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



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# True encounters with the fictional university: collectively rewriting the script of filmic dark academia from the academic margins

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## ABSTRACT

Portrayals of teachers, students and universities in the popular cultural texts of dark academia are far removed from the lived realities of teaching academics in the contemporary, digital, neoliberal university. Pathways educators, who teach large numbers of non-traditional students in tertiary preparation programmes mostly online, are almost completely silenced in much of popular and academic discourse about the idealised university. This paper disrupts such romanticised representations of academia through personal reflections on four well-known films aligned with dark academia subcultures: *Dead Poets Society*, *Good Will Hunting*, *The Riot Club* and *Mona Lisa Smile*. Through their first voice writings, six pathways educators working together at a regional Australian university come together to flip the script on the fantasy academy. From six diverse origin stories, a collective voice emerges, telling a new, co-written story based on our lived experiences of teaching and learning from the underrepresented margins of the neoliberal academy.

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Enabling education; collective story; dark academia; widening participation; pathways education; neoliberalism

## Introduction

It is perhaps ironic but understandable that the post-industrial, neoliberalisation of academic labour (and its disciplinary management) currently co-exists with a popular nostalgic yearning for an imagined, golden past and place of academic freedom, opportunity, and privilege. As Murray (2023, 347) suggests, 'Dark Academia' emerged in the mid-2020s as a kind of social media subculture and style which reproduced and romanticised, 'a retrograde version of Anglo-American university life'. Books, fashion, films and online images which have been associated with this dark academia aesthetic assign a particular elitist glamour to traditional teaching and learning within institutions such as Oxford or Cambridge, constructed through the strategic deployment of signifiers such as tweed blazers, Gothic architecture and vintage books. This idealised vision of university life evident within the increasingly popular online subcultural trend known as 'dark academia' (Murray 2023) also finds expression in the revival or rebooting of old and new films about the academy on streaming platforms and services such as Netflix, Bing or Amazon Prime. Films currently available on 'best of' dark academia 'binge-lists'

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(Pierce-Bohen 2023) include those which have attracted fan followings, emotional attachments and nostalgic resonance within dark academia subcultures, especially when they feature heroic teachers and genius savants. Within filmic dark academia aesthetics, fictional images of academic life typically conjure a cultural, social and physical environment of security and tradition, wherein privileged professors, sheltered in their ivory towers, have plenty of time to study obscure topics of their choosing (Nguyen 2022). It is important to examine and deconstruct these myths of dark academia and its idealised, elitist vision of higher education, not only to highlight how the cultural and social environment of the university has changed over the past decades, but to confront the reality of modern universities as experienced by increasingly diverse students and teachers. Thus, the diverse authors of this paper set out to explore and challenge such growing contradictions between real and fictitious academia. As real-world pathways educators<sup>1</sup> who teach large numbers of non-traditional students in tertiary preparation programmes that sit at the margins of academia, we sought to understand and problematise the very real pressures we now face in our identities and roles in the post-pandemic, digital, neoliberal university. These economic and socio-cultural pressures are largely absent from unrealistic, popular Hollywood narratives and images around the morally good teacher in the imagined university. Our creative teaching and learning narrative incorporates more inclusive identities into the shared university imaginary.

In this study, we selected a small sample of films within the dark academia subculture and compared the filmic representations of academia to our own lived experience in higher education. We developed a chronological narrative that drew on our accounts, and through a collective analysis of our reflections, we aimed to rewrite the script of filmic dark academia from our own perspective in the academic margins. Using a narrative format to tell an alternative story that parallels that of a film, allowed us to emphasise our lived experiences and learnings. We selected four films that adopt dark academia aesthetics – *Dead Poets Society* (Weir 1989), *Good Will Hunting* (Van Sant 1997), *The Riot Club* (Scherfig 2014), and *Mona Lisa Smile* (Newell 2003) – because they show the romanticised aspects of academia, which emphasise class privilege, tradition and the status-quo, gender biases, and/or the charismatic, tireless, and transformative teacher as a heroic change agent. They each take place in an idealised academic landscape and most follow a narrative which plays upon binary moral-political distinctions between ‘good’ (progressive) and ‘bad’ (conservative) teachers. These films aim to inspire as well as construct drama and suspense around the different values and attributes ascribed to different individuals studying and working in the academy. These aspects were all deemed to be relevant to reflecting on our own experiences of academia within the contemporary neoliberal university. Therefore, we wanted to unpack and critique some of the mythology, subjects and themes shared by these films and their unrealistic representations (which may create false expectations) around teaching and learning in the academy.

## Dark academia versus ‘True’ academia

While film has long been ‘a powerful mediator for interpreting academic cultures across different eras’ (Stevenson 2023, abstract), the revival of campus culture films, as part of the wider dark academia cultural trend, was recently accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Murray 2023). The juxtaposition between this renewed attention to filmic romanticisation of university life and the harsh realities experienced by academics in pandemic times is a paradox, that we believe, needs to be critically analysed. While online communities have debated, and streaming television celebrated, the exemplary texts and legendary characters of dark academia since the early 2020s, real students and staff already experiencing time pressures in the neoliberal university are now subject to new tensions and precarity around their work, wellbeing, and identities (Olds et al. 2023).

