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How Do Culturally Responsive Storytelling Methodologies Engage and Challenge All Vulnerable Adult Learners?

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Scholarship of Application

ABSTRACT

Many adult learners may be vulnerable in one or more aspects of their identities. Learners may view vulnerability as limiting or even prohibiting their active participation in higher learning environments. This vulnerability may be expressed as a lack of motivation or demotivation to engage with their current learning environment, community, teacher, and curriculum. Derived from second language acquisition, the branch of learning with the highest rate of recorded failure, amotivation is the learner's belief that their current related learning trajectory is either too difficult or pointless, and demotivation is the specific catalyst that triggers amotivation. This article posits that, even for international student cohorts for whom English is their second language, when deeply informed by Māori and Pacific culturally responsive pedagogies (CRPs), oral and written biographies that directly relate to their identities empower them to thrive. Storytelling serves as a springboard for their initial engagement, which in turn motivates a commitment to subsequent learning. As this article demonstrates, this methodology is potentially transferable to any learning environment for vulnerable adults.

KEYWORDS

vulnerable adult learner, motivation, subordinate identities, Talanoa, narrative inquiry, autoethnography.

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INTRODUCTION

How might alienation and struggle inform student engagement with learning? For learners who may have experienced alienation, their connection to these aspects of their identities is often associated with experiences of marginalisation and associated struggle. An associated vulnerability often stems from their acquired sense of inferiority and worthlessness (hooks, 1994).

The article is structured into three parts. These follow the chronological development of what began as a purely organic response to a largely amotivated student cohort in my first teaching role in Aotearoa/New Zealand in 2004. The surprising success of an initial intervention, facilitated by an oral presentation, served as its catalyst. There, students articulated their respect for a chosen pop culture icon – as it related to aspects of their identities. From 2005 to 2014, I was employed as an English as an EFL instructor in South Korean universities, and from 2014 to 2018 as an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) lecturer at Australian universities. In each setting, I often faced potentially unmotivated and demotivated adult learners who were vulnerable. Due to the particular needs of these cohorts, I expanded this methodology to incorporate writing testimonies through narrative inquiry and, where appropriate, highly autobiographical autoethnography.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is identity, and why is it so important?

An identity is a set of meanings attached to roles individuals occupy in the social structure (role identities), groups they identify with and belong to (group identities), and unique ways in which they perceive themselves (person identities) and reflect upon themselves in each of these identities (Burke & Stets, 2009). More generally, identities help position an individual in an interaction, guide their behaviour in it, facilitate the development of stable social relationships within these defined social structures, and make interaction in them functional (McCall & Simmons, 1978).

Plural identities

Tatum (2000) makes the important point that identity can be nuanced, with many individuals possessing both dominant and subordinate aspects of their identities, sometimes concurrently. It is the subordinate aspects that become the focus of others' attention, as well as our own. As such, we forget anything beyond what we believe subordinates us, some of which we may practice. As Tatum notes, dominant groups, by definition, set the parameters for how subordinates operate. While dominants are not aware of subordinates' experience, subordinates most definitely understand dominants. This may leave little space for self-care, leading to internalisation of their negative messages and even self-hatred. Central to the overriding ideology of the dominants is the presumption of moral and democratic superiority. Following World War II, this was achieved through the United States' global hegemonic status. Related presumptions were not gained directly through imperial conquest, as arguably achieved by previous colonisers, but rather by the

transmission of ideas (Ong & Hartley, 2013). Ong's academic mentor, Perry Miller (1939; 1953), described the New England Mind as Protestant, democratic, and plain in approach and delivery. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Ong and Hartley (2013) note that for survival, subordinate groups are typically cautious about breaching relationships of power and etiquette. In public, they manipulate appearances to shield their true views. However, their offstage persona reveals a latent sense of violence that can become the touchstone of fraternity among them (Scott, 2007). Foucault (1977) articulates the establishment of conditions in which they speak, and once enabled, are far more able to say than any intellectual what needs to be said, as they know their conditions. The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project that positions the colonial subject as the other (Spivak, 2023).

