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Christina C. Gray  
*Edith Cowan University*

Geoffrey M. Lowe Dr  
*Edith Cowan University*

Peter F. Prout  
*Edith Cowan University*

Sarah Jefferson  
*Edith Cowan University*

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## ‘Just like breathing’: A portrait of an 85-year-old veteran teacher

Christina Gray , Geoffrey M. Lowe, Peter F. Prout and Sarah Jefferson

School of Education, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia

### ABSTRACT

Through a phenomenological lens of portraiture methodology, this article explores the career experiences of a veteran acting teacher who, at the age of 85 years, remains highly passionate and dedicated to his work with younger aspiring actors. The article reveals how for this veteran teacher, his strong teacher identity characterised by a quest for challenge and a commitment to career-long professional development are significant to maintaining relevance and passion for teaching. As many countries grapple with issues surrounding the retention of veteran teachers, understanding the ways in which he maintains his passion and commitment over succumbing to stress and burn out like so many teachers in the performing arts is timely.

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### KEYWORDS

Veteran teachers; teacher career trajectories; positive veteran teachers; acting teachers

## Introduction

Understanding what keeps a teacher committed and enthusiastic later in their careers is the driving force behind our research into positive veteran teachers. Our focus on positive veteran teachers, addresses a gap in the literature that has been dominated by research into high attrition rates of teachers leaving the profession (R. Cohen, 2009; Gallant & Riley, 2014; Hong, 2012). As R. R. Cohen (2009) identifies, how positive veteran teachers’ careers unfold and what sustains them in their teaching is relatively unknown which is surprising given the high esteem in which they are held by their colleagues and the positive influence they have in their schools.

Through a phenomenological lens of portraiture methodology, this article reports on the professional life of a veteran teacher, who at the age of 85, remains passionate and dedicated to his work. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe narrative portraiture methodology as:

... a method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. Portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experience of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions—their authority, knowledge, and wisdom. The drawing of the portrait is placed in social and cultural context and shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each one negotiating the discourse and shaping the evolving image. (p. 15)

A methodological benefit of narrative portraiture includes bringing the participant and their everyday life experience into focus, which can offer unique insights into a research phenomenon (Edgar & Jacobs, 2020). Through this veteran teacher's portrait, we gain a sense of his history and context and ways he makes sense of his professional identity.

Following the portrait, the article explores the interplay between this positive veteran teacher's identity and his motivation for persevering in the profession, his effectiveness and self-efficacy (Day et al., 2006). Of particular interest, is his quest for challenge and commitment to career-long professional development in maintaining relevance and passion for teaching. As many countries grapple with retaining older, experienced teachers (Admiraal et al., 2019; Worth et al., 2018), understanding ways in which he maintains passion and commitment over succumbing to stress and burnout like so many teachers in the performing arts (Ballantyne, 2006, 2007; Gray & Lowe, 2019) is timely.

### **The conceptual terrain**

Research into teacher career trajectories offers an interesting insight into distinct career phases of teachers (Day & Gu, 2007; Huberman, 1989; Meister & Ahrens, 2011). Seminal work conducted by Huberman (1989, 1993) identified five phases of teaching with the final phase termed disengagement (teachers with 34 years + experience) and characterised by a gradual withdrawal from the profession. These teachers were typically sceptical or resistant to structural reforms and often described as disinvested, bitter and unhappy towards leadership. While much of the research identifies a general decline in motivation and commitment to teaching (Ben-Peretz & McCulloch, 2009; Fessler, 1985; Huberman, 1989), several studies have identified a smaller group of veteran teachers who, despite increasing pressures of the job, remain positive and enthusiastic (Day & Gu, 2007; Gray et al., 2018; Steffy, 1989). Steffy (1989) classified this smaller veteran cohort as either in the expert or master career stage or the renewal stage where they sought opportunities to experiment with new ideas. Vonk (1989) described these teachers as professionals with high-level competencies and reenergised while Meister and Ahrens (2011) noted this cohort as motivated, highly effective and looking to grow professionally. Day and Gu (2007) similarly labelled this cohort as having a strong sense of motivation and commitment to teaching, and a continuing sense of well-being. It is these positive veteran teachers that are the focus of this research.

