

Affirming humanity

A case study of the activism of general/professional staff in the academy

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General/professional staff are activists in Australian universities. Their activism has seldom been researched in scholarly approaches in higher education studies nor in activism studies. General/professional staff occupy a unique place in the labour force of higher education, and may work in a wide range of professions and trades. A case study of activism undertaken by 'Rosemary' is presented. A number of features of activism in the academy are revealed in the case study.

Keywords: general/professional staff, activism, case study, Habermas, critical theory

Introduction

General/professional staff in universities perform a very wide range of functions, roles and duties in the academy and are accorded different, usually lower, status in the university workforce to that of academics. They may work as gardeners, security staff, cleaners, catering staff and as semi-skilled and unskilled labourers. They are often women and have career mobility limited by the industrial conditions in which they work e.g. promotion is not available to them as it is to academics. They are also known as non-academics although some act in roles that have overlap with research, teaching and community engagement and thus with academic labour but without its status. In this space, they are sometimes referred to as 'third-space professionals' (Whitchurch 2013) in the academy. They may be librarians, lawyers, laboratory technicians, counsellors, information technologists, architects or accountants. They may be members of professions, subscribe to professional codes of practice, be published in eminent academic journals, hold postgraduate qualifications and engaged with careers, not just jobs in the academy. In practice, the dualism in the university workforce – between academics and non-academics – is disintegrating because of professional practice overlaps and other nuances, as noted by Macfarlane (2015) but

the rhetoric of a binary division among the workforce persists in scholarly literature. Macfarlane has described it as 'one of the most disrespectful of othering dualisms' (Macfarlane 2015, p. 107), warning higher education researchers of the dangers in this and other dualisms such as obscuring the complexities of the situations studied, missing nuances, neglecting the political agenda that drives dualisms, and masking a continuum of experiences.

The terms used to describe their role differs in national settings, showing a persistence of local and national effects in higher education: for example, in New Zealand they are often referred to as allied staff (Wohlmuther, 2008). What little scholarly literature there is, is dominated by a small number of authors such as Maree Conway, Ian Dobson, Judy Szekeres, Joan Eveline and Michael Booth in Australia, Sue Wohlmuther in New Zealand and Celia Whitchurch in the United Kingdom. The focus of these researchers has largely been on senior administrators, managers and other senior level functions: those with high status (by virtue of higher salaries and influence) in the university workforce. However, Eveline and Booth (2004) conducted a feminist poststructural analysis of junior-level staff who work in the 'ivory basement' (occupying lower level positions in an Australian university) where 'administrative, emotional and relationship work' (2004, p. 244) is performed; and Crawford and Tonkinson (1988,

35) interviewed a university cleaner as part of a study of the history of women at the University of Western Australia. Non-scholarly literature, grey literature, on general/professional staff can be found in Australian trade union publications and websites but it can be regarded as further evidence of a different class of work allotted to general/professional staff within the academy to that of academics that it is relegated to the grey literature rather than the more prestigious light of scholarly literature.

In the Encyclopaedia of Activism and Social Justice, Martin (2007, pp.19-20) has defined activism as

...action on behalf of a cause, action that goes beyond what is conventional or routine.....Activists are typically challengers to policies and practices, trying to achieve a social goal, not to obtain power themselves. Much activism operates behind the scenes. Activism is action that goes beyond conventional politics, typically being more energetic, passionate, innovative, and committed.It is also possible to peak of activism inside an organisation, such as a corporation, government department, political party, or labor union.If employees organise to challenge a decision or try to alter the usual decision-making process, this can be called activism, though it is much less visible than activism in public places. What counts as activism depends on what is conventional.....Activism is typically undertaken by those with less power, because those with positions of power and influence can usually accomplish their aims using conventional means.

For the purposes of this article, activism involves a political orientation that favours progressive understandings of social justice and social change, where progressive refers to perspectives of social justice which are both emancipatory and oppositional to conservative and reactionary perspectives.

Studies of the activism of general/professional staff is almost absent from scholarly literature, a silencing effect in research from higher education research and activism studies, although grey literature such as union publications may report on their activism. Yet in Australia a university gardener, Eddie Mabo, had a critical conversation while at work in the garden beds on campus with colleagues that led to a long, and eventually successful history-making activist win for recognition of Indigenous rights (Loos & Mabo, 1996).