The transformative power of empowering subordinate voices

Tatum (2000) cautions educators that resisting one's own oppression should not relieve us of our responsibility for complicity in the oppression of others. As a Black, educated, heterosexual woman of privilege, she questions whether this entitlement due to class and sexuality makes her oblivious to those excluded from such privilege, noting that one's ongoing self-examination creates the possibility of forging alliances that potentially liberate all humanity. When considering our responses to the dominant identity as educators, hooks (1989) asks where we should position ourselves - on the side of the colonising mentality, or with the oppressed, offering ways of understanding that create space where transformation is possible? Tatum (2000) advises that once positioned in the latter, breaking free from imposed limitations facilitates healing by integrating all multidimensional components of one's subordinate identities. Given that the boundaries set by the dominant group may arguably be cultural (Miller, 2012), a more fluid, inclusive interpretation of culture is thus a more appropriate response to giving the voiceless a voice. In essence, then, examination of one's identity may force us to acknowledge differences that may set us apart. By approaching such engagement from the student's perspective, using their related testimony as the teaching, the more traditional top-down, teacher-as-expert approach is inverted. The survivor now becomes the teacher and expert, revealing aspects of utmost importance to them about their subordinate identity or identities (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

The importance of identity in the literature on second language acquisition and motivation

The experience of being different, of one's identity as an outsider not being accommodated, has driven much of the second-language motivation research and the resulting literature (Gearing, 2018a). Arguably, one of the most significant contributors to this literature has been linguist Bonny Norton (Peirce, 1995; Norton, 1997, 2000, 2013, 2014). Her seminal research posited that a comprehensive psychological theory of social identity was necessary to explore how inequitable, socially constructed power relations limit learners' opportunities to practice their target language. Such a positing was primarily informed by her qualitative study of a group of immigrant working-class women in Canada, highlighting the lack of accommodation for second-language users of English, despite their very high motivation (Peirce, 1995). Her resulting identity and investment theory challenged language acquisition theorists to

address how relations of power in the social world affect learners' access to their target language community (Norton, 1997). This included how such individuals positioned themselves, were positioned by others, and the factors that influenced their positioning, such as who they were with (or not), what they were doing, and where they were. In her accompanying sociological construct of investment, every experience undertaken by a language learner was deemed an act of negotiation (Norton, 2000). According to this construct, learners desire and even expect a solid return on their investment in the form of social and economic benefits (Bourdieu, 1977; 1986), enabling them to access hitherto unattainable resources (Norton, 2013), which in turn allows for the creation of a desired identity within a particular community (Norton, 2014). Regardless, despite very high motivation, such learners were denied access to the very communities of practice that would facilitate the requisite sense of belonging (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Davies, 2005; Norton, 2013, 2014).

Oral storytelling in Aotearoa/New Zealand

It was with no knowledge of any aspect of the literature outlined above that I found myself faced with a cohort of young Māori and Pacific youth in 2004. My task in this five-week course was to help write a resume and plan for any job interviews that may result from its submission, or to assist them in applying for apprenticeships or in technical colleges. At that time, I had recently graduated from a Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) course, and this was the first cohort I had been assigned to teach where the associated skill set seemed irrelevant. The approach I would take with these students is the one advocated by Toiviainen et al. (2019). These authors believe that a key role of adult educators is to encourage young, vulnerable adult learners to become active citizens, particularly those whose marginalisation due to their socioeconomic and political backgrounds may require them to develop economic and social skills, benefiting from vocational guidance, basic skills classes and second-chance education. From a teaching perspective, they articulate vulnerability as highlighting empowerment of young adults in different situations rather than using this term as a label to define target groups.

The majority of this cohort were reticent, withdrawn, shy and in some cases quietly resentful, having assumed a position of amotivation before arriving in their current learning environment. At their first presumed obstacle, typically presented by an aspect of the curriculum they would interpret as irrelevant and/or representing their worldview, they would become demotivated (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Kikuchi, 2015). Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014) advocate for realigning any over-reliance on textbook-derived tasks and assignments in favour of real-world, relevant ones. This approach is also supported by the architects of the two-lane approach, a highly successful assessment pedagogy as a response to the new learning and teaching landscape of GenAI.