Defining the characteristics of a veteran teacher has somewhat different perceptions by researchers. According to research by Huberman (1989), a veteran teacher has 15–20 years in the classroom and a strong mastery of teaching. Day and Gu (2007, 2009) define veteran teachers as those at the peak of their expertise and wisdom and with more than 24 years of teaching experience. Whereas, others caution that veteran teachers should not be defined by age but by their ability, expertise and capacity to articulate and reflect on experience (Carrillo & Flores, 2017; Lieberman & Mace, 2009; Meister, 2010). Our research considers tenure and experience, whereby, we classify a veteran teacher as over the age of 40, or who has had 20 or more years teaching experience (Gray et al., 2018; Lowe et al., 2019).

We begin with unpacking key attributes of ‘positive’ veteran teachers. This is followed by a review of the literature, albeit limited (Prior, 2007), on characteristics of positive acting teachers.

## Positive veteran teachers

R. Cohen (2009, p. 475) stated that for some positive veteran teachers, ‘their idiosyncratic needs and personalities just naturally mesh with the culture of teaching.’ This natural affinity is described by Hansen (1995) as a calling to teach and provides the teacher with a sense of identity and meaning. Day (2012) described the importance of ‘personal strengths or core qualities’ (p. 11) that are conducive to teaching such as fairness, perseverance, courage and commitment.

### Commitment

Indeed, maintaining a high level of commitment to the profession is deemed a characteristic of positive veteran teachers (Day & Gu, 2009; Huberman, 1989, 1993; Steffy & Wolfe, 2001). Sammons et al. (2007) defines commitment as:

... the expression over a career of a desire to be the best possible teacher and provide the best possible teaching for all students at all times through care and competence. Commitment occurs, then, in both real time and is an enduring aspiration. (p. 10)

R. Cohen (2009) posits that a dispositional factor of hardiness, or ‘Grit’ (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014), characterised by a sense of control over environments, high levels of commitment and being comfortable with challenges are traits of positive veteran teachers. Commitment is often associated with resilience in the face of setbacks and challenges that occur (G. J. Brunetti, 2006), enthusiasm and a capacity to grow professionally in order to avoid plateauing (Meister & Ahrens, 2011). Day and Gu (2007) convey that high levels of motivation and commitment, as well as a strong sense of active engagement in the profession, are key attributes of positive veteran teachers.

### Comfort in the role

Comfort in the role relates to a sense of agency, professional competency, being comfortable and in control of the classroom (Day, ca. 2007; Day & Gu, 2007). Huberman (1989) described these teachers as having ‘the perception of confidence, effectiveness and serenity’ (p. 353) while Fessler and Christensen (1992) identified that this was a pleasant and enjoyable period of a veteran teacher’s career. Day and Gu (2007) noted that these teachers had a clearly defined sense of professional identity. Similarly, Lightfoot (1985) and Steffy and Wolfe (2001) described comfort as a self-belief of being an expert or master.

Interestingly, Fessler and Christensen (1992) cautioned that although positive veteran teachers had considerable expertise and seemingly strong self-efficacy, they valued outside affirmation of their effectiveness. Whereas, Huberman (1989) found positive veteran teachers sought less support or affirmation from external stakeholders. Steffy and Wolfe (2001) concurred and reported that positive veteran teachers engaged in transformative reflection to maintain agency and efficiency.

Comfort in the role also emerges in relation to the impact these teachers have on their students. G. Brunetti (2001) described the satisfaction gained from watching their students learn and prosper and Admiraal et al. (2019) described comfort in realising aspirations in their relationships with students and making a difference to young people. Thorburn (2011) summarised comfort in the role as ‘a sense of agency, and a belief that they could continue to make a positive contribution to learning and achievement of pupils’ (p. 340).

