Standing up to Fear and Self-Doubt:  
Tackling the Challenge of Mature Age Study

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Abstract

For many mature-age students beginning tertiary studies, fear and self-doubt are barriers to their academic progress. Women who have been occupied with family and domestic responsibilities are particularly prone to these feelings, having had few opportunities to build their confidence outside the home. Many mature-age students have memories of unsuccessful academic experiences in school, perhaps 20 or even 30 years ago. Intense anxiety, a sense of inadequacy and guilt connected with the unfamiliarity of doing something for themselves, rather than for others, can combine to create a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. Counselling can provide an opportunity for students to make significant changes. This paper presents some case studies of first-year mature age students and discusses how counselling interventions, drawn from narrative therapy, assisted students in the grip of fear and self-doubt, to challenge these disempowering feelings and hence develop alternative views of themselves as competent and capable students.

Standing up to fear and self-doubt

Since 1994 I have worked as a Counsellor at the Central Coast Campus, within the Student Support Unit. In this paper I will be talking about some of my experiences of counselling mature-age students and the kinds of problems affecting them. I will be presenting an outline of a model of therapy referred to in the literature as the "Narrative Model" of therapy, and discussing the ways in which I apply this model in my work with mature-age students, illustrating this discussion with some case studies.

The Central Coast Campus is located at Ourimbah in NSW, Australia, which is on the east coast, about halfway between the cities of Sydney to the south and Newcastle to the north, in an area of the coastline known as the Central Coast of NSW. The Campus is unique in structure, being a joint venture of the University of Newcastle, the Hunter Institute of Technology (known in NSW as a TAFE College – College of Technical and Further Education) and the Central Coast Community College, which provides short adult education courses within the local community. The campus first began in 1989, beginning with an enrolment of 50 University students, and then expanding over the following years in both the University and TAFE sectors to the present enrolment of approximately 2,000 University and 1,500 TAFE students.

As an area, the Central Coast region is one of the most scenically beautiful areas of the state, with many natural waterways, beaches and national parks. As a result it is a very popular tourist area, particularly for Sydney-siders, many of whom have holiday homes on the Central Coast. However, the external appearance belies the fact that the Central Coast is also quite economically and socially disadvantaged, with higher than state average levels of: unemployment (particularly youth unemployment); families in receipt of pensions or benefits; people over 65; people under 14; low income earners; domestic violence; and, more recently, male suicide (ABS Census Data 1991; NSW Office of Youth Affairs 1994; Devery, 1992; Smyth 1997; NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, 1997). The growth of relatively cheap housing estates over the past 10 to 20 years has attracted many low- and middle-income earners to move up from Sydney, leading to large numbers of workers commuting to Sydney for work by train or car. This adds to the isolation of these families, particularly the parent (usually the mother) who is left at home for up to 12 to 14 hours a day, often without a car. Public transport in many areas of the Central Coast is very poor. Apart from the areas directly on the Sydney to Newcastle train line, the Central Coast is serviced by private bus companies only, which offer services that are very expensive as well as infrequent.

Into this quite disadvantaged area, the arrival of a University Campus brought with it opportunities which had not been possible before for many sections of the community. This was particularly the case for mature-age women and young people from lower income families, who would not previously have contemplated the expense and travel difficulties of going to University in Sydney.
or Newcastle, or even further afield. With the expansion of courses and places in both University and TAFE over the subsequent years, these opportunities have increased.

As a result of many of these factors, the Central Coast Campus has had, from its inception, a high proportion of mature-age students enrolled in various courses. Figures for 1998 show that 61% of the total University student population were registered as mature-age students (over 21). Within the counselling service, the figures for 1998 show that 57% of new clients were aged 30 and over, and 80% of these were women. This means that in 1998, 46% of new clients were women aged 30 and over. In this paper I will be talking about this particular client group - female students over 30.