Such a refocusing of assessment design in some universities has been driven by lecturers who are apprehensive about students misusing GenAI software in assignments and examinations (Gearing, 2024b). One response that prepares students for a future when, arguably, GenAI will augment human intelligence (Liu, et al., 2023). The two-lane approach (Liu & Bridgeman, 2023) may fulfil this intent. Lane one, which is secure from GenAI can be described as assessment of learning. Example assessment types include supervised exams, interactive oral assessments, and in-class activities that provide feedback from teachers

and/or peers. In lane two, GenAI use is assumed and the fostering of reflective process-driven learning through structured GenAI engagement takes place. This includes evaluating GenAI outputs, documenting decision-making, and critically assessing GenAI's role in learning tasks. Its authors make the point that learners will be more motivated to engage if they feel a sense of autonomy and see relevance to their personal and professional lives of their learning.

The testimony of pop culture icons as a catalyst for vulnerable adult learner engagement with their subordinate identities

Management offered me multiple free passes to Hoyts cinemas. These students elected to see Eight Mile, the Eminem story. Because the main task in this course was preparation for job interviews, a primarily oral practice, the students had been largely reluctant to engage with it. I modified this task to ask "Individually, or in small groups, in five minutes, explain why Eminem is iconic to you and critique which album is his best and why?" This cohort's resulting presentations revealed associated feelings informing such vulnerability due to their cultures, economic status, sexual identity, disability, religion or having suffered physical and/or emotional trauma and/or abuse (Tatum, 2000). From having presented as unmotivated learners just days before, they were now motivated, engaged, and thriving (Gearing, 2023, November 27-28). What would explain this significant change?

How culturally responsive pedagogies empower vulnerable adult learners

One highly successful way to onboard such students is achieved by focusing on them through what Bishop (2023) describes as teaching from the north-east. He employs this metaphor to advocate for enhancing the experience of vulnerable adult learners by having teachers increase support through the creation of family-like contexts. As a form of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), 'northeast teaching' is inclusive of all learners' cultural knowledges and emphasises pedagogy over the transmission of culture, because students are deemed to be experts in this area already. He advocates a responsive approach that includes learners in their own determination, which in turn supports teachers in becoming increasingly professional and productive. As a form of CRP, north-east teaching is inclusive of all learners' cultural knowledges, particularly those who are currently marginalised. This was the approach I employed.

Creation and maintenance of a safe space for vulnerable adult learner engagement

Due to the makeup of this cohort, I employed what the literature now clearly articulates as the necessary elements for the underpinning of a safe face-to-face space for such sharing to occur. Webber and McFarlane's (2020) five optimal cultural conditions for Māori student success include: 1) Mana Tangatarua; 2) Mana Tu; 3) Mana Motuhake; 4) Mana Ukaipo, and 5) Mana Whānau. In order, these are similar to the skills, knowledge and confidence needed to navigate success in two (or more) worlds; efficacy, courage, humility, tenacity and resilience; a positive Māori identity; belonging and connection to place; and a belief in the occupation of a central position of importance within the family. Ako Aotearoa Kaupapa Māori criteria (Rātima et al., 2022) also identifies five key themes: 1) Ako – Learning and Teaching, which are based on

reciprocity. Learners' prior knowledge is welcome. The learning environment is co-constructed with learning activities, at times, being led by students; 2) Wānangatanga – Knowledge. Teaching includes the promotion of Māori language, knowledge, perspectives and worldviews; 3) Nga Uara – Values. A student-centred environment that makes connections between prior experience and current learning and supports students taking leadership in the latter; 4) Manatanga – Leadership in teaching enhances the mana of tangata whenua; and 5) Mataki/Taunaki – Evaluation of excellence in teaching and learning. Bishop et al. (2014) state that the whanau shares rights, responsibilities, commitments and obligations fundamental to the collectivity (Metge, 1990). The tikanga of the whanau includes warm interpersonal interactions, group solidarity and shared responsibility. Whānau is the location for the construction of shared common understandings.