Despite being subject to the post-pandemic ‘new normal’ of stress, online delivery, uncertainty and change fatigue (Jones et al. 2023), academics (and other audiences) may still hark back to nostalgic ideals of transformative teaching embodied by fictitious film characters, such as John Keating, English teacher and leading character of the film *Dead Poets Society*. Karlsson (2022)

demonstrates the benefits of using fictional films as empirical material to inspire critical examination of issues of culture, organisation, identity, and resistance to the neoliberalisation of academia. For example, Karlsson explores John Keating as an intellectually emancipated teacher who in turn inspires intellectually emancipated students. The popular but rather clichéd view of the charismatic individual challenging conservative schooling systems is not new but undoubtedly remains a seductive myth for students and teachers alike. Yet, the world of Welton Academy depicted in *Dead Poets Society*, and the titular dead poets (white, male, privileged elites) celebrated within it, are far removed from the lived realities of the diverse academics who work within widening participation programmes (including bridging, access, or foundation courses). University-based pathways educators who teach in these programmes work with the most marginalised pre-tertiary students to prepare them for undergraduate study (McDougall 2021). While many lecturers in the modern massified university work with increasing numbers of non-traditional students, tertiary preparation teachers provide individualised and specialised support to students who are unable to meet university entrance requirements without bridging courses. Sitting at the periphery of higher education, sometimes referred to as a third space (Whitchurch 2013), pathways educators are thus ‘at the frontline of the democratisation of higher education’ (Balloo et al. 2023, 11), and therefore live through its many challenges and contradictions. Australian pathways educators, not only typically teach the most diverse, isolated and vulnerable of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, including incarcerated students (see Farley and Hopkins 2017; Hopkins 2022), they also do much of this often challenging work through distance and digital modes rather than face to face (Hopkins 2023). The Australian, regional university-based pathway teachers, who are both the authors and subjects of this paper, have a different collective and co-written story to tell about teaching, identity, and resistance to neoliberal organisational life than that which is represented in American films about elite institutions. Our alternative ‘true’ story includes real-world accounts of heavy workloads, time pressures, alienation, and marginalisation, but it is also a story about hope, resilience, diversity, transformation, and emancipation in real (as opposed to romanticised) academia.

In order to ‘flip the script’, or disrupt the dominant meanings, of popular films within the dark academia subculture and filmic subgenre, we, the authors (and subjects) of this paper, experimented with contemporary storytelling based on our experiences around the same narrative themes of teaching and academic identity. We believe celebrated dark academia texts, including popular film ‘classics’ about heroic teachers like *Dead Poets Society*, exclude and silence our true diversity as pathways educators teaching mostly online in a regional Australian university. As we shall see, our positionality statements and alternative stories about academic identity foreground our diversity around gender, culture and social class background. Essentially it is our *diversity*, and the diversity of the students we teach, which is mostly absent from these films – our more inclusive stories have been historically silenced within mainstream media discourse about university culture and organisation. Exploring our own experiences of teaching in widening participation programmes may be particularly pertinent for understanding academic identities generally, since ‘pathways educators work with the ‘non-traditional’ demographic that will soon become the ‘traditional’ demographic – offering a preview of the future’ (Balloo et al. 2023, 14). Moreover, it is important to resist the dark academia romanticisation of elite institutions because it reproduces the erroneous and discriminatory assumption that only the most talented, gifted or privileged belong at university. It is also important to resist romanticising the exaggerated perfectionism, emotional labour and/or unrealistic charisma of fictitious heroic individuals, because in the real, neoliberal academy, dedicated pathways educators may already be at heightened risk of unrealistic expectations, time pressures, change fatigue or burnout (see Jones et al. 2023; Olds et al. 2023). To understand the unique and more representative experiences of pathways educators within the neoliberal university, it is important to first set the stage by reviewing the structural and cultural changes that have affected universities, as well as the historical context and impact of these changes on academic identity formation.

## Mise-en-Scène?: setting the stage for stories of teachers beyond dark academia

### *Massification of higher education*

Pathways educators play an important but often unrecognised part in the contemporary massification of higher education. Together with internationalisation and neoliberal governance, widening participation and massification have transformed universities in various complex and often contradictory ways. On the one hand, massification has challenged 'the traditional form of universities as centres of elite education where only a select few gain access' (Hornsby and Osman 2014, 712). However, with widened access has come a neoliberal, market-based culture and increasing homogenisation under the guise of 'internationalisation' (Deem 2020; Nordbäck, Hakonen, and Tienari 2022; Zapp and Ramirez 2019). In addition, the massification of higher education has created large, costly, and administratively bloated high participation systems, and has led to crudely competitive global rankings (Marginson 2007; Pusser and Marginson 2013). It is typically the elite, high ranking Anglo-American institutions (such as Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard or Massachusetts Institute of Technology), which dominate in these global rankings, and are romanticised in dark academia subcultures and texts. In the real world, non-traditional, widening participation students are likely to have a university experience that is far removed from the romanticised visions of dark academia fiction.

### *Academic identity in the neoliberal university*

Contrary to the traditional stereotype of the academic in his (sic) ivory tower, the modern academic is subject to many of the same managerialist policies as those in the corporate world. In the past, academics were criticised for their irrelevance to the real world, economic unproductivity, and unmanageability (Troiani and Dutson 2021). However, as the 'McDonaldisation' of higher education predicted in the 1990s becomes ever more a reality (Parker and Jary 1995), the contemporary neoliberal university workplace, may be described in terms of an 'assembly line' (Hopkins 2023, 1802) or 'production line' (Clarke and Knights 2015) model, with academics pushed 'to produce primarily in terms of quantity, not quality' (Cidlinska et al. 2023, 148). In addition, academics (especially pathways educators) are expected to perform emotional labour, or pastoral care (Crawford et al. 2018). This is particularly expected of women working with non-traditional students (Lawless 2018). These expectations often conflict with time pressures for pathway educators to transition new cohorts of students as quickly and efficiently as possible into undergraduate courses.

Within the neoliberal university, academics 'embrace or are exhorted to comply with competitive ideas about what constitutes success, with both success and failure framed and understood as personal accomplishment, disconnected from [the] wider social, economic and political context' (Edwards 2022, 905). Smyth (2017) writes of the new idealised academic 'rock star' of the neoliberal university, who attracts funding, the best research students, and brings status to the university. Barker (2017) names this 'hypercompetitive and combative' academic 'the ninja' (87); Pitt and Mewburn (2016) identify the 'academic super-hero' who 'conforms to university strategic priorities' (99); Tülübaş and Göktürk (2020) use the name 'calculating entrepreneur' (211), while Skea (2021) adopts Foucault's term '*homo economicus*'. Regardless of the nomenclature, this archetype depicts a character who has fully internalised the norms of the neoliberal university and is self-monitoring, self-publicising, self-aggrandising and focuses on high-visibility, high-status work (Barker 2017; Clarke and Knights 2015; Rajaram 2021; Skea 2021; Tülübaş and Göktürk 2020).