This article draws on the concept that affirming humanity is a form or practice of activism which is positive, life-enhancing and pro-active: it is the immediate action for the ideals, visions, values and inspirations that impels other forms and expressions of activism. It is congruent with resistant and contentious practices of activism but foregrounds features, such as direct expression and performance of the positive values and

aims of social change, a sort of 'prefiguration' activism, bringing positives into immediate reality and realisation. Prefiguration, argue Barker, Martin and Zournazi (2008), is the matching of the means and the end. If you want a compassionate society because your analysis tells you the current one is alienated and alienating, practice compassion here, now and everywhere. They note that this is emotional labour or emotional work. Used reflexively and mindfully, such emotional work fosters wisdom, and relates to the development of activist wisdom. This sort of activism by general/professional staff draws on both institutional wisdom and relationship wisdom, and includes or integrates both the interpersonal domain with agency in political and cultural domains. This article offers insights from Rosemary as to some of the emotions and emotional labour congruent with activist practices in the academy, adding to the work of Barker *et al.* (2008), and to the work done by Debra King (1999, 2006) who uses the theory of Touraine to examine the role of emotions in activism.

A case study of activism undertaken by 'Rosemary' is presented. She is a long-term career professional in higher education in the general/professional staff labour force at an urban campus of an Australian public university. She is female, in her forties, has university qualifications, works full-time, and is a white Australian. Three interviews with Rosemary revealed that in addition to her paid work in junior-level professional positions, into which she introduces concerns about poverty and homelessness by organising staff events around them, she is an active member of campus clubs with feminist and anti-racist concerns.

Methodology and research design

The pseudonym 'Rosemary' was chosen in consultation with the research participant. The research received ethics clearance from the University of South Australia. Single case studies have transferability to other contexts by examining their meaningfulness in other contexts by maintaining connectedness to the specific case (Simons, 2009) and in recognisable and familiar settings (naturalistic generalisation). Using appropriate forms of transferability and generalisation in a qualitative case study (see Simons 2009, pp. 164-169 to examine six possible forms of generalisation of case studies) illuminates both the possibilities of activism for general/professional staff in the academy and also its potential.

The case study method was blended with critical ethnography. Ethnography is 'an attempt to understand

and interpret a particular cultural system' (Dey, 2002, p. 188). Critical ethnography unsettles, disrupts and actively interrogates the reproduction of social inequality, and also affords the researcher with sociological reflexivity, the reflection on the conditions of the research itself (Chari & Donner 2010). As Forester (2003, p. 48) has said, the purpose of critical ethnography is to expose the politics of 'multilayered complexity'.

Rosemary was interviewed in three semi-structured interviews held off-campus and at her home in a comfortable quiet setting.

The case study reveals a number of features of activism in the academy, including the limits to activism as well as the threats to it, especially for junior women in the general/professional staff of the academy.

Theory

Theory is chosen by a researcher for its interpretive power. The research for this article is theoretically informed by critical theory, and specifically by the Habermasian concept of the lifeworld as it offers insights into when and how general/professional staff perform activism. Jurgen Habermas is an eminent critical theorist and his work is used in this study to illuminate the issues and examine the significance of the work of activists in the academy.

Commonly used Habermasian notions are those of the lifeworld and the systemworld, and their relationship under advanced capitalism. The lifeworld and system (or systemworld) are two distinct spheres or domains of life, with 'distinctive rules, institutions and patterns of behaviour' (Finlayson 2005, p. 51). The lifeworld is an 'unregulated sphere of sociality..... a repository of shared meanings and understandings and a social horizon for everyday encounters with other people' (Finlayson 2005, p. 52). The system or systemworld is linked to instrumental rationality, with two sub-systems - money and power. These act as 'inherent directing and coordinating mechanisms' of the capitalist economy and its related institutions (Finlayson 2005, p. 53). The systemworld is necessary as an organising function in society: but in advanced capitalism, it 'uncouples' from the lifeworld and develops its authority in regulating human behaviour to such an extent that it colonises, distorts and subverts the life-affirming functions of the lifeworld. The

lifeworld resists this and our humanity asserts itself, and does this in several ways. Activism is one response from the lifeworld to the colonising effects of the systemworld (Habermas 1973).

Habermasian analysis can be used to examine the potential of a process to be an arena for deliberative democracy (Wiklund 2005) and discursive democracy,

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and for the opening of communicative spaces (Kemmis 2009; Wicks and Reason 2009). These are emancipatory processes (and thus activist using the definition posed in this article) as well as processes which characterise the lifeworld itself, and are

transformative (see Ercan and Dryzek, 2015). If found, these lifeworld processes-in-formation have significance in a Habermasian analysis. In addition to the opening of communicative spaces, and discursive and deliberative democracy, lifeworld processes include reflexivity and will-formation. Reflexivity is an important feature of emancipatory functions in critical theory, and thus may also be of activism.