The Pacific concept of storytelling

I believe that the focus on oral storytelling was integral to the success of these students' learning experience because in primarily oral cultures to which these students belonged, storytelling closely reflects lived human experience. Such storytelling is empathetic and participatory, rather than being objectively distant or homeostatic, and is situational rather than abstract. It is aggregative rather than analytic (Ong & Hartley, 2013). Specifically, Talanoa, which is integral to Pacific CRPs is subjective, primarily oral and collaborative. Importantly, it is resistant to rigid, institutional, hegemonic control, with participants only disclosing when they feel safe and the context is appropriate (Vaioleti, 2006). The intent is to discover what is, rather than what we assume (Koya-Vaka'uta, 2017). In a good Talanoa encounter, noa creates the space. Tala holistically intermingles participants' emotions, knowledge, and experiences, leading to an energising and uplifting of the spirits to a positive state of connectedness and enlightenment (Manu'atu, 2002).

Accessing oneself through the experiences of one of us

The creation of a culturally appropriate and safe space for participants to share aspects of their vulnerable, subordinate identities is essential for enabling self-disclosure (Masaviru, 2016). One highly successful example of this approach has been facilitated by Samon nurse Daron Semu. Administered conversion therapy as a gay Mormon, he now runs workshops where LGBTQIA+ Pacific youth create siapo cloth and share related experiences. Siapo cloth is the Samoan name for a traditional barkcloth made and used by Pacific peoples, especially Samoans. It is part of a broader tradition found across Polynesia, where it is known by related names such as tapa (in Tonga, Fiji, and elsewhere). Semu recounts that the biggest power anyone can have over another is a secret. Once a person exposes it, it loses its power, its weight (Semu, 2023). For such cohorts, once safe to express themselves through accessing a safe community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), their hidden transcripts can be revealed (Ong & Hartley, 2013). As subordinates, they could now express their emotions, including anger, in ways they had previously suppressed (Tatum, 2000; hooks, 1989, 1994, 2000). In so doing, they disregarded the language of the powerless – the use of stock formulas that give the least offence (Scott, 2007). As oral peoples consider words to have magical potency, this re-empowerment aligns, at least unconsciously, with their sense of the spoken word as necessarily power-driven (Ong & Hartley, 2013). Therefore, with the mask of conformity demanded by

the dominants now removed, as with participants in Semu's workshops, the offstage persona of the students in my class revealed a similar fraternity. Now free to use familial forms to express equality and camaraderie (Scott, 2007), each spoken word by members of the group fostered the development of its close-knit formation (Ong & Hartley, 2013).

Written storytelling by South Korean university students

In 2005, I began a ten-year career as an EFL instructor in South Korea, initially in a private language academy before entering the university system in 2007. Social mores currently dominating South Korean society include Confucianism, which emphasises deferral to authority figures and conformity to group values (Jenks, 2017). However, many younger university students (18-25) in particular, privately displayed high motivation to explore their subordinate identities. Due to their reticence to actively engage, where appropriate, I self-disclosed (Masaviru, 2016) my positionality (Qin, 2016). As an out gay man, my struggles for recognition as such had informed my empathy with those deemed to be outsiders by society at that time. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given South Korean cultural mores (Park, 2009), these students revealed a preference for exploring their associated identities through the writing of testimony over presenting them orally. This was due to their fear of potential loss of face publicly in a culture where, at that time, this was considered taboo (Jenks, 2017).