For those at the margins of the academy, such as the culturally and linguistically diverse, older early-career researchers, women in STEM, casual workers, and those in less 'prestigious' academic departments and third spaces, there may ironically be space to create a different academic identity. Though not immune to the same pressures to teach, publish, and undertake bureaucratic work, their distance from the centres of power at large institutions can lead them to eschew the unwinnable

race for prestige and instead focus on their more inclusive work of helping more diverse others at the margins of the academy. For example, Balloo et al. (2023) found that third-space academics in widening participation programmes define themselves in a large part by their commitment to social justice and transformative education for marginalised students.

### **The current project: alternative voices from the margins**

This research project began with the formation of a research group of six pathways educators who teach university-based tertiary preparation and English language courses on the same campus of a regional Australian university. As pathways educators are largely focused on teaching and many have limited time for research, the aim of the group was to use a flat mentoring format as a springboard for generating research ideas from our diverse disciplinary backgrounds to support each other through ongoing collaboration. Our work has already yielded new multidisciplinary insights and outputs (see Balloo et al. 2023). As a group we represent diversity in academic seniority, experience of teaching within widening participation programmes, disciplinary expertise, gender, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and class. Discussion around our sense of dwelling at the margins of academia in lower status, non-traditional, third spaces, contrasted starkly with the dark academia aesthetic. The authors of this paper set out to explore such growing contradictions between real and fictitious academia portrayed in our selected films. Although we work at the coalface of university massification, policies and processes, none of us identify with the neoliberal ideal of being academic ‘superheroes’, let alone research ‘rock stars’. As a diverse group of academics teaching students from non-traditional backgrounds, we observed that we did not fit easily into the frames of Eurocentrism and class privilege romanticised in dark academia aesthetics. None of us, therefore, had lived experience of the elite Anglo-American institutions like MIT, Oxford or Cambridge depicted in these texts aligned with dark academia subcultural trends. Moreover, the fact that we came together in the first instance as an act of collaboration rather than competition suggests that we do not identify as the self-aggrandising, hyper-competitive research ‘rock stars’ of idealised, neoliberal academia. As reflective practitioners looking to learn from our lived experiences working at the margins of the neoliberal university, our aim was to use dark academia texts to both critique corporate assembly line models of pre-tertiary education and explore our own teaching-intensive roles anew.

### **Methodology**

In this study we drew on an arts-based methodology and used filmic dark academia as a reflective stimulus to arrive at a collective story written in the first-person voice of pathways educators teaching at a regional Australian university. Arts-based methodologies, such as art, poetry and drama, are increasingly being used for data collection and analysis, and to represent and disseminate findings (Manathunga et al. 2017; Norris 2016). These approaches can be used to help an ‘audience find new ways of looking at the world’ (Norris 2016, 127), and they are particularly valuable in academic identity work, since they ‘enable [academics] to vividly and evocatively render the pleasures, pain and paradoxes [they] experience’ (Manathunga et al. 2017, 536). Manathunga et al. (2017, 527) ‘argue that one of the few ways left for academics to protect the spaces of collegiality, pleasure and democracy is to engage in art, poetry and drama to provide a forum for collegiality, dissent and resistance’. Through this collective arts-based process we also sought to explore the potential of co-writing, including how this is shaped by the typical process of reviewing and revising. Therefore, as a subversion to the peer review process, we also detail below where revisions were made to our methodological approach and findings as a response to reviewer feedback. In revealing this usually hidden part of the writing process, we intend to increase transparency while embracing a novel approach to editing and revisions.

Institutional ethics committee approval was obtained for the current project (ID: ETH2023-0298). In our collaborative research group, we initially used three films depicting dark academia



aesthetics – *Dead Poets Society* (Weir 1989), *Good Will Hunting* (Van Sant 1997), and *The Riot Club* (Scherfig 2014) – as stimuli for generating reflections around the gap between fantasies and realities of university cultures. Initially, each researcher watched the films individually and then wrote short reflections of 500 words or more centred around the following question: ‘How do the realities of working in the widening participation space compare and contrast to the romanticised and idealised academic subculture depicted in dark academia aesthetics of popular media?’ Although this reflective task was done individually, we discussed and shared our thoughts and ideas throughout the process of writing our reflections. Feedback was then provided between team members and, when deemed necessary, we discussed whether further explanations needed to be added to certain reflections (e.g. more detail required about the individual positionality of the author). After the initial submission of the manuscript, we drew on one reviewer’s feedback to inform our collaborative approach by introducing a fourth film, *Mona Lisa Smile* (Newell 2003). The reviewer felt that this film’s perspective would offer an alternative to the male-only accounts of the other dark academia films originally sampled.

Using arts-based texts as a stimulus for reflection has previously been done as part of a collective biography approach (Kinchin et al. 2023). Inspired by this approach, the reflections in the current study were used to produce a collective story that was informed by collective biography principles. Collective biography invites researchers to collaborate and share their experiences and memories about a common topic (Davies and Gannon 2006). Along with other personal narrative methodologies, collective biography draws on some of the core tenets of feminist epistemology, namely: perceiving knowledge as embodied in lived experiences; challenging the divide between knower and known in research; questioning what counts as knowledge, and pushing against universal, disembodied and neutral claims of authoritative knowledge (Anzaldúa 2009; Kern et al. 2014; McDowall and Ramos 2018; Ramos 2018).