Will-formation is another lifeworld process-in-formation and has two forms, one of which is relevant here. Opinion-formation takes place in a 'weak public sphere' where 'members participate in discourses and negotiations regarding issues concerning themselves and the community' (Habermas 1996; Wiklund 2005, p. 248; Pederson 2009, p. 390). It is one organised around communicative power. This is a process in which people share opinions, discuss ethical considerations and seek a group dialogue and consensus which results in the formation of will, of autonomy, of the capacity to have active agency in the lifeworld. Habermas has described the academy as an 'opinion-forming association', one designed to generate public influence in the public sphere (Habermas 1996, p. 355; Baert 2005, 121-124).

If in the case study we can find (i) processes and practices of an arena for discursive or democratic deliberation (ii) the opening of communicative spaces (iii) reflexivity on rule-based systems, such as institutional wisdom or on the self as an active agent in the academy or (iv) opinion-formation among members of a community: then we have found significant features from which we can conclude that the lifeworld is asserting itself against the colonisation of the lifeworld through activist practices and processes.

Limitations of the approach

There are limitations influencing the research for this article. The first is in relation to time-lag since the original field work was conducted for the case study. The second is in preserving the integrity of refreshed analysis without violating the integrity of core concepts or the original case study which was developed for a doctoral study. The third relates to the risk of error through over-identification of the researcher with Rosemary and an over-focus on progressive activism without weighing other forms while framing conclusions about the academy.

First, in relation to time-lag, the literature review was refreshed and updated. Reflexive contemplation of both the original and refreshed literature and of the original fieldwork processes took place. The fieldwork observations were compared to a study of IT general/professional staff in the academy (see Seeley 2016), which showed that despite the time-lag between my own and her doctoral fieldwork, there was a sobering similarity in the tone and content of descriptions of the conditions of labour of non-academic staff, including their invisibility in mainstream higher education studies.

There has been opportunity for critical reflection and mindful reflection (see Webster-Wright 2013), including consideration of the possibility of researcher error because of the limitations declared here. This contributed to a test of the rigour and viability of the research for this article, and influenced the analysis.

Third, the exclusive focus is on progressive activism. This research decision has risked the skewing of the conceptual development of understandings of activism in the academy; and risked error by over-focusing on one form of activism and the over-identification of the researcher with the research participant. The possible error has not been remedied in the research design, and remains, leaving some likelihood of obscuring the complexity of campus activism and its political agendas.

The Context - higher education in Australia

The conditions of labour and work in the academy form the context of this case study. The editorial of this issue elaborates on neoliberalism and the academy. Neoliberal economic and associated discourses drove the transformation of the management of public institutions into entrepreneurial and corporatised forms. This displaced collegial governance and the student as learner-citizen into the margins of the educational enterprise (Olssen & Peters (2005). Therefore, promoting

and fostering engaged citizenship in a civil society, among staff and students in the academy, can be framed as an activist stance in the corporatised public university and its alienated landscapes.

The Case Study: Introducing Rosemary

Rosemary is an administrative officer in an equity unit at a university in South Australia. Equity units are usually central units located within the administrative structure of the university, not in its academic or research areas. Her duties include administrative coordination of functions of the equity unit, including supporting the recruitment of Indigenous students and staff, committee work and organising public events such as concerts and reconciliation events. She is a member of campus clubs that support equity goals such as feminism and diversity.

She was born in Australia, the daughter of white British migrants. She attended public schools in the northern (working class) suburbs of Adelaide. Of her class background, she said:

we didn't have a lot of money but there were still lots of books around.

Her activist values are attributed to her family background:

My values were formed growing up in my particular family. Very interested in social justice as a family. Even though my father was a white-collar worker... he was very interested in equality. He wasn't much of an activist himself but my mother was.....and my uncle was a conscientious objector [during the war in England].

The orientation of her family to activism felt right for her and:

I never changed it.

Rosemary is 48, divorced and has one adolescent child.

Collegiality as an activist practice

Can collegiality take on an activist orientation? During the interviews Rosemary revealed that she consciously and deliberately acts to align her collegiality with concerns to redress alienation and marginalisation in the academy. Despite a heavy task-related workload she attends consciously to relationship-related work, drawing on relationship wisdom, to inform her attentiveness to redressing alienation and exclusion.