### **Challenge acceptance**

Challenge acceptance, or the willingness to embrace and incorporate change, is another characteristic of positive veteran teachers. For some positive veteran teachers, the ability accept challenge is associated with an innate sense of fearlessness, that stems from years of teaching experience (Jefferson, 2020). For example, change brought about by cycles in education policy and thinking, or change brought about through the incorporation of ICT. Huberman (1993) referred to positive veteran teachers who accept challenge as continuous renewers who were optimistic, open and committed to teaching. These teachers naturally sought to update and renew their practice (Huberman, 1993) and as Meister and Ahrens (2011) found, were motivated to seek new opportunities by an internal desire to renew and update teaching practice. Hargreaves and Fullan (2013) similarly described this cohort as ‘the renewed, who are constantly learning and challenged’ (p. 38). The ability to respond to and/or embrace challenge in maintaining career motivation is noted in the research (White, 2008) as is the ability to stay actively engaged in the profession (Day & Gu, 2009). Indeed, regular professional development in order to expand ideas and pedagogy are deemed highly important to positive veteran teachers (Day & Gu, 2007; Gibbs & Miller, 2014). Armour (2006) ascribed a link between the importance of career-long professional development to quality teaching and urged that this should be a research agenda.

### **Positive acting teachers**

In the case of an acting teacher, such as the participant in this study, it is understood that a great actor does not necessarily make a great acting teacher (Gross, 1982; Prior, 2012; Taylor, 2000). Gross (1982) cautions ‘what one needs to know to act and what one needs to know to teach acting are two very different things’ (p. 2). A synthesis of the limited literature pertaining to positive acting teachers suggests three key attributes, namely: authentic practice, industry experience and high-level pedagogy.

### **Authentic practice**

Often acting teachers talk about their practice ‘synnoetically’, that is, their own experiential learning. Prior (2007) when describing acting teachers who reflect on their own drama school training when justifying their teaching practice, stated ‘there remains little doubt that many tutors are not only deeply but also profoundly affected and influenced by their own training. Many tutors feel that they carry on the legacy of that training’ (p. 301). Prior describes this practice of referring to their training as a way of legitimising their knowing.

While many teachers are influenced by their former teachers, Taylor (2000) cautions that it is not enough to merely copy a good teacher. Authentic teaching ‘relies upon the teacher having a clear technical understanding of the content and the learning processes not just to imitate them’ (Prior, 2007, p. 61). Further, it is not enough to rely on age old methods if a teacher cannot progress in their thinking, move with the times and maintain relevance. Instead, acting teachers’ pedagogy should be fluid and forward-thinking. Educators must seek out training on their own in order to be better teachers. For example, the ability to incorporate new media to prepare actors for the camera as well as the stage. As Roznowski (2015) cautions, actor training without this focus lacks a connection to industry reality.

### *Industry experience*

Brestoff (1995) reminds us that teachers of acting, who have experience in the acting profession, have had to deal with the real-world demands of being an actor in a challenging and insecure industry. Prior et al. (2015, p. 69) describe the industry as having ‘... physical, vocal and psychological hazards and demands ... including financial, political, and relational challenges.’ Certainly, acting students place great value on their teacher’s experience in the field and willingness to impart this knowledge on how to survive or make it (Prior, 2012). Furthermore, experience in both stage and in films is deemed highly valuable by acting students due to employment opportunities for twenty-first-century actors containing less stage time and more screen time (Roznowski, 2015).

### *High-level pedagogical skills*

An ability to blend a sophisticated understanding of the acting process with the art of teaching is a complex act (Neelands & Goode, 2000; Pascoe & Sallis, 2012; Prior, 2012). For example, Taylor (2000) emphasises that merging the pedagogical with the aesthetic is particularly challenging for teachers and Kempe (2012) highlights the considerable worth students place on their acting teacher’s ability to model skills and techniques. However, Taylor (2000, p. 256) describes acting teachers that:

... may be able to demonstrate specific acting skills ... but they cannot make sound logical connections in order to break down what they know into small meaningful parcels. They cannot give clear practical demonstrations and exercises that will enable others not only to understand but be able to use for themselves the concepts under review. In short they cannot teach.

As Brestoff (1995) suggests, ‘... most teachers have the information about acting but not many are greatly gifted at communicating it’ (p. 198). Therefore, perhaps a case can be made, that a positive veteran acting teacher has industry acting experience as well as proven pedagogical ability in the classroom.