Feminist theorist Anzaldúa (2015) argues that knowledge is relational, contextual, and embodied with personal stories working as an entry point to make sense of the realities we inhabit. She also stresses that it is vital to give up the notion that there is ‘a ‘correct way’ to write theory’ (Anzaldúa 1990, xxvi), challenging the boundaries of not only what counts as knowledge but how knowledge is presented. This is echoed by Saavedra and Nymark (2008, 256) who speak about the importance of recognising that ‘theorising must come from everyday lives and bodies of people and not from abstract and detached perspectives’. In this sense, stories/narratives can be used to disrupt traditional perspectives about who has the authority to produce knowledge through research (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Carmona 2012).

The collective story presented in the current study is not strictly a collective biography. The story has instead been structured as a chronological narrative that draws on accounts of individual experiences and memories found in the reflections. Nasheeda et al. (2019) proposed a framework for turning qualitative data into chronological stories with a beginning, middle and end to ‘extract the essence of the participant’s lived experiences’ (3). Nasheeda et al. asserted that it ‘is difficult to retain the core experiences if one divides the stories into segments and themes’ (3). Therefore, the story format was used as a device for emphasising key facets of our experiences.

In constructing this collective story, we were inspired by the storytelling of the films that provided the stimulus for reflection. Thus, we drew on a common narrative construction of a story used in creative works: *exposition* provides the facts at the beginning of a story; *conflict* provides momentum throughout the middle of a story to build towards a *climax*; and *resolution* is the completion of the story (Block 2020). In using the structural device of a story, our aim was to use our collective story to parallel the fictional lives of filmic dark academia by articulating the essence of our very different lived experience. Our collective story encompasses: the type of individuals who inhabit this world and the actual aesthetics of the real academic environment (*exposition*); the major challenges faced by academics on a day-to-day basis (*conflicts*); and opportunities opened up by being in the space (*resolution*). We use the collective ‘I’ when telling this story to represent the shared lived experience inspired by the presentation of academic culture in the films.

The actual construction of the story was an analytical process. It involved a collective reading of all reflections to look for common themes and points of conflict between real experiences and what is depicted within dark academia aesthetics. As much as possible, we used verbatim text from the reflections to preserve authenticity. Stylistic choices were inspired by feminist thinkers who remind us that it is not only about what we write, but how we write, that may challenge the status-quo of knowledge creation in academia (e.g. Anzaldúa 2015; Haraway 1992; Trinh 1989). After all, ‘how we write – particularly, what is usually constructed as good academic practice – maintains positivist traditions of research that reduce the worlds of others into determinable and predictable patterns of behaviour. ... Writing is a depiction of the world/s we live in, and the ways in which we write serve to create only one of many ways of looking at this world. ... The words we use are always derived from different ways of looking at and being in the world’ (McDowall and Ramos 2018, 58–59).

### **The characters: intimate true stories of pathways educators**

We arrive at our collective story from different locations and diverse backgrounds, each of us bringing our own unique experiences. From these different trajectories, diverse voices ultimately come together in the creation of a collective story of an academic self, struggling to come to terms with neoliberal organisational cultures. From the six individual identities outlined below, a collective identity emerges, telling a co-written story that captures our voices and speaks back to the fictional worlds of four dark academia films.

#### ***Pathways educator 1: a regional, working class story***

I guess I would be what the chummy, elitist *Riot Club* characters call a ‘boot-strapping regional’ in the sense that I came from a regional, working class area, and I had to ‘pull myself up by the bootstraps’ just to get into university at all. In fact, I remember my father initially did not even want me to go to university because in working class families it is better to leave school early, work and bring money into the household, as most working class kids did back then before universities became democratised. Growing up, I was told that university was just for rich people and that I was probably getting too big for my boots even applying. So, I never had that sense of personal confidence, self-belief and entitlement that the young, male ruling class characters in films like *The Riot Club* and *Dead Poets Society* seem to take for granted. Being a working class female, no one was expecting me to be the rebellious, boy-genius hero of films like *Good Will Hunting*. In those days, working class females were expected to be practical (not inspired or inspiring), to quietly put other’s needs first instead of realising their own career ambitions. Even today, when women often still perform the ‘housework’ and emotional labour of academia, while teaching, supporting and caring for others, I do wonder how much has really changed.

#### ***Pathways educator 2: the late bloomer***

My parents did not go to university but expected this of me. The unspoken rule was to do a practical, short degree (3 years) to become independent as quickly as possible. I was conscious of not having the luxury of doing an esoteric or long degree. Consequently, I did a short and so-called ‘practical’ degree that turned out not to be practical in terms of employability; I landed my first graduate job 10 years later. Eventually, I did a Master’s degree part-time while working full-time to pay my fees and living expenses. My classmates were scattered around the world and mostly also studying part-time via a computer screen. I graduated aged 40 and started my Ph.D. four years later. I did this part-time while working, Zooming into meetings with my thesis supervisors. While my university was ‘traditional’ and academically elite, the students were diverse in ethnicity, gender, age, and background. Some, like me, were middle-aged and dealing with serious health



complications. Fortunately though, the Australian system provides citizens with free Ph.D. tuition, opening opportunities to people like me.

### ***Pathways educator 3: science is not just for men***

I was born in a fairly typical South American country, where women were traditionally expected to dedicate themselves to their homes, look after their children and obey their husbands. When necessity dictated that a woman entered the workforce, so-called 'appropriate' jobs tended to gravitate around the caring professions (nursing, childcare, teaching) or the fine arts (poetry, visual arts) in line with the perceived 'sensibilities' of the female gender. I was fortunate to have university-educated parents who were determined to support my career aspirations. They encouraged me to follow my dreams and shielded me from well-intentioned but disempowering advice from others (e.g. '*Science is for men*', and so on). As a result, I received what I now regard as excellent education, which paved the way for my career as a scientist. On the flip side, my parents never pushed me and made it clear to me that they would support my career choices. A rebel at heart, I am grateful for this perspective.