Rosemary practices and encourages collegiality because she values human needs saying:

I think it is very important to treat people as human with human needs. And you know – one of my staff on Friday, yesterday, suddenly had a crisis with her daughter you know 'I need to get home' now she catches the bus, so I got another staff member to drive her home and come back. They asked 'Can I do this?' [I said] Of course – Go go go!

Rosemary struggles to find time to be active but uses strategies to find and manage time in order, for example, to support colleagues experiencing alienation and exclusion:

I've been consciously I might not call it networking but getting together with other women in a similar role to mesit down and you might talk about work and might talk about other things....but it is so important I think to have that interaction

Q: Why is it important to you?

A: If somebody, at your own level at work, you feel more free to talk, I think, about issues. A lot of them have similar situations, so they might have solutions for you or you might have solutions for them. You realise that they haven't been travelling in the way that you thought they were, they've got issues and that can explain certain things that happen in the workplace or might affect the way you deal with them in the future. I have got (a contact) in the faculty office, and I thought she was travelling really well but now I realise that she's not....so, you know, I want to be a support for her.

Rosemary's collegiality is more than conviviality towards colleagues. The activist orientation of conviviality and collegiality comes from the values that inspire her to this perspective and her conscious willingness to frame it as supporting marginalised members of staff – this is a social justice orientation to the effort she makes. She manages very heavy workloads and also prioritises practices that humanise the alienated workforce. For example, she mentioned that she puts time into praising, acknowledging and developing colleagues, ensuring that family friendly practices are followed and doing extra work in order to support vulnerable colleagues and their families, enabling them for example to attend funerals or attend to sick family members.

She has been active with others in organising informal fundraising events on campus for homeless people, raising funds to support soup kitchens and shelters; she uses these informal activities at work as opportunities to deepen peoples understanding of poverty, its causes and possible social interventions in poverty.

Administration duties with activist dimensions

Rosemary's work in an equity unit that serves minority and marginalised cultures involves her in defending equity

units from funding cuts, managing threats to their security, funding and the public image of equity units. These are formal parts of her job and also have activist dimensions embedded in the role, concerns in common with those of progressive activists:

You've got a university that's funded by the numbers of student, [effecting] staff student ratios and things. This had a huge impact on [equity unit].....we're under huge pressure because we don't have a very good student-staff ratio and we don't get many EFTSUs for it.....And the rest of university is saying well why are they getting all this money? <laughter>.....we can barely keep our head above water!

.....and that's why you know they'llargue with a lot of courses that have large student numbers in them.....ones that are popular, that are vocational, so you know, there goes learning for learning sakes andTheir talking about mainstreaming it and if you mainstream it that means getting rid of it – quite frankly.

.....How do we resist it? If we had enough funding it would be easy to resist it because I think a lot of it is based on that you know (a) students having to pay and (b) getting rid of courses (c) mainstreaming specialist units which, you know, because they are seen as non cost effective – horrible – the need to have huge vocational programs like <program name>which is where the university gets its money, or courses that will attract a lot of [full-fee paying] international students.

Rosemary's concern to resist the downsizing and mainstreaming of equity units shows her activist orientation to resisting the negative impacts of change. Rosemary is reflexive, a work skill that applied to her activism leads her to awareness of self and others, and awareness of complicity with and contradictions in activist practice:

Oh we are complicit with a lot of stuff, no doubts about it, it is easier.....When looking at power relationships..... where you are in the organisation, where you are in that particular group. If you are in a meeting and things happen you don't agree with youyeh think 'not right'. But you might think you're not be in a position to say something into that relationship.

Australian workplaces are multicultural. Having cross-cultural skills is valued by employers but for Rosemary developing her cross-cultural skills is transferred to her activism, for they are part of her concern to find ways of working with others which prioritises attention to injustice, and supports a humane and empowering approach to social change. In working with ethnic and race minorities she has developed cross-cultural communication skills:

I remember having to teach myself to do this. <Laughter>. Relax my body and wait, it'll come when it comes. Let's move on – no – stay – some [waiting] time [is needed].

With [an Indigenous staff member] I sit there.

Q: Part of cross cultural richness is stillness?

A: Just sit back and wait. I have to find that stillness within myself.

Rosemary identifies here the development of her own skill in transcultural communication, but also made clear that this has served both her professional development and her activist concern to work well with colleagues from minority cultures in order to promote common social justice and anti-racist objectives.