### *Methodology*

This study set out to understand how an 85-year-old veteran teacher, described by his students and colleagues as being an outstanding, exceptional and inspiring teacher, remained enthusiastic and dedicated to teaching. To learn about this phenomenon, two qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews were undertaken in order to capture the participant’s stories and perspectives.

The interpretive and descriptive nature of this work falls under the interpretive paradigm, phenomenology, a theoretical perspective that attempts to generate knowledge about the lived experience of individuals (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Van Manen, 2009). O'Toole (2006), when describing the work of drama researchers, stated, 'As researchers, our descriptions and interpretations of any phenomenon depend on how that phenomenon forms part of the reality that we have constructed for ourselves: a reality that is largely social and shared with all our community' (p. 27). What this approach does, is to understand and describe the participants' experiences of their everyday world as they see it (Daly, 2007).

Goodson and Sikes (2001) suggest that while life history research is an inexact method as one teacher's experiences are not representative of other teachers' experiences, a sample of one is worth pursuing as it reveals critical moments that characterise a teachers' career. Accordingly, one participant was the focus of this research, and selected using reputational-case selection (LeCompte et al., 1993), whereby, according to teaching networks (knowledgeable professionals in their field), he exhibited characteristics of a positive veteran teacher (commitment, challenge acceptance, comfort in the role). This was accompanied by criterion-based sampling (Patton, 1990), with the application of the following criteria: (1) participant had been teaching for a minimum of twenty years; and, (2) participant was over the age of 40 years (Day & Gu, 2009; Fessler, 1985; Huberman, 1989, 1993).

Following Institutional Ethics approval, the interview questions were emailed to the participant two weeks prior to the first interview. Each interview lasted 60–90 minutes, were digitally recorded and then transcribed verbatim into a Word document. Then, in order to reflect the rich, story-like aspects of recalled experience, this information was used to create an individual portrait. As Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explain, by blending art forms with the rigour of science, portraitists are able to 'document and illuminate the complexity of a unique experience or place' (p. 13).

### ***Constructing the portrait***

In constructing the portrait, researchers drew from the work of Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) who categorised the major aspects of portraiture research to include: (a) context; (b) voice; (c) relationships; (d) emergent themes; and, (e) the aesthetic whole. In the following paragraphs, a summary of these aspects in relation to this research is provided. It is important to note that the authors did not intend for these aspects to be performed in a linear fashion but rather to frame all stages of the inquiry process (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

### ***Context***

Context is integral to understanding why people act as they do and, therefore, a crucial element of portraiture methodology. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) defined context as 'the setting—physical, geographic, temporal, historical, cultural, aesthetic—within which the action takes place' (p. 41). This approach contrasts significantly with positive methodology, which sees context as a potential source of distraction or confusion (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Capturing the context in this phase of the research, entailed describing the setting in enough detail for the reader to feel they are actually there. Therefore, selective details are provided which vividly locates the participant in his various places of work and events.



### ***Voice***

Voice refers to both the voice of the portraitist and the participant. While the portraitist's work is empirically grounded, the voice of the portraitist is everywhere (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In the case of this research, the portrait has been constructed so that the participant's voice dominates the story but then the researchers' voice frames the meaning of the story. Our intent is to paint the story from the participants' point of view and not to let our voice overshadow the participant's perspectives.

### ***Relationships***

The building of relationships is at the centre of portraiture. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) affirmed that portraits are constructed, shaped and drawn through the development of a relationship, and through that relationship, access to stories and insights are given. Relationships are developed by building trust, empathy, respect and rapport with the participant. In conducting the interviews in person, rather than using an outsider as interviewer, the participant's trust and confidence (O'Toole, 2006) were gained so that he comfortably and authentically shared his thoughts. Member reflections were conducted for the participant to review and comment on the data which, not only to attended to the credibility of the research but honoured the relationship built with the participant.