### ***Pathways educator 4: happy at the less prestigious institution***

I was the first person in my family to go to university, so I did not have any real conception of what university was. It never occurred to me to apply to one of the top ones, but I was very happy at the 'less prestigious' university I ended up at. I felt a real sense of belonging there, and it always felt like a good fit. At the time, I kind of thought of universities as all being much the same in terms of student experience. University was such an enlightening and transformative experience for me, and I felt like it must be the same for other students too – a kind of rite of passage, but without the elitist connotations found in dark academia, which portrays university as being for a select few. It occurs to me now that maybe I wouldn't have felt quite so at home at university if I went somewhere that had an academic culture like that depicted in these films. I am forced to ponder how different it must be going to a university with a long history and culture you have no ties to.

### ***Pathways educator 5: outsider for the first time***

The films made me reflect upon my own privilege and background. Both my parents went to university but dropped out because of the demands of raising a family while they were still very young. They worked hard to ensure my siblings and I had access to the best possible education and in the Brazilian context that means going to private schools. Growing up, going to university after school was not even a question, it was pretty much a given. Years later when I became a migrant and had to fend for myself in a new country while struggling with being an outsider for the first time, having the confidence that was instilled in me growing up was vital to give me the courage to invest in my education as a kind of saving grace. My origins and own challenges to belong and thrive in Australia inspire my life's work. I am very much passionate about the transformative and enriching power that education can represent.

### ***Pathways educator 6: educated in a tropical pacific university***

Being in academia for over 27 years, with 20 years of study in mixed modes and 7 years as an academic in higher education, dark academia for me is unusual. Being educated in a tropical Pacific university, blazers and cardigans would never be seen as part of students' attire. Studying at the University was a need, and the privileged got the scholarships – something that was only achieved through hard work. The students came from diverse cultural backgrounds, and all aimed to strive and thrive. Some were more competitive on the playing field than in their

studies. Their priorities were different, but their discipline was at its best. The Gothic architecture of the prestigious universities, Cambridge, Harvard and Oxford, with mostly white students with rich parents is nothing like, and no match to, the place where I studied or the Australian University I now work at as an academic.

## Flipping the script of dark academia: our co-written, collective story of an academic self at the margins

### *(Scene one) where am I? Watching dark academia films at work*

The opportunity to focus on research through the intimacy and emotion of first voice writing produces mixed feelings. There was a slight sense of guilt in taking permission to slow down and contemplate how the selected films related to my lived experiences in academia.

The teachers and learners in the films I watched are surrounded by large offices lined with bookshelves of beautiful books with leather covers, fine art on the walls, imposing gothic architecture and few computers. It seems to me that books are part of the *mise-en-scène* of the elite in these films, but in real life, the new working class of the digital age has to do everything online, mostly because it's cheaper and faster! Everything in the massified university seems to be online, and teachers are on hot-desks, or teaching large groups in front of computer screens for much of the working day and night. Dark academia, with its candlelight, cluttered rooms and calligraphy, has faded into the realm of myth, nostalgia and popular culture. The selected films, all set in elite institutions, bear little resemblance to the university where I work, both in terms of built and cultural environment. Here, at a regional Australian university, most buildings are functional and cost-effective, with comparatively little historical value. As I walk through the long corridor from the staff kitchen to my office, eyes strained and head aching from teaching into the dark mirror of the ubiquitous computer screens, it is bright fluorescent lights that line the ceiling, not the warm flickering candlelight of cosy, dark academia fantasies.

It made me laugh a little, however, to see the early scenes of *The Riot Club*, where the camera looms over the beautiful green English scenery and gothic buildings of Oxford University, and the posh young English gentlemen ride their bicycles through the charming lanes to the ancient lecture halls. When I was nineteen, I had to catch two buses and a train and then walk uphill to get to my regional Australian university from my distant working class town and, once I got there, the teaching and learning happened in cramped hot classrooms. The elite school, the Oxbridge University of these films, is not a real place to me, only an imaginary ideal. It never really existed except in a kind of popular culture fantasy life when I long ago aspired as a teenager to be the first in my family to go to university.

The students in the dark academia films, with exception of *Mona Lisa Smile*, are mostly young white males who study full-time or apparently do not need to study, due to their inherent genius (*Good Will Hunting*), privilege (*The Riot Club*), or reorientation to things that 'really matter', such as self-fulfilment and liberation (*Dead Poets Society*). *The Riot Club* has one ethnically Greek minor character, and he is considered 'less than' by his peers because of this. Female characters tend to be love interests or sex objects rather than fully fleshed out major characters. *Mona Lisa Smile* is an exception to the rule – focusing on a young female teacher, Katherine Watson, and a group of female students, at the prestigious Wellesley College in the US. Watson is presented as an inspiring, empowered role model ('an extraordinary woman who lived by example') who, while teaching art history and critical thinking, encourages her female students to pursue a career and a future beyond men, marriage, and motherhood. Like John Keating of *Dead Poet's Society*, Miss Watson is also popular and charismatic, intent on facilitating the self-growth and enlightenment of mostly sheltered and privileged students who ultimately learn to 'see the world through new eyes'. Like Keating and the caring teacher-hero, Sean Maguire, from *Good Will Hunting*, Watson is a kind of surrogate parent to the students, expending emotional labour

without realistic boundaries. Both *Dead Poets Society* and *Mona Lisa Smile* present highly individualistic and teacher-centred views of transformative teaching, benefiting only a small number of already privileged, white and wealthy young people. In my reality in the neoliberal academia with increasing time pressures, I would rarely have the luxury of playing the role of surrogate parent or teacher-saviour to a small number of privileged or gifted individuals. Reflecting on *Mona Lisa Smile* also reminds me that the experience of the students I teach, would not sit easily within the wealthy, sheltered world of Wellesley College where female empowerment is only a matter of individual psychology.