For many of these women, beginning tertiary studies brings with it a great deal of fear and self-doubt. Most have been occupied with family and domestic responsibilities and have had few opportunities to build their confidence outside the home environment. Many are single-parents who are experiencing severe financial stress and looking to study as a way of building something more positive for their and their children's futures, by increasing their chances of meaningful employment. Many have memories of unsuccessful and unhappy school experiences and are feeling intense anxiety and a sense of inadequacy in what they are taking on. Many are struggling with the unfamiliarity of doing something for themselves, rather than just for others, and experience a deep sense of guilt connected with this. These kinds of fears and uncertainties can be a potent mixture for failure within the first year of tertiary studies - often by withdrawal rather than actually failing to make the grade in their assessments. In many cases, the fear of failure itself will persuade women to withdraw, before they have the chance to discover if they might actually pass. Counselling can be a valuable opportunity for women to be assisted to face the fear of failure and to stand up to the feelings of self-doubt, guilt or whatever else may be blocking their path. Through this process, they can make new discoveries about themselves and begin to develop alternative views of themselves, as competent and capable students.

The model of therapy which I have found to be of great assistance in this process is usually referred to as the Narrative Model of therapy. This is a model which was initially drawn from the ideas and writings of two therapists - David Epston, from Auckland and Michael White, from Adelaide. Other therapists have since expanded upon the ideas of Epston and White (as indeed they too have expanded their ideas over time) so it has become a changing and growing model of therapy, enriched by the ideas of many people, but with some central features which distinguish it from other models. In describing these features I will refer to three case studies - Mary, Susan and Jane. These are not their real names and many other details have been altered, but they are typical of many of the women whom I see for counselling.

Epston and White (1989) proposed that "the text analogy provided ..... a description of the way that persons organise their lives around particular problems" (p.14) and that "persons give meaning to their lives and relationships by storying their experience, and … in interacting with others in the performance of these stories, they are active in the shaping of their lives and relationships" (p.21).

In other words, we all have stories about our lives and our experiences which help us make sense of what has happened to us in the past, and which also influence our current and future behaviour, beliefs and interpretation of events. The Narrative Model assumes that, out of the many possible stories we may have about ourselves and our lives, some will become more dominant than others, through the reinforcement of these stories by external and internal events and experiences.

For example, Mary, aged 35, came for counselling as she was experiencing severe anxiety before and during exams. Mary identified herself as "an anxious person" and saw herself as always having been this way. Mary was a middle child of 10 children in a very busy, hardworking and impoverished family, who remembered having often felt anxious throughout her childhood. She experienced further anxiety after the birth of her child and was in a relationship with a man whom she described as "conservative and dominating" and of whom she was somewhat afraid. She described herself as "a weak person" and felt that she was often a disappointment to her husband. She had begun tertiary study mainly to try to please her husband, who had suggested it, as he was...
also studying and wanted her to study with him. Although she had passed the Open Foundation course (University entrance course for mature-age students) the previous year, she feared failure in the part-time degree in which she was now enrolled. For Mary, the "dominant story" which she held about herself and her life was one in which she was constructed as a weak, anxious person and a disappointment to others. This story was influencing her to believe that she would fail at study, even though she had in fact already passed one component of it. This departure from the story-line was hardly noticed by Mary and not given any significance, which is something I will come back to a little later in this paper.

Susan, aged 40, was divorced with two adult children. She came for counselling as she was feeling exhausted and depressed and considering leaving University. Susan had raised her children as a single parent, working in a series of what she described as "dead-end jobs and no future" in order to provide for her children. She had no support from her ex-husband or from her family and had some degree of conflict with her children as they were growing up. Some conflict still persisted between them and Susan had a sense that she had failed as a mother despite her best efforts. Once the children no longer needed her financially, she had given up her job to do her Higher School Certificate (HSC), then applied to University. She said that she had feared "a penniless old age" and had hoped to be able to get some qualifications, which would increase her opportunities of a career. However, Susan was now plagued by self-doubt and was afraid that she would fail as a student. She was doubting the wisdom of her decision to give up work in order to do something in which she felt she would in all probability fail. Susan's story about herself was one in which she was constructed as a failure. No matter how hard she worked at something, she would fail. She had very few experiences in her life of supportive people giving her encouragement, but many experiences of unsupportive people giving her criticism, such as her family, her ex-husband and her children. These experiences all served to reinforce the story of Susan the Failure. Her successful completion of the HSC and the success in having provided her children with some degree of financial security as they were growing up, despite no help from others, were overlooked.

