with the student as victim). If we consider the metaphor of the 'university-as-machine', then university staff act as the interface between students and the university. A teacher purposefully reaching out to a failed student in the position of ally might be able to reduce power differential, hence creating a more user-friendly interface and potentially shifting students' internal dialogue away from a victim or stuck position. This links well with recent calls in the literature to promote authentic relational pedagogies of care and mattering between teachers and students (Gravett and Winstone 2020). Such care from teachers, and other staff, would address Tinto's (2017) pillars of persistence: self-efficacy, valuing of the curriculum and belonging.

Improving teachers' attitudes towards students, including greater approachability and empathy, was an important recommendation stemming from recent research with students on improving mental health at university (Baik, Larcombe and Brooker 2019). This is not intended to place the full onus for recovery on teachers. According to Meyer and Land (2014) liminality and discomfort are essential (and indeed normal) components of learning, and struggle can be an important part of recovering from failure. However, our view of agency as one of being a dialectic between the individual and their social environment means that student-teacher partnerships are necessary for supporting some students to eventually cross the threshold or in essence to escape being stuck.

For many students in our study, the shock of failing a unit prompted them to reflect, seek help and make changes. Considerable emotional and financial impact may have been spared if these students had been identified well before the point of failure, followed with effective interventions from teaching or professional staff. Our results point to the importance of students positioning themselves, and being positioned by the institution, on paths that do not lead to failure. This would require not only recognition of students' difficulties through the predictive learning analytics methods that are gaining traction (Herodotou et al. 2019); but also listening to student narratives following first assessment experiences to gain insights into their figured worlds and identify opportunities they may

have for repositioning themselves and others, and reauthoring themselves to be more successful students.

It is worth considering whether students can be inducted into study in ways that help them build a credible success narrative before encountering the substantial shock of realising that they have been fooling themselves when failure is locked in. Intervening early might reduce negative figurings of victimhood and loss of agency. A focus on this aspect of student support might lead to innovations in the ways support services at the local and university level are conducted. As Biesta and Tedder (2007: 132) propose:

> 'Learning about the particular composition of one's agentic orientations and how they play out in one's life can play an important role in the achievement of agency, and that life-narratives, stories about one's life, can be an important vehicle for such learning'.

Universities can employ similar strategies with students who have already failed a unit but chosen to persist with their studies. As we have argued elsewhere, these students may receive little sympathy or additional support from the university despite the commonness of unit failure, and they could benefit from open discussions around what it means to fail, destigmatising and reframing this event as a learning opportunity, as several US universities have started to do (Bennett 2017). These discussions should include helping these students to recognise and redress patterns in their self-narratives associated with their failure.

Conclusions

Failure is a necessary part of learning, but the stories we construct determine whether failure is taken up as an opportunity to act and develop or one of passivity and victimhood. Deficit discourses of failure, and its associated stigma and shame, can be perceived as a threat to student agency. Care is needed to identify the ways in which failure is talked about, or indeed not talked, about within our universities. However, our findings should not lead us to assume that the problems failing students encounter can always be addressed by interventions or forms of engagement designed by the university. What the university sees that these students need and the kinds of actions they see for themselves as being appropriate can be quite different depending on a wide range of historical, contextual and personal factors. What works for one student may not work for another, even though they might appear to be in similar situations. Journeys through a university education are often circuitous and involve 're-visioning, reconsidering and readjusting possible selves in response to what was controllable' (Delahunty and O'Shea 2020: 11). We see this constant negotiation and readjustment in all our students as their journeys unfold and as failure disrupts their university journeys.

Many students who fail persist in their studies, so this should not be regarded as an unusual phenomenon. Our study focused on the narratives of students who persisted, and the stories that they wished to tell about their experience. The remarkable contrast in these figured worlds points to the bluntness of persistence as framing for recovery following failure. All our students continued to enrol in their degrees, in other words were persisting, but the nature of their persistence varied, and their likelihood of success differed. Therefore, the kinds of interventions higher institutions make, the ways they portray these to students and when and how they make them available need to take account of the ways students see the trajectories they follow. These narratives may often be established before failure becomes apparent, so caution needs to be exercised in focusing only on what occurs after failure is formally revealed.

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