Thinking about privilege brings me to another central theme that struck me as I watched the films: the issue of class. Working class and even middle class students depicted in these dark academia films are the exception to the elitist rule and are shown to be clear outsiders, as is the case with the titular mathematical savant/janitor in *Good Will Hunting*. In contrast, the student body in my working life in pathways education is predominantly female, usually mature-aged, extremely multicultural, and from a mix of socio-economic backgrounds. They also tend to be part-time students, juggling study with family responsibilities and paid employment, and often managing health issues. These students are generally not living the fantasy lives of the protagonists who populate the ivy covered, ivory tower landscapes of filmic dark academia.

### ***(Scene two) narrative conflict: fighting the status-quo, saving the self?***

Working in widening participation to me is about offering non-traditional students a way into academia when they might otherwise be shut out. Dark academia seems to emphasise the inherent gatekeeping of higher education; only those from the 'right background' are allowed in. The four films have no place for diverse learners, as only the most academically gifted or affluent are recognised and celebrated.

A glimpse of this tension is portrayed by the English teacher John Keating in *Dead Poets Society*. This teacher's unconventional style puts him in conflict with the academic authorities and the students' families as he beseeches his students to think for themselves and challenge the systems around them. Of course, we all want to teach students to develop critical thinking skills, but the extent to which we can really rage against the machine or be radical free thinkers in the increasingly competitive and corporatised university, with all its time demands, bureaucratic and administrative processes, is questionable and ineffective, to say the least.

This tension between the ideals and the constraints of 'real' academia raises other questions for me – when we, in widening participation, encourage non-traditional students to develop a sense of belonging, do we mean belonging to the fundamentally inequitable, organisational structures that already exist? Can these students bring their own diversification to university, or are we instead expecting them to assimilate to a romanticised notion of what came before them to feel like they really belong? And how do I, as a non-traditional academic fit into this conflicted, contradictory picture of democratisation? Even today, I sometimes feel like an outsider in the University and wonder if I am in the right place and space. In a sense it does feel like I am in a third space – somewhere between teacher and researcher, and somewhere between working class and middle class.

The status-quo represented in the films is inherently exclusionary, dominated by aristocratic/bourgeois whiteness and classism. For example, in *The Riot Club*, the characters do not have to develop a sense of belonging, because everyone fits into their domain. In contrast, a key aspect of widening participation is helping students to develop a sense of belonging to the university that is not grounded on assimilation. In this way, the work I do is transformative because it breaks traditions, it is about honouring students regardless of their backgrounds, and supporting them in their pursuit for excellence. Excellence can take many forms including opening spaces previously not available to people who do not belong to the 'traditional' university student category.

### **(Scene three) invisible women?**

Staying with the ideas of tradition, belonging and status-quo, I'm reminded of how central the representation of gender is in the films. According to these cinematic representations, higher education is largely the domain of white males with intergenerational wealth. The teachers featured in three of the films are white males, whereas teaching in pathways education tends to be a feminised profession. The small proportion of men to women in this research group (one male, five females) is a case in point. I found the portrayal of women in all the films quite unsettling. In *Good Will Hunting*, *Dead Poets Society*, and *The Riot Club*, the main characters – both students and academics – are men. Women are decidedly not in the privileged quarters. They are girlfriends, labourers, uneducated 'townies', or at best, students outside the inner circle and struggling to learn and achieve. While female teachers and students are quietly floating around in the background scenes, only the male teachers and students in these films are featured as fun, charismatic, and inspiring game-changers.

*Mona Lisa Smile* brings a different, female-centred perspective, showing privileged female students attending a prestigious institution. In the opening scenes, I am struck by how this film about young, middle and upper class white women attending the elite Wellesley College in the 1950s chimes with the contemporary dark academia aesthetic. We see all the markers of class privilege and ivory tower universities – imposing gothic architecture, stain-glass windows, angelic choirs and chiming bells, manicured lawns, provide the film's backdrop as female students in this elite institution fill expansive lecture halls or ride their bicycles down tree-lined lanes. The cast of young, white women who appear as 1950s liberal arts students in the film (wearing their tweed jackets, knitted turtlenecks, oxford flats with socks) mostly come across as preoccupied with their own relatively minor personal problems than learning about the wider world. While the film is constructed around feminist coming of age stories, the challenges the girls must overcome relate only to the balance of professional careers and (heteronormative) relationships. Moreover, the version of feminism being sold here is individualistic liberal feminism focused on the self-growth and career success of the individual rather than promoting the interests of women as a diverse group. It is also particularly ironic that Miss Watson assists one of the privileged white girls with her application to Yale Law school, the student enthuses that her favourite teacher 'practically writes the application'. The film sets this exchange up as a signifier of the heroic teacher, but here in the real world, where our core business is facilitating the successful transition of non-traditional students into university programmes, student support is more complex than writing the application for them. In my role and reality as a pathways educator, teaching large numbers of mature-aged female students, I see the tension between professional aspirations and family responsibilities remains pertinent and problematic. Yet, my lived experience and the experiences of my students tend to be vastly different to the privileged and sheltered lives of the upper middle class women from the 1950s portrayed in *Mona Lisa Smile*. Indeed, our classrooms are filled with curious, competent, and bright women like those in *Mona Lisa Smile*. However, in our environment, diversity is undeniable. Our female students come from all ages, backgrounds, cultures, and socioeconomic levels, and live intricately complex lives. Many of them excel in their studies and are being taught, nurtured and validated by an equally capable and diverse group of female academics who work together and support each other *as a group*. Katherine Watson (played by Julia Roberts) is presented in *Mona Lisa Smile* as an inspiring, empowered role model ('an extraordinary woman who lived by example'). Yet as Stevenson (2023) has pointed out, the film's romanticisation of the experience of women in ivory tower academia sets unrealistic standards, particularly when teacher-hero Watson prioritises her students' many minor personal problems over her own research, and in real life, heroic-saviour Watson would probably be at risk of workplace burnout or fatigue. While clearly informed by liberal feminism, the film presents a very individualistic and teacher-centred view of transformational teaching which benefits only a small number of already privileged, white and wealthy young women. I aim to challenge and resist the apparent perfectionism and charismatic individualism embodied by

the Katherine Watson character and evident in the heroic teacher mythology of dark academia generally.