Jane, aged 36, was married with two school-aged children and came to counselling as she was fearful of the coming exams. Despite having handed in all other assessable work, she was considering leaving, as she was convinced she would be too anxious in the exams and would fail. Jane had entered University into a full-time degree after doing the Open Foundation course. She was very unhappy in her marriage but financially dependent on her husband, so had decided she would stay in the marriage mainly for the sake of the children. Getting a degree had seemed like a passport to freedom, as Jane had thought that once she had a degree she would be able to leave, but now this was seeming out of reach to her. Jane described herself as growing up in a family in which there was violence from her father to her mother, and a great deal of criticism and verbal abuse from her father to her and her siblings. In her early 20's she had a "nervous breakdown" while studying a TAFE course and feels that her family regarded her ever since as "weak" and "a failure". She described her husband as being verbally abusive and she was also suffering economic abuse in that she had no money of her own, while her husband often refused to give her sufficient money, even to buy enough food for the family. Jane's story about herself was that she was a "fraud" who pretended to be a normal student but really was a weak failure. She felt a fraud being at University, and guilt that she was taking the place of a student who was really entitled to be there.

The Narrative Model assumes that there is always more than one possible story or interpretation of events about any person or situation. However, where the dominant story is sufficiently powerful, it can obscure the alternative stories and make them difficult to access. Alternative meanings and interpretations of events are overlooked and go unrecognised unless the power of the dominant story is challenged. In order to challenge the power of the dominant story, it has to be understood and taken apart, to be able to see it for what it is, where it came from and how it grew to be so strong. In the same way as we might deconstruct a text in the study of literature, or of history and therefore understand it in its context and perhaps find new or alternative meanings, we can assist another person in deconstructing the dominant story of their life. This can allow for the possibility
that the threads of alternative stories can be recognised, taken up and pursued so that a person may then have the choice to live their life according to a different story (Monk et al., 1997).

The first step in deconstructing the story is that of externalising the problem (White, 1991, p.29). The dominant story tends to be one in which the person sees themselves as the problem - Mary described herself as "an anxious person", Susan described herself as "a failure", and Jane described herself as a "fraud". In order to begin to assist the person to locate the problem outside themselves and within the context of the dominant story, it is helpful to separate the problem from the person so that the problem becomes the problem, not the person. Client and counsellor can then unite against a problem, providing the client with an ally. This is as simple as referring to "Anxiety" rather than "feeling anxious", or talking about "the Fear of Failure" instead of "feeling a failure". With Mary, I talked with her and asked questions about "the Fear and Self-Doubt". With Susan, we discussed the ways in which the "Fear of Failure" was influencing her decisions. The pattern of self-doubt and self-criticism was externalised as "the Critic" while her ability to be self-protective at times we referred to as "the Friend". Jane and I talked about "the voice of Fear and Self-Doubt" and we explored the kinds of things that this voice was saying to her.

Through these kinds of "Externalising Conversations", to use a term of Michael White's, it becomes possible to find out more about the problem, its influence on the person's life and relationships and to discover the dominant story by which the person is living their life and making sense of their world (White, 1991, p.29).

For example, some of my conversation with Susan went like this:

Me: "How big is the Critic compared to the Friend?"
Susan: "The Critic is huge and the friend is very small"
Me: "How long has the Critic been a part of your life?"
Susan: "Since the divorce".
Me: "What kinds of things does the Critic tell you about yourself?"
Susan: "It tells me that I'm a hopeless parent, that I'm hopeless in relationships and that I'm to blame".

With Mary and Jane, I asked questions around their past experiences with Fear and Self-Doubt, such as:

"When do you think that Fear and Self-Doubt started to make an appearance in your life?"
"What are some of your earliest memories of Fear and Self-Doubt?"
"In what ways have Fear and Self-Doubt stopped you from doing what you would have liked to do in the past?"

These kinds of questions aim to review the effect of the problem on their life and relationships and, in particular, on their own view of themselves. Once both client and counsellor have more understanding about these effects and how they have come about, certain discrepancies in the dominant story begin to become more apparent. Going back to Mary's story, there had been a significant departure from the theme of failure in her story when she had passed the Open Foundation exams sufficiently well to gain admission to University. Surely this was evidence of some success in her life? However, this had not been given much significance by Mary, as it was overshadowed by the dominant theme of failure. Such discrepancies, or departures, from the dominant story line can be used as entry points for the beginning of the discovery of alternative stories. In using the Narrative Model, the counsellor seeks to identify occasions when the person has not been completely oppressed by the problem and has acted in such a way as to escape, even slightly, from the disempowering effects of the problem. Michael White calls these occasions "unique outcomes" while David Epston refers to them as "sparkling moments" (White and Epston, 1989).
In telling her story, Mary had told me that Fear and Self-Doubt had been present in her life from a very young age. However, I had also been interested to hear that she had left home at quite an early age, moving from the small country town in which she had grown up, to the nearest city, where she found work and accommodation and made some good friends - quite an independent achievement for any 17 year old. This had been dismissed by Mary as insignificant in her overall story. I asked her questions around this such as:

Me: “You left home at a young age. How did you manage to push aside Fear and Self-Doubt long enough to take that step?”