Acknowledging a preference for writing

In advocating for writing about their subordinate identities, many of these students endorsed much of what Ong and Hartley (2013) describe including the perspective that oral creations have historically been viewed as variants of written productions. As such, they are considered beneath serious scholarly attention. Writing is often considered artificial when compared to natural, oral speech. By its very form and content, the latter anticipates a response. However, articulating spoken language into writing is governed by consciously contrived, articulable rules. However, such alienation from a natural milieu is in many ways essential for heightening consciousness. To live and to understand fully requires proximity and distance. Accordingly, writing provides for consciousness in a way that nothing else can, with its drive toward carefully itemised introspection and elaborately worked-out analyses of inner states of the soul. The written text appears to be a one-way informational street, as no real recipient (reader, hearer) is present when the text comes into being. In rare cases, often due to positive feedback, some students then elected to present their testimonies orally to their class as part of their overall assessment.

METHODOLOGY

Drawing on the methodology I employed with the Māori and Pacific group in Auckland, I assigned select cohorts the task of selecting one icon in popular culture and writing about why that individual was so important to them as a narrative inquiry or an auto-ethnographic testimony. The features of each are outlined below and inform the case studies, which are then explored further.

Narrative inquiry

Bruner (1990) makes the point that it is through telling our own and others' stories that we come to understand who we are. Clandinin and Connelly (1998)

expand on this notion, noting that people record reflections on life through storytelling to explain it to themselves and others. At its core, narrative inquiry aims to educate by co-inquiring with individuals to bring their contexts to life, telling, retelling, and reliving stories of experience (Huber et al., 2013). It relies on its authors configuring personal events into a historical unity and also anticipating a related future (Polkinghorne, 1998). Such self-insertion in the other individual's story legitimises the author's own voice (Elbow, 1986). According to Murray (2009), such narratives are the result of explanations gleaned from the overall depiction of change that has been witnessed and processed. The role of narrative inquiry may extend to documenting the changing conditions of lives and the impact that new conditions have on them in a broader context, including those in the cultural, political, familial, educational and religious spheres (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Good stories teach the reader something essentially human by providing understanding of an actual life or community as lived (Robinson & Hawpe, 1986).

Auto-ethnography

Auto-ethnography '"strips away the veneer of self-protection" to make the author themself "accountable and vulnerable to the public" (Denzin, 2003, p. 137). As such, auto-ethnographic writing can comprise 'highly personal accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding' (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21). By writing themselves into their own work as major characters, autoethnographers challenge the accepted view of silent authorship by incorporating their own voice alongside the researcher's voice (Holt, 2003). "Auto-ethnography endeavours to scrutinise dominant narratives, suggest alternatives and proffer viewpoints previously discarded as unhelpfully subjective" (Turner, 2013, p. 225). In so doing, auto-ethnography "opens up a space of resistance between the individual (auto-) and the collective (-ethno-) where the writing (-graphy) of singularity cannot be foreclosed" (Lionnet, 1990, p. 391). As such, the associated discomfort of writing auto-ethnography is part of the process. Ellis and Bochner (2006) classify evocative auto-ethnography as that which foregrounds the writer's personal stories. Analytical auto-ethnography connects to a broader set of social phenomena and is grounded in the writer's personal experience through systematic, sociological introspection. Such resulting writing may well reveal a decentred and destabilised self through multiple speaking positions and representations (Denshire & Lee, 2013). For these reasons, auto-ethnographic writing may be concurrently evocative, personal, analytical, theoretical, scholarly, and descriptive (Burnier, 2006). Holman-Jones (2005) describes auto-ethnography as a blurred genre that both disallows definition yet simultaneously advocates for writing that can change the world. Unsurprisingly, due to its autobiographical nature, auto-ethnographies are typically composed in the first person (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). If an author of auto-ethnographic testimony comes from a position of vulnerability, speaking back to power may result in highlighting associated power relations and ethical issues readers may have previously never considered (hooks, 1989; Tatum, 2000). In the process, they may also be writing about others (Sparkes, 2013). Auto-ethnography, therefore, enables a broader comprehension of the world. It renounces rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful research and challenges privileged readers to self-reflect and deconstruct their discourse (Dauphinee, 2010).