Even today, I feel like female teachers are expected to just get the job done as quickly and quietly as possible and work without fuss or fanfare. They don't often get to be the radical heroes of teaching and learning, jumping up on desks like John Keating, in the film *Dead Poets Society*, or striding around the campus looking for their next genius protégé, like the privileged, ivory tower, white, male professor Gerald Lambeau of *Good Will Hunting*. Rather, we, as female, 'third space' academics tend to do the quiet work of teaching and the housework of academia, in virtual, invisible, online classrooms. This makes me think that we may still have a way to go before we have full gender equality in the real world or in the filmic universe of teaching and learning.

#### ***(Scene four) narrative resolution or transformative teaching?***

Prompted by the work of Karlsson (2022), I return to the example of John Keating in *Dead Poets Society* as both a case in point and a problematic, filmic embodiment of transformative teaching and learning. The heroic male middle class teacher, John Keating, is portrayed as extremely charismatic, energetic, confident and engaging; like the idealised rock star in the elite educational institution of academic fantasy. Certainly, here in the real world of the neoliberal university, we are under increasing pressure to keep our student-clients equally engaged and entertained. As a pathways educator, I'm at the same time moved and annoyed by what this character of the heroic male teacher or academic rock star represents. Unlike John Keating, I do not attempt to operate as a 'sage on the stage' to inspire our students, rather I position students at the centre of their own learning experience. Yet, part of me also sees Keating as the embodiment of the transformative learning that I'd like to perform with my own students (if ever permitted the same time, freedom and resources).

In any case, I am concerned that educators who embody the transformative goals of the fictional John Keating will be moved on like he was, and asked to find employment elsewhere because the neoliberal university has no need for them. There are real, social, cultural, and financial penalties for challenging the structures and systems around us, as Keating does. As teachers, we too encourage independent and critical thinking in our students. Yet, at the end of the day, we must still grade them and rank them and slot them into the way the wider tertiary education system works, just like the labour market expects it to work. In the real world of the modern complex and contradictory neoliberal university, we are expected to churn out human capital and free thinkers at the same time.

I also find that the way academic institutions are presented in dark academia is far from the caring and flexible environment I aim for. In *Good Will Hunting*, the God-like, maths lecturer is interested in the gifted, boy-genius mathematician only because he can contribute to the field of research for the rock star academic. In the film, mathematics is an unlearnable, inexplicable skill that Will Hunting is born with, unrelated to his efforts or even his interests. In contrast, I strive to show my maths students that with appropriate support and pedagogy, all students can learn what they need for their careers and life goals. There is much misinformation about transformative teaching generally in films about heroic, morally 'good' teacher saviours like in *Good Will Hunting*. The moral-political and pedagogical lessons of this film centre on the redemption and self-growth story of one twenty-year-old, self-taught maths prodigy who finds his true 'good' self through education in and around an elite institution (MIT). The narrative turns on an angry, young, white man, portrayed as a precious and unique genius, whose personal growth is facilitated by two white, male academics: a traditional, privileged maths professor (Gerald Lambeau), who focuses on academic achievement, and a fervently, tirelessly caring counsellor (Sean Maguire), who teaches on overcoming emotional troubles. Despite their superficial differences, these two fictitious father figures of the film embody individualistic and oppressive myths about transformative teaching – essentially that it is about facilitating the personal and moral growth of a deserving genius and inherently 'good' white, male student, apparently at the expense of less special (and more diverse) nameless others. At their

elite institution these two academic father figures apparently have the luxury of lavishing much time and emotional labour on this one special student, often in an intimate and confronting manner that would be considered unrealistic, if not unethical, in the universities of my lived experiences. I find their representation confronting because these two teachers, especially Maguire, embody the romanticisation and normalisation of the inequality, individualism and emotional labour which underpins heroic teacher mythology and dark academia cultures generally. I personally fear that the genius myth romanticised in dark academia may discourage non-traditional students, who may conclude: 'I am not a genius, I don't have the gift, so why bother trying?'

### ***(Scene five) leaving a light on: a happy ending of sorts?***

The belief in who you are and what you can achieve is shaped culturally and depends to a certain extent on your social class, your race and your gender. Yet, the young, predominantly male, white heroes of the elite educational institutions portrayed and romanticised in these films seem confident and entitled to the point of arrogance. As someone from a working class background, it has taken me a lifetime to believe in myself and some days I am still not sure if I really am valued and at home in this organisational and institutional space, despite earning all my degrees on paper. I am certainly not (or not permitted to be) a heroic teacher-saviour of the genius student. On the positive side, it has given me a strong sense of purpose to work in pathways education with non-traditional students from mostly low socio-economic backgrounds where I can demystify some of the culture of the university for them.

One lesson I learned from my own trajectory, and that motivates me to keep going, a lesson not depicted in any of the films, is that the most striking academic myth is that educational success is for the gifted elite alone. In many ways, neoliberal academia can be about inducting non-traditional students into a pre-existing way of being and learning. This means that nothing is new, so everything is copied, replicated from a bygone age. Alternatively, one of the most satisfying aspects of working in the widening participation space is seeing new voices and embodied knowledges emerge.