Mary: “I just wanted to get away from home, to have some sort of future. I had a friend who was leaving too, so we went together.”

Me: “What were some of the other steps you took to prevent Fear and Self-Doubt from following you to the city, so that you could get a job, find a place to live and make friends?”

Mary: “I don’t know - it was hard at times but I got to really like having the freedom and independence of being away from home, and meeting other girls through work really helped?”

We followed this theme of resistance to Fear and Self-Doubt through other periods of her life, such as the ways in which she had stood up to Fear and Self-Doubt by enrolling in, completing and passing the Open Foundation Certificate, then going on to enrol in University.

Me: “How did you manage to enrol for a degree without Fear and Self-Doubt getting on your back and persuading you not to?”

Mary: “Because I’d done pretty well in Open Foundation, I guess I had a bit more confidence. I felt so good when I got my results - I felt as if I could do anything.”

Such questions and responses began to introduce an alternative story of strength in the face of adversity and a history of her struggle against the influence of Fear and Self-Doubt.

In Susan's case, she too had not noticed or given any significance to occasions in her life when she had not been oppressed by the Critic, such as her success in her HSC and her struggle to provide for her children while they were growing up. I wanted to discover if these occasions were worthy of greater significance and whether they should be recognised as a departure from the dominant story of Oppression by the Voice of the Critic. Part of our conversation went like this:

Me: “How did you manage to silence the voice of the Critic long enough to complete your HSC and enrol at University?”


Me: “What effect did these ideas have on the Critic?”

Susan: “They silenced it.”

This revealed the beginnings of an alternative story about Susan, as a person who had chosen to reject the Critic in favour of the Friend. Questions such as the following, provided some history, thus thickening the plot of this alternative story.

Me: “How long have you known the Friend? When did the Friend first start to introduce itself to you?”

Susan: “About two or three years ago I think, when I started thinking about what else I could do with my life - to get out of the dead end jobs I was in.”

We went on to look at the times that Susan was able to silence the Critic and times that the Friend would manage to sneak through long enough to help to silence it. I asked Susan:

Me: “Who else do you have on your side, helping you to silence the Critic?”

Susan: “No-one.”
Me: “How have you managed to come this far towards your goal of a future, all by yourself, against the odds?”

Susan: “Probably because I’ve always been obstinate.”

Me: Do you think that obstinacy is another name for determination?” Susan: (laughing) “Yes, I suppose so.”

A new idea of Susan as a person of determination became added to the emerging alternative story. This construction of a history of the alternative story is important in ensuring that it can become an ongoing story in the person's life. If it has a history then it can also have a future. If it has continuity over time it can become a lasting alternative story which can influence future action, beliefs and interpretation of events. In this way, it can serve to develop a new self-description within the person, so that they come to view themselves quite differently within the context of a very different story (Monk et al., 1997, p.111).

Mary, who had been unable to complete an exam because of anxiety, sat for the exam again after we had two sessions together. We had constructed a history of her struggle against the influence of Fear and Self-Doubt, going back to the time when she was 17 and leaving home for the first time. In our second session, she had reported feeling stronger and having had “loads of energy” in contrast to the exhaustion and depression with which she had presented initially. Mary described how she had been standing up for herself, giving her own opinions assertively and experiencing some degree of anger at being in what she identified as a “one-down” position in relationships, particularly with her mother and her husband. By the third session Mary had sat her exam again with no anxiety and reported feeling relaxed, confident and strong. She told me that she was excited to be rediscovering the confidence she had experienced when she first left home at 17 and was concentrating on living up to her own expectations rather than those of others. Future sessions consolidated Mary's resolve to live her own life, not a life for others, and dealt with the inevitable issues in her marriage which had been present for many years. In finding an alternative story of strength and independence, Mary was able to face these issues with courage.