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One student's testimony

Autoethnographers often write about epiphanies that they perceive as having significantly impacted the trajectory of their subsequent lives (Couser, 1997). One student chose gay rock star Sir Elton John to recount his related traumatic experiences, including a suicide attempt, addiction, and related mental and physical health issues as experienced by his icon (John, 2019). This student's intent was that through telling our and others' stories, an understanding of who we are is gained for ourselves and others (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998; Huber et al., 2013; Polkinghorne, 1998). He then drew on what Ellis and Bochner (2006) classify as an evocative, analytical auto-ethnographic approach, connecting this to a broader set of social phenomena by grounding his personal experience through systematic, sociological introspection. His resulting written testimony advocated for a world in which LGBTQIA+ individuals and communities would be legitimised beyond their then-perceived current non-accommodation (Norton, 1997, 2000, 2013, 2014), or **being** relegated to the most peripheral of acceptance into their desired mainstream communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Such marginalisation was what he argued had caused all his related mental and physical health issues. In doing so, he highlighted associated power imbalances and ethical issues that readers may have never previously considered (Tatum, 2000), particularly heteronormative dominance (hooks, 1989, 2000). They problematise representation by summoning our positioning in the context being described (Richards, 2008) and speak to the associated experiences of others (Sparkes, 2013). Such emancipatory testimonies problematise representation by summoning our positioning in the context being described (Richards, 2008) and speak to the associated experiences of others (Sparkes, 2013). They challenge conventional discourses by breaking expected silences and problematise representation by summoning the acknowledgement of our own positioning in the given context (Richards, 2008). Hopefully, they move those who read such accounts to ethical action (Denzin, 2014).

Teaching English for Academic Purpose courses to students in foundation and pathway courses in Australian universities

I arrived in Perth, Australia, to teach pathway and foundation adult students, many of whom were second-language speakers of English, in September 2014. One of these students, a mature international student, chose singer Tina Turner as her icon. Turner gained worldwide respect for chronicling how, by embracing Buddhism, she was able to forgive her abusive ex-husband, Ike, himself a sexual abuse victim. In so doing, Turner broke an intergenerational cycle of abuse and trauma (Turner, 2020). Understandably, this student was reluctant to provide an auto-ethnographic account of her experiences. She did, however, produce a narrative inquiry detailing the effects of ritualistic, intergenerational abuse in her family through the lens of that experienced by Turner. By providing an understanding of actual life or community as lived (Robinson & Hawpe, 1986), she was then able to deliver a series of potential healing guidelines necessary to combat this cycle, both individually and at the societal level – politically, economically, and spiritually. As with the South Korean student's testimony above, she intended to educate by reliving stories of experience (Huber et al., 2013). In her case, this extended to documenting the changing conditions of life

(particularly in her extended family). In a broader context, the impact of new conditions includes cultural, political, familial, educational, and religious spheres (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

While subordinate identities may impact vulnerable adult learner motivation and engagement, other factors – some of which are directly linked to these identities - have significant potential to also negatively impact their learning trajectories. These include economic and pastoral factors, the impact of COVID-19 and GenAI, as well as the growing trend of online learning.

Additional sociocultural factors with the potential to negatively impact vulnerable adult students' learning experiences

Economic and pastoral factors

Harun and Durden (2024) reference cost as a global issue in education. They highlight the fact that for international students for whom English was their second language, the cost of studying in Australia may have put them into debt, while also exposing them to widespread discriminatory practices by employers and substandard wages in the job market, which often resulted in predominantly part-time work. Evans (2016) notes substantial evidence of exploitation by housing and accommodation agents and property swapping and illegal evictions. Unsurprisingly, in their analysis of 65 articles and books on student debt, Nissen et al. (2019) reported that the effects of associated pressures had a negative impact on mental, physical, economic, and social aspects, resulting in increased drop-out rates among those affected – particularly international students and those from marginalised communities. Those who did graduate often did so with lower-than-expected grades. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, Solomon et al. (2024) note studies by Campbell et al. (2022), who highlight a significant increase in depression and anxiety among college and university students with accompanying stress levels and self-harm rates due to financial pressures, leading to increased dropout rates (Ladejo, 2021). Disturbingly, stigmatisation of mental health issues continues to affect students' attitudes in seeking help (Foster et al., 2019; 2021), with loneliness and academic stress being key predictors of mental health issues for students there.