Obstacles and limits to activism

Rosemary identified a number of limits on her activism. These include her marginal status as a member of the general staff and as a feminist in a junior role in the hierarchy of the university; time-poverty and workloads; the loss of cultural knowledge of key activists; and the silencing of activists such as anti-racist feminists:

Well, there's always a power relationship. You have to be careful of what you say, because it might be seen as pressuring someone, trying to influence somewhere, where really you don't have the right to. So you have got to be very careful about the way that you say.

Q: So you are saying that as you do it you are very mindful of your, your role at that event at that time at that place?

A: The specific place and time yes.

The lack of time to attend to core duties as well as activism acts as a limit:

I think it could be a lot more activist than it is, you know, the university. I think a lot of people just don't have time..... Everybody I talk too, and I think its endemic, is overworked. Just getting through what you have to get through in a day is enough for everybody...so those other things about university life that you think are important are not happening any more.

Another obstacle to activism is the loss of cultural knowledge when activist staff leave. Talking of a valued fellow activist she says:

she one of the ones who just works to death. Because of her huge, you know, desire to make that whole place work.....We'll be lost when she goes.

Another obstacle is the silencing of activists when labelled as trouble-makers or when they are hesitant to speak out. She identified factors that act as obstacles:

[it is your] role in that organisation, lack of seniority, or [being] the only woman in the room. I think also for women, there are often consequences of being named as a 'feminist'. Well, putting down with the feminist label.

Asked about her understanding of the nature of social change she identified its slowness in succeeding at changing society and the persistence of sexism. An example of this is the expectation that junior level women prepare catering for and organise informal collegial social events among colleagues, showing that conservative gender roles persist for junior women. Rosemary noted that senior women have moved into eminent non-traditional positions in the university workforce while junior women continue to occupy more traditional service roles:

Social change effects so much in the workplace and obviously and that's a slow change – sometimes you wish it would go faster, <laughter> sometimes it goes backwards!! <laughter>

And the slow change in sexism? Well even during this week we had a thing for Melbourne Cup. Who at work cooks at functions, we had a thing for the Melbourne Cup, who was in the kitchen doing the cooking? The females and who is in the boardroom waiting? The males <Laughter>.

Having helped organise a workplace function for homeless people, Rosemary was inspired to expand her activist interests:

But that affected me, from then on, I usually buy two, I buy one for me and one for the church that I'm in. I do what I can collecting food for people, it's expensive.

The obstacles to Rosemary's activism are numerous, and include her junior female status in the academy, and caution about managing her public image and credibility with senior male colleagues. She talked of the time constraints, the busy and demanding workloads, and the persistence of sexism in the workforce around junior level women in the general staff.

Features of the case

This case study reveals how Rosemary consciously and reflexively adopts activist stances as a member of the general/professional staff. She humanises her workplace through her collegiality and supports collegiality among others, giving spaces for care and concern to be expressed as part of working relationships. This is more than 'just' collegiality for it is inspired by the values of social justice and grows from active and activism-inspired deliberate interventions in daily life in the academy. Her work on

homelessness and poverty are more than just charitable support events among colleagues: it takes on an activist flavour because she adds education for and inspiration for social change into her approach. This disclosure by Rosemary indicates significant features of the lifeworld – the practices of discursive deliberation in an arena on campus; the opening of communicative spaces on campus; and opinion-formation among members of a community. We have found significant features from which we can conclude that the lifeworld is asserting itself against the colonisation of the lifeworld through activist practices and processes revealed by Rosemary.

Her mainstream role in an equity unit is, in itself, related to the activist possibilities still available in the academy: serving the educational aspirations of a marginalised community, defending the equity unit against mainstreaming and budget cuts, and collaborating with Indigenous and non-Indigenous colleagues to ensure that equity goals are met. She infuses her 'equity job' with a passion and vision of progressive activism, bringing activist reflexivity to her work as she considers and actively manages heavy workloads, stress and other obstacles to activism in the academy. This reflexivity on both rule-based systems of the academy and her own agency as an actor in the academy – significant features of the assertion of the lifeworld – leads her to an analysis of the other obstacles to and limits to activism in the academy for general/professional staff such as sexism, gendered roles, silencing, compromising her stance for the sake of pragmatics, junior status in a hierarchy, the upward management of senior staff and the loss of key allies such as other activists in the academy. She is reflecting on rule-based systems, drawing on institutional wisdom and reflects on the self as an active agent in the alienating landscape of the academy.