Jane told me that she was thinking of withdrawing from all her subjects rather than face the fear of failure. I asked her:

Me: “The fact that you passed your Open Foundation exams and got entrance to the University course you wanted, what does this tell you about your ability to succeed and achieve?”

Jane: “Part of me knows I can do it, but then the fear comes in and the other part of me just wants to run away because I get to thinking I’ll fail for sure.”

Me: “Will you allow the voice of Fear and Self-Doubt to blind you to your knowledge of success and achievement, or will you refuse to give in to it without a fight?”

Jane sat four exams. She achieved two passes, a credit and one fail. To her own surprise she did not feel devastated about the one failure. She was delighted to have passed three subjects with one credit and was even more delighted to have faced the Fear of Failure and survived it. Actually meeting that Fail, face to face as it were, had taken the fear out of it. Having survived one fail without devastation, Jane knew she could keep going. The alternative story of Jane facing and defeating fear had a history and now it also had a future. Over the subsequent months, Jane faced some dramatic ups and downs in her personal life. She made the decision to no longer be the victim of abuse and she and her husband separated. Despite the financial and other practical implications of this, Jane continued to study part-time and began to develop, through University, a supportive network of friends. Jane told me at our last session that she was following her own path.

Susan's struggle against the Critic and her alliance with the Friend also had a history. The more we talked about it, the more Susan was able to identify the ways in which she rejected the Critic in favour of the Friend. In our second session she told me that the Friend had been stronger through that week. Susan had decided to drop one subject, which she described as "a friendly thing to do for
myself". She had also noticed that the Critic had been particularly strong when an unexpected bill had arrived. However, when Susan made the decision to drop a subject, the Critic had been "silenced". From this experience, Susan concluded that strong and assertive decisions helped to weaken and silence the Critic. Further history was gathered by Susan being able to identify the ways in which she had been challenging the Critic over the previous two to three years. She reported feeling "a physical change, as if something had moved" after the first session, and that this feeling, a "lightness" had stayed with her. Susan attributed it to having been able to separate herself from the Critic - to have been able to see it as something outside of her, not within her. By our third session, Susan was planning ahead for some more "friendly things" to do for herself, such as changing her working hours in her part-time job. She said that she no longer felt as if she was "being sucked into a whirlpool". The new story was gathering strength and already influencing Susan's future decisions.

Another crucial element in the survival and expansion of alternative stories is that of an audience for the new story (Monk et al., 1997 p.110). Someone other than the client and counsellor needs to witness and appreciate the emergence of the alternative story in order for it to have the best chance of survival and growth over time. Within a tertiary institution there are usually many opportunities for this to happen. The audience can be brought into the counselling session simply by asking questions such as:

"Who else has noticed these changes in you?"

or

"If I were to ask your fellow-students (or lecturers) to tell me a little about you, what would they say?"

Or perhaps,

"When you were working on that group project with those other students, what were some of the contributions you made that you think they would have valued the most?"

A wider audience can be recruited by asking the client if there is anyone else to whom they would like to tell the new story. Often there is a friend or family member, or someone from the past like a schoolteacher, who was or still is a significant person in the client's life. To encourage the client to "catch them up" with news of important changes in her life can assist with the continuation of the new story. The more people around her who get to know about the new story, the more the power of the old story is diminished.

In using the Narrative Model, the stance of the counsellor is one of curiosity and enquiry, which relies far more on the expert knowledge of the client than that of the counsellor. The counsellor seeks to understand the client's experience and to uncover the dominant story of the client's life. We all have stories about our lives. These stories and the problems we encounter, develop in a social, cultural and political context. Through patient and persistent enquiry and exploration, the Narrative counsellor aims to understand the context in which the client's story has emerged. By viewing the problem as the problem and not as the person, the context for the growth of the problem can be explored and more easily understood by both client and counsellor. Through this process, the client can begin to see herself as her own best expert on herself and her life, and so further develop the new story of herself as a person of strength and resourcefulness.

The case studies of Mary, Susan and Jane illustrate this process. Through discussing their experiences, I have attempted to demonstrate some ways in which mature-age students can be encouraged to face the fears that so often beset them in the context of studying in a tertiary environment, through a counselling process which encourages the growth of their own confidence and knowledge of their own expertise and strengths.

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