The impact of COVID-19

As Cameron et al. (2022) note, a significant number of students in Aotearoa/New Zealand believed that their studies were negatively affected by the compulsory move to an entirely online mode of instruction during the pandemic. Vulnerable groups, including students with low financial resources, were the most severely affected. Gearing (2024a) highlights the widening of the digital divide during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students with limited or no access to the internet, technology, and devices, or private spaces to study, reported the highest levels of stress (Anderson, 2005). Internationally, many students suffered anxiety through a perception that their institutional providers were too slow at providing much-needed information online (Gómez, 2013). Gelles et al. (2020) found that disparities that were often overlooked in face-to-face classrooms were now exacerbated online. Cameron et al. (2022) found that the lowest satisfaction with institutional providers in Aotearoa/New Zealand was recorded by international students, particularly regarding boredom, anxiety, and frustration (Aristonovik et al., 2020) with learning (Owusu-Fordjour et al.,

2020) and student performance more broadly (Kamarianos et al., 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020) being significant concerns. However, Estrada et al. (2023) make the point that suitably amending course design during the COVID-19 pandemic for solely online delivery reduced the incidence of demotivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

Studying online

For many students, studying online is far from ideal (Gearing, 2024a), primarily due to a perceived lack of teacher and peer support, which can be demotivating (Gearing, 2018b). However, online courses may offer more learner autonomy because their flexibility allows students to plan a more individualised path, pace, sequence, and level of content, enabling them to perform better (Hung et al., 2010). The theory of transactional distance (Moore, 1993) explains that distance education encompasses not only geographical distance but also pedagogical distance. By manipulating instruction through communications media, increased dialogue between learners and their teacher reduces transactional distance. This promotes greater learner autonomy and may also help students learn within their zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). In these zones, students can then perform a range of tasks that they may not yet be capable of but can accomplish with assistance from their teacher and/or peers (Verenikina, 2003). As such, self-directed students are more likely to succeed in online courses (Lin & Hsieh, 2001; Tsai & Tsai, 2003). Once a learner has entered an online course, tenacity is required (Paradowski & Jelińska,2023). This must be informed by autonomy and curiosity, and motivation must align with learners' efforts and desires (Hung et al., 2010), resulting in increased retention (Saadé et al., 2007). Nevertheless, online learners often report feeling isolated and disconnected (McInnery & Roberts, 2004). Therefore, a shared sense of belonging, purpose, and norms is vital (Koole, 2014). Nevertheless, even among students with high online study motivation, this decreases over time, requiring continuous support from peers and advisors, along with evidence of progress (Cheng & Lee, 2018).

The impact of GenAI

As Gearing (2024b) argues, in the new world of GenAI, there has never been a greater need for students and their teachers to act responsibly and not relinquish their roles as guardians of quality (Bearman et al., 2024). Accordingly, any associated anxiety related to the reduction of human judgements to machine outputs should not be underestimated (Bearman & Luckin, 2020; Bearman et al., 2024; Zhai et al., 2024). GenAI outputs may not be sufficiently accurate to support students in structuring critically informed arguments (Bearman & Luckin, 2020), and students may expect GenAI to perform this function for them. As Jafari and Keykha (2023) note, as GenAI grows increasingly more sophisticated, student over-reliance on it may well lead to diminished critical and analytical thinking and decision-making abilities (Ferrajão, 2020; Guo et al., 2023), a reduction in cognitive ability (Ahmad et al., 2023), and reduced emotional intelligence (Dempere et al., 2023). Furthermore, Gen-AI may be currently susceptible to errors or hallucinations (Hatem et al., 2023), and students may be challenged in assessing whether Gen-AI outputs are informed by credible sources (Gao et al., 2022) and may not be based on factual information (Bearman et al., 2024), may not exist (Hatem et al., 2023), or be inaccurate (Olojede, 2024). This hallucination effect may be intensified by the inherent lack of human interaction associated with the use of