### ***Emergent themes***

The development of emergent themes reflects the portraitist's efforts to interpret and bring insight to the data. Portraitists search for metaphors and symbols, and construct coherence out of themes that the participants may think nothing of (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). It is important to note that listening for emergent themes occurred throughout the interviewing process. We engaged in an iterative process of conducting an interview, analysing and interpreting the data, and identifying or disregarding themes before conducting the next interview. Whilst we sought to identify themes, it was important to not let that overshadow the flavour of the participant's perspective. Emergent themes were rendered using modes of analysis proposed by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997). First, we listened for and identified repetitive refrains articulated by the participant. Second, we identified resonate metaphors and symbols in the participant's words and phrases. Finally, we revealed the patterns.

### ***The aesthetic whole***

Each of the elements contributes to the aesthetic whole. Through blending empirical choices, portraitists seek to capture insight and emotion and develop a narrative that informs and inspires (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In attending to the aesthetic whole we first constructed the overarching story for the portrait and then structured the narrative to frame and organise specific ideas. By constructing the portrait in a coherent, logical fashion, we were able to vividly capture characteristics of the veteran teacher's experiences.

## Narrative portrait

The following portrait is provided to introduce veteran teacher, Clayton (pseudonym), providing insight into his acting and teaching career, and ways he maintains his enthusiasm and passion for teaching.

### *Veteran actor and teacher, clayton*

*One of my sons came and watched a class one time, he said, "Dad, it's so easy for you. It's like breathing."*

*When I first came to New York, I didn't know anything about anything. I had one connection in New York who happened to be Tennessee Williams' agent, which if you're going to start somewhere, start with someone like that. Well she got me an audition for director, Elia Kazan. I'd read about four words before he said, "No stop. Shut up. You need to study acting." I asked who the great teachers in New York were and he said Lee Strasberg, Sandy Meisner, Stella Adler, Uta Hagan and Bobby Lewis. They were the five top teachers at the time.*

*That's how I came to study with Lee. There are three parts to the method that Lee used to emphasise. Relaxation, you have to be relaxed. The character's tensed but you're relaxed. The other thing is concentration, concentrating on something, so you practice concentrating so that no matter how unnerved you are by the audience, or your anxiety, or your fear, or your sense of inadequacy, or whatever, you have something to focus on so that your attention is focussed. And the other's preparation. You have to prepare. This method has led me through life really – prepare, relax, concentrate.*

*After a year of studying with Lee I said, "Lee, can I audition for the Actors Studio now?" And he said, "You can, but you're not ready." That's how Lee talked, very blunt, and so I studied with him for another year, and I studied really hard. In my second year studying with Lee I said, "Can I audition for the Actor's Studio now?" and he said, "You're ready," that was it. So, I auditioned, and I got in. I got in the same year Geraldine Page got in. I was sitting right next to her in our first class and when we were introduced, I said, "I'm sitting next to the best actress I have ever seen in my life." She was wonderful. I was still in college when I saw her in 'Summer and Smoke' and later I got to play her son.*

*My big break came in 1957, when I was cast in 'The Bridge on the River Kwai'. I was 23 and just a boy. It was kind of my break in the industry. I mean, I'd done a play on Broadway followed by a small part in a movie – and that was how I got my big break for River Kwai. We filmed in Sri Lanka for six months and that was fun, it was an adventure to be in that country. I grew up more or less in the tropics – Cuba, South America, Chile, Argentina. I was a bit out of my depth of course – prepare, relax, concentrate. People tell me 'The River Kwai' is an important film. It still works. Would you believe it's even popular in Japan? It's a little racist though.*

*After that, I continued studying with Lee and I started working on live TV, which in New York was wonderful. I got to play 'Billy Budd,' on television, live. The whole thing was wonderful, and so I had some really good parts. Whatever I was, the sensitive young man, was very popular then. Not anymore though. Now no one seems to be that interested. I don't know any actor in America who's the sensitive boy type. It's not the thing anymore.*

*Things are a bit of a blur after that. I lived in Los Angeles for a long time. I worked on several movies as an assistant to the director and one was for Mike Nicholls 'Catch 22'. I had a lot to do working with the actors, keeping them in order, kind of like a kindergarten teacher working with actors. LA wasn't my favourite place in the world, but because I had a family, I was there, I was sort of stuck.*