Rosemary can be seen practicing relationship-wisdom in her activist practices: she joins with others in genuine caring for colleagues, a form of activism in itself sometimes referred to as 'prefiguration' in which an activist ensures that the means equals the ends, for example where caring collegiality is practiced as an activist-inspired strategy and value-orientation, and leads to caring collegiality as an activist outcome in the alienated landscape of the corporatised university (Barker, Martin, Zournazi 2008). She also shows emotional wisdom in managing her activism, knowing how to self-care and mutual-care (see King 1995, 2005, 2006). Rosemary links some of her engagement with activism in the workplace with the inspiration of a working-class background and role-models in her family. While a class

analysis of this case study is not part of this research, here we can see that the working-class background of a feminist and anti-racist activist acts as an asset to her activism in the academy and we also see her reflexivity in relation to her working-class origins and rich life-affirming family history.

This case study reveals that activist stances can be and actually are deployed on campus by general/professional staff. They deploy practices specific to their place in the academy, making strategic use of the mission of the university to match activist goals; and also accommodating their junior status, gendered roles, their invisibility and silencing in a hierarchical and bureaucratic culture in the corporatised university.

The success of progressive activism, and dissection of the activist and their practices, were not key concerns of the research. However, Rosemary suggested a definition of successful activism as 'turning up': a process-rich engagement with the issues of social justice in which turning up for activism in the alienated workplace of the modern academy is an activist 'outcome' in itself.

The practices deployed by activist general/professional staff have been shown to be able to be revealed in forms such as 'communicative action', by opening communicative spaces and sustaining campus lifeworlds. Discursive democracy is fostered in the workplace in several instances in the case study; the opening of communicative spaces in the academy; reflexivity on rule-based systems within the academy, such as institutional wisdom and also on the self as an active agent in the academy; and opinion-formation among members of a community.

Smith, Salo and Grootenboer (2010) have shown that collective praxis addresses the practice of communicative action and addresses the risks of alienation and injustice in the academy. They argue that it does this, as can be seen in this case study, by acting in collective ways (such as to ensure that care work is recognised as collegiality and therefore recognised as valued paid work); being reflexive (such as when Rosemary reflects on her own complicity with the silencing effects of proxy substitution for more senior staff); and emancipatory (such as when she uses her cultural competence to establish a quiet receptivity to Indigenous colleagues that enables communication and shared decisions). In such spaces as this equity unit, they argue, safe havens develop in the academy (Smith *et al.*, 2010).

Smith *et al.* (2010, p. 60) argue that another response to neoliberalism in the alienated landscape of the university is the deployment by an activist of a 'duality

of purpose', a merging of activist goals with university goals, one with a strategic intention and purpose. We can see a duality of purpose in this case study when for example Rosemary mobilises her activist vision to serve the defence of the equity unit against mainstreaming and to enable it to continue to function in serving the educational aspirations of marginalised communities. In this way the lifeworld asserts with vigour its collegial, collectivist and communicative functions, and does this through the vision and practice of activists in the academy. Activists that mobilise the 'duality of purpose' are lifeworld enablers and make significant contributions to the lifeworld affirming functions of the academy.

The features of, and processes of, campus activism emerge in this case study. Rosemary is redefining and interpreting the university, her alternative career in it and reinterpreting one of its core purposes, serving equity and the common good, as a site of emancipatory interests. The work of an equity unit in the academy is seen here to be a potential site of activism and emancipatory interests.

As Kemmis (2006, p. 461) has pointed out, the activist stance means truth-speakers bring 'unwelcome and uncomfortable news' into the academy. He says of this sort of stance that it will

'require of those who do it that they display the courage and conviction of the parrhesiastes – the obligation or duty to speak with the greatest courage and conviction we can muster when the time comes to speak honestly to the tyrant, the assembly, the head of the department, or our friend.'

Conclusions

This study of activism in the academy challenges the invisibility in scholarly literature of the activist orientation of general/professional staff in the academy. This is an under-researched area which awaits the attention of future Critical Higher Education researchers.

The case study challenges the pessimistic tone of many studies of activism by revealing the optimism and hopefulness of meaning-making and life-affirming practices in activist work. It takes courage and conviction to do this work in the alienated landscape of the corporatised university – and to do so revitalises and energises the lifeworld of campus and its potential, and reaffirms the common good purpose of the university. Alternative conceptions of the university exist. This sort of activism through affirmation of humanity draws from relationship wisdom and remains connected to practices

of activism which ask for the courage to face opposition, contention and conflict.

This case study challenges stereotypes of activism by revealing how activism can be embedded in the daily work practices of the general/professional labour force of the university and offers conceptions of activist work.

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