GenAI, limited understanding of it, and the inherent biases contained within it. Importantly, students who lack the requisite understanding of how to interpret what they are sourcing may uncritically accept any outputs that are inappropriate as reliable (Liu et al., 2023). Concerns have been raised over a rise in reported instances of plagiarism related to the use of GenAI (De Angelis et al., 2023). These concerns are largely due to ethical issues regarding students' limited understanding of its biases and limitations (Biag & Yadegaridehkordi, 2024; Li et al., 2023). This leads Zhai et al. (2024) to surmise that some students and researchers minimise or even choose not to engage with related ethical issues. This leads these researchers to question the long-term implications of over-reliance on Gen AI for essential cognitive skills, including critical thinking, and (Gearing, 2024b) to advocate for specific skills development relating to critical thinking and evaluative judgment.

CONCLUSION: *The importance of the teacher*

In critiquing the neoliberal university system in Australia, Desierto & de Maio (2020) highlight the importance of the teacher-student relationship, particularly for students who may be considering withdrawing from their courses, as teacher support is integral to their success (Hagenauer & Violet, 2014). This is further complicated by the fact that teachers in the Australian neoliberal university system are often compelled to conform to prescribed teaching curricula (Furedi, 2017). As this article has demonstrated, it was largely due to the culturally appropriate responses of the teacher to the needs of the vulnerable adult learners that I was able to engage them and maintain their motivation. I achieved this through the choices that informed the curriculum design and development, which were supported by aspects of his personality, notably empathy, gained through my lived experiences of a subordinate identity.

The literature on second language motivation clearly articulates that the role of the teacher cannot be underestimated. The two most important, seminal studies of second language motivation both found that the single most significant demotivating factor for students was the teacher (40%). Dörnyei's quantitative research of 4000 Hungarian high school students' motivation to learn English, French, German, and Russian (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011) and a comprehensive review of second language motivation literature in Japan (Kikuchi, 2015) both noted the teacher's personality, approach, methodology, choice of resources, and their curriculum as the most crucial contributing factors. The associated 'baggage' that prospective second language learners bring to their new second language classroom learning environment includes prior experiences of second language learning failure and broader sociocultural factors, such as negative sentiment towards the second language and the community that speaks it. This raises the question of whether a multicultural approach to education may further mitigate the effects of learner amotivation.

The intent of this article has been to advocate for a multicultural approach to education. By drawing on the values of Māori and Pacific CRPs to create a safe environment, vulnerable adult students from any cultural background can access aspects of their subordinate identities and use these as springboards to engage with their curriculum orally, in written form, or both. The methodology introduced in this article has demonstrated that oral and written storytelling

can potentially engage any vulnerable adult learner. If a safe engagement is facilitated through the foundation of CRPs, then students tend to explore aspects of their subordinate identities, which they then place within broader sociocultural constructs to make sense of them. In doing so, they not only empower themselves but also their peers. The need for such a methodology is evident in the increasing diversity of factors that place adult learners in vulnerable situations. These include the impact of COVID-19's then-enforced isolation and the advent of GenAI. These challenge what humanistic educators believe is the fundamental driver of tertiary education – exposure to new perspectives through shared dialogue. Identity theorists expand on this, positing that sharing dialogue in a live, safe setting is how vulnerable learners assume the voices of empowerment. By showcasing a highly appropriate methodology, this article advocates for such empowerment.

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Ethics Statement

All student cohorts who are referred to in this article gave their consent at the time. The two students whose experiences are cited have given their permission for these to be drawn from in this article.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no competing interests.

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Dr Nigel Gearing SFHEA has 20 years' experience as an English and pathway and foundation teacher in New Zealand and in the South Korean and Australian university systems. He is currently a learning and teaching designer at the University of Auckland. He has a PhD in Applied Linguistics from Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. His research interests include factors affecting the motivation of learners and teachers, in the second language classroom (online and face to face and in the broader sociocultural environment), curriculum development and design, vulnerable adult learner engagement, culturally responsive pedagogies and the impact of GenAI on learning and teaching.

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