*I eventually came back to New York and I started to act again at the Actors Studio. That's when Lee asked me if I wanted to teach.*

*I always liked teaching. I have a lot of children. Well, I had nine. Two of my children have died, but seven are still kicking, and so part of being a parent is being a teacher. But, it never occurred to me to teach acting. You know, Lee Strasberg was my model. He was a really remarkable teacher and I revered him. I was scared of him always, but he was a wonderful teacher.*

*I started with one class. I was working on a soap opera at the time, so I taught at The Actors Studio every Monday night, I never missed it. I was very anxious at first, very, very, anxious. I never had that kind of confidence that some people had. I carried anxiety with me a lot and felt very inadequate teaching. You know, "Who am I to teach? Who am I kidding?" And then I'd hear Lee's voice - prepare, relax, concentrate. That was a long time ago, that was in 1978.*

*Little by little the soap opera jobs dried up, thank God, and then I started teaching more, and then I didn't really want to act anymore. I don't miss acting. It's a little harder for me to remember lines now. Although, I'm making an exception this year. My wife started a Shakespeare company called Shakespeare Downtown and we do a play a year. We do it at Castle Clinton in Battery Park and she's done a wonderful job with it. I've been thinking about 'Hamlet' for the last 70 years so I'm finally going to do it. My wife's a really good actress and she's really dedicated. She is up all night and she went for a walk in the middle of the night, which is a little dangerous in New York. I wouldn't do it. But she walked down to this Castle Clinton. We live downtown near the South Street Seaport, near the Brooklyn Bridge. She walked there, because the moon was out and she looked at it, and she said, 'Romeo and Juliet' and two years later we did 'Romeo and Juliet'. Oh, she insists that we not charge anything for these shows. Tickets are free. She insisted on that, that was her idea and so she's the boss. She's my boss. I need to learn from her.*

*I'm 85 now, and I teach six classes a week. Usually, they're four-hour classes, and so on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, I do eight hours, two four-hour classes. I've gotten so used to it, it's easy.*

*One of my sons came and watched a class one time, he said, "Dad, it's so easy for you. It's like breathing." Well, I don't know that's true but I think maybe the thing that's helped me the most, other than the fact that I had Lee Strasberg as a teacher, is that I have had quite a bit of experience as an actor so I know what it feels like to be an actor, to be good at nothing and to be bad at something.*

*Ursula La Guin wrote, "It is our suffering that brings together in pain, which each of us must suffer alone. We know that there is no help for us but from one another. That no hand will save us if we do not reach out our hand and the hand that reach out is empty, as mine is, you have nothing, you possess nothing, you own nothing, you are free. All you have is what you are and what you give." All you have is what you are and what you give, and somehow I've learned to be able to be myself. I don't pretend to know things I don't. If someone does a scene, I say, "I don't know how to help you with that." They would rather have that than come up with some crappy, dumb arse, idea that I don't really believe in. I don't pretend to be something I'm not.*

*I'm relaxed in class and I always enjoy it. I'm happy teaching. Sometimes the kids are terrible and lazy, and hopeless, and don't do any work. But even when they're bad, as long as they're trying I don't mind. Lee Strasburg would say, "If you don't want to work it's fine. It's fine that you're not going to bother with me." I always remember those words.*

*I think it takes a long time to be a good teacher. Maybe it took me a long time to be myself and not have to pretend that I was something that I wasn't. They say, it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert at something. I don't know if that's true but it took me a long time before I felt really okay in class.*

*I have a mantra that I say, and it's, "Don't expect applause". It's a wonderful thing to remember. At the end of class, I used to want them to say something nice to me, like, "God, that was a great class." Not anymore. If I have an insecure feeling that maybe I wasn't great that day, I remind myself, "Don't expect applause." And then I feel okay.*