As I rush to conclude this collective story, I think about my own daily workspace and pace: frantic, competing priorities, metrics, and fast scholarship spat out like fast fashion (not like the tweed blazers and Oxford flats of dark academia aesthetics)! Often in this chaotic rhythm, I struggle with 'productive' demands competing for my energy, lacking the time it takes to create knowledge that can make a real difference. I often feel like I must fight to embody the ethics of care and relationality that are so central to my philosophy as a teacher, researcher, and human being. I am also reminded that in my workplace, the 'light of knowledge' (*Dead Poets Society*) is certainly not lit by candlelight. Yet, the light of knowledge is still here; it is created and kept alive every day in the work we do with our students and in our research.

## **Discussion**

The collective story of six pathways educators presented above moves beyond the good teacher / bad teacher tropes of filmic dark academia fiction to voice the complex challenges pathways educators face in the neoliberal university, where diversity and equity may be simultaneously celebrated and undermined. In this story, tense relationships between teacher identity and affect are revealed, where practitioners discuss feelings of shame and guilt in taking time out for their own research, anxious that this first-person research may not even be valued by the academic mainstream. It is therefore evident that these practitioners are struggling with the (gendered) institutional politics of self-evaluation and external validation, underpinned by the fear and shame of being exposed as not 'real' or legitimate (ivory tower) academics. These diverse Australian pathways educators are not the same charismatic teaching and research 'rock stars' depicted in famous films about top ranking, global elite institutions. Nonetheless, in their embodied knowledge and lived experience they have provided new ways of looking at and being in the contemporary university.



At the same time, their voices reveal and disrupt the institutional processes of marginalisation, as the authors reclaim their own origin stories and hard-won learnings as academics. To tell our own story is in a sense to reclaim our identities as emancipatory educators, just as we produce our own discourse about real and true academia. Watching these films required a reading of teaching and learning through the privileged accounts of wealthy, white, mostly male, young people at elite British or American ivory tower institutions. Hence, the collective story above provides a necessary alternative representation or resistant reading of dark academia filmic texts in affect-driven stories of academic becoming. Intersectional identity markers are evident in these individual and collective participant stories which challenge more mainstream filmic assumptions about the idealised academic as middle class, Anglo-American, white and mostly male. Our collaborative story illustrates instead that universities can be diverse spaces and that success should not be defined by filmic stereotypes and cultural tropes of the charismatic 'rock star' academic, tireless teacher-saviour hero or the idealised, privileged, genius student.

While such films triggered in us a burst of nostalgia for a real or imagined past, they also prompt us to consider our own challenges, compromises, values, and professional identities as third-space academics working on the margins of the digital university. Although we are, like the fictitious filmic teacher-hero, more focused on teaching than research, our working lives are more complex and conflicted than these films suggest, as we move across boundaries between academic and support or service roles. Moreover, while we too provide support, comfort, and care for students from a diversity of backgrounds, in the real world there is a price the caring teacher pays for tirelessly expending emotional labour in the competitive context of the neoliberal university. Sacrificing our own wellbeing and careers for the sake of privileged and troubled students, like filmic teacher-saviours John Keating or Katherine Watson, is not part of our contemporary, collective dreaming for a better future. In the real world, individual teacher agency is also curtailed by organisational cultures, institutional boundaries, limited resources, time pressures and other realities of working in the post-pandemic academy. In some sense, these heroic-teachers in dark academia films are celebrating a university culture that does not exist. Nonetheless, such films are increasingly popular and comforting because they reaffirm values of the idealised, individual caring teacher in troubled times of mass disruption, perpetual precarity and digital depersonalisation. While looking to the romanticised dark academia past may help soothe socio-cultural anxieties about the postmodern academy, it effectively piles more pressure on the relationships and identities of third space workers charged with supporting growing numbers of non-traditional students in the democratised and digital university.

## Conclusions

We started out as a group finding our small but significant sample of dark academia film texts to be powerful tools for stimulating discussion, exploring our own underrepresented but real-life subjective experiences as pathways educators working in university-based tertiary preparation and English language courses. Yet, through our reflections, we were able to probe deeper into our lingering emotional reactions to these films, to explore the emotional demands of our own work and our own identity investments, aspirations and limitations in being transformative teachers and pathways educators. While we found these Hollywood heroic teachers to be mostly unrealistic and inappropriate role models, the long cultural shadow cast by filmic characters like John Keating, Sean Maguire, and Katherine Watson forced us to clarify our own values as workers on the front lines of the modern mass or democratised neoliberal university. While hardly heroic, we are working exceptionally hard to improve access and success for non-traditional students in multiple modes, perhaps risking our own psychological strain or burnout in the process, to support successful transitions for increasing numbers of students under increasing time pressures. Hence, one of our key findings is that the psychosocial issues which commonly surface in our reflections are not problems of individual 'bad' attitude, but rather related to larger cultural issues, specifically issues of *organisational culture* in the neoliberal university. The solution, we argue, is to restore support, reasonable boundaries, and

the balance of power to practitioners doing the real work of pathways education, thereby supporting the teachers who support the students.

This paper has extended the limited scholarship on pathways educator identities through intimate, first-voice encounters with the practitioners themselves. It also calls for a form of academic organisation and view of the world which works outside the post-industrial, digital assembly line model of the neoliberal university. Advocating for our pathways students is a creative and ethical act of defiance against the neoliberal factory line model and its performativity demands.

As researchers, we do recognise that these film texts are open to many varied readings and our own reflections are, to a degree, both selective and subjective. We also recognise that as knowledge workers within the academy, we are in some sense invested and complicit in the elitist discourses we aim to critique. Nonetheless, we believe our collective story reveals an honest and intimate representation of our own academic selfhood in an underrepresented third space. Watching these four well-known films was like looking into a distorting dark mirror. Yet, these film viewings also provided an accessible launchpad for sharing our own stories of teaching and identity from the underrepresented margins of the neoliberal university. While we may be perceived as the low-status, shadow Other of the elitist academy, we also hold to a light of hope, diversity, and collaboration in our everyday, teaching-intensive practice.

## Note

1. Sometimes known as enabling, bridging, access or foundation educators.

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