*I feel lucky because I get new inspiration all the time, and that's pretty good because I'm 85. People always say, "That's just a number," "Yeah, it's a big goddamn number," I get inspiration from The Drama Bookstore where I find all these plays and films scripts that are interesting. I keep looking for new material, new things to work on that are challenging and keeps me so interested. Last week I did a film acting master class at the Actors Studio, and it was a wonderful experience and I left feeling so inspired. I still go to the Actors Studio because I like doing it. I feel very lucky. I feel really, really lucky. My life has been highs and lows but I've learnt through those times. It just keeps on getting better all the time. Woody Allen says, "Luck has a lot to do with life," and I think he's right. Luck. Some people get good luck, and some people don't, and I've had a lot of good luck.*

## Discussion

Through Clayton's narrative portrait, we bring his practice up close in a bid to understand, provoke, inspire and initiate discussions. When we delve into his storied life, we gain insight into his acting and teaching career, and the profound lessons he has learnt first-hand along the way. Importantly, Clayton's portrait illustrates attributes of positive veteran teachers that are key mechanisms he uses to sustain his enthusiasm for teaching. Given that teachers learn and improve their own practice when provided opportunities to probe skills of expert teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), this narrative portrait provides us with a valuable reflective tool (Moen et al., 2003).

The veteran teacher attributes Clayton exhibits (challenge acceptance, comfort in the role and commitment) will now be discussed in turn, along with consideration of key attributes of positive acting teachers (authentic practice, industry experience, high level pedagogical skills).

## Challenge acceptance

Significant challenge is evident in Clayton's practice and key to maintaining his enthusiasm for teaching. His quest to find new material that challenges him and provides interesting work for his students, keeps him invested and inspired. Clayton continually engages in self-renewal through updating his teaching resources and pedagogy (Huberman, 1993; Meister & Ahrens, 2011). Furthermore, despite having stepped away from professional acting, Clayton was bravely embarking on a major acting role,

whereby, after ‘*thinking about “Hamlet” for the last 70 years*’, he was ‘*finally going to do it*.’ This innate sense of fearlessness, resulting from years of teaching and acting experience, enables Clayton to avoid plateauing (Jefferson, 2020).

Clayton’s quest for challenge is also evident in the professional development he seeks to hone his teaching and acting craft. Indeed, participating in Master Classes at the Actors Studio on a Saturday, after teaching long eight-hour days during the working week, was not uncommon for Clayton. He described his most recent Master Class as ‘*a wonderful experience and I left feeling so inspired*.’ This commitment to self-improvement and to continue to work on his craft by taking classes with a teacher is at the very heart of Lee Strasberg’s actor training (L. L. Cohen, 2010, p. 1).

The autonomy Clayton has over choosing his professional development that is relevant to his own teaching context and career phase is an important finding in this research. While affirming the wider literature reporting on the importance of pertinent professional for veteran teachers (Carrillo & Flores, 2017; Fransson & Frelin, 2016; Thorburn, 2011), Clayton’s experience reinforces that when it is perceived as effective or useful to the individual, teachers are not likely to view the professional development as an impingement on their time (Jefferson, 2020). The importance of providing veteran teachers with autonomy in relation to career opportunities and professional development is integral to effectively supporting their ongoing vocational vitality (Day & Gu, 2007).

### Comfort in the role

Clayton enjoys comfort in the role of teaching and describes himself as being ‘*relaxed*’ and ‘*happy*’ when teaching. Consistent with research, it is the sense of hope, agency, and a belief that he continues to make a positive contribution to the learning and achievement of students that sustains his passion for teaching (Day & Smethem, 2009). While Clayton encounters challenges in his work, such as lazy, work-adverse students, his ability to self-reflect on himself during actor training has proven useful.

Clayton has a strong identity of himself as a teacher, deriving pleasure and satisfaction from teaching his students (R. Cohen, 2009). Not only does he recognise his natural affinity for teaching (Hansen, 1995), but these strengths and qualities are also recognised by those closest to him (Day, 2012). For example, when watching him teach, his son exclaimed, ‘*Dad, it’s so easy for you. It’s like breathing*.’ Interestingly, the stamina Clayton required to teach for eight consecutive hours, three times a week was remarkable and yet he described it as ‘*easy*’ as he had ‘*gotten so used to it*.’ This dispositional factor is described by R. R. Cohen (2009) as a hardiness and characteristic of positive veteran teachers.

Clayton’s teacher identity is characterised by a humble and authentic approach to his teaching. His mantra, ‘*Don’t expect applause*,’ helps to keep him grounded and protected from feelings of inadequacy. His ability to bounce back or recover from lessons that were not always positive is recognised as a positive adaptive strategy of positive veteran teachers and linked to higher work satisfaction (Griffith et al., 1999; Malone et al., 2013). Further, from his years working as an actor, he knows what it is to be ‘*good at nothing and to be bad at something*.’ Correspondingly, he strives to be authentic in the classroom and not pretend to know all the answers. He believes his authentic self is appreciated by students and taken many years to realise. It seems that he attributes his

self-actualisation synonymously with becoming a good teacher. Consistent with positive teacher research, Clayton's story reveals his confidence and comfort in his teaching role as a result of his years of teaching experience (Carrillo & Flores, 2017; Day & Gu, 2007; Thorburn, 2011) complimented by reputable industry experience (Brestoff, 1995; Prior et al., 2015).

## Commitment

Illustrated throughout Clayton's story is his commitment to maintaining high-level pedagogical skills through self-reflection, professional development and an innate quest for challenge. Clayton is committed to his students and preparing them for the arduous industry in which they aspire to join and committed to honouring the work of Lee Strasberg. While we see that this commitment comes at a price both in time and energy, it is also the case that has led Clayton to feeling lucky and content with his life.

Clayton has committed fifty years to developing his pedagogical craft and still maintains high expectations of himself. Like many acting teachers, these high expectations stem from the commitment too and deep respect he holds for his acting teacher (Prior, 2007; Taylor, 2000). Clayton describes his teacher as, *'my model'* and a *'really remarkable teacher.'* It is perhaps this respect and high regard for his teacher that contributed to his anxiety and feelings of inadequacy he experienced as a beginning teacher. Notably, it was during these moments of self-doubt that Clayton would channel his mentor's teachings, reminding himself to prepare, relax and concentrate (L. Cohen, 2010). It is little wonder Clayton is committed to his craft given how these performance values have continually aided him through life, particularly in times of vulnerability and stress.

## Conclusion

How a positive veteran teacher's career unfolds and what sustains him in his teaching is at the heart of this research. A focus on the search for goodness, a defining feature of portraiture methodology (Dixon et al., 2005), has enabled us, as researchers, to locate strengths and possibilities as well as moments of resistance and negotiation (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Portraiture as a method empowers us to honour Clayton's voice with minimal researcher interference, and thus helps us develop perspective through understanding his story and his sense of purpose. Reflecting on others offers a mirror to ourselves, and where we (and our careers) sit in relation to the researched. Thus, the strength of this research lies not just in identification of positive veteran actor teacher characteristics through hearing Clayton's story, but where we sit as reflective practitioners in relation to him and the characteristics he exhibits. By affirming Clayton in this way, we potentially affirm ourselves.

Amidst a climate of high attrition rates and forecasted teacher shortages, more research examining how positive veterans sustain their practice is needed. This study contributes to these efforts by demonstrating ways veteran teachers maybe supported so that they may thrive rather than becoming disenchanted and/or succumbing to burnout. Through Clayton's portrait, we learn how he navigates stress and vulnerability through accessing performance values of prepare, relax and concentrate. We learn how a career-long commitment to professional development helps to keep his passion alive.

Specifically, we note that as an 85-year-old, Clayton is still committed to seeking innovative ways to continue inspiring and challenging his students. This commitment is influenced, in part, by his own former teacher whom he admires and respects; thus he acknowledges being personally inspired and being instrumental in inspiring his students. Further, Clayton's comfort in his teaching role is a powerful light for our own journey as teachers. He embraces his competence that his son views as *'like breathing.'* Clayton's authenticity contributes to his passion to continue seeking his own unique pathway to successfully inspiring students to excellence.

These findings lead us to conclude with a reminder of the true value and joy such positive veteran teachers bring to their work and of the powerful agency and influence they can be in our schools. We do well to identify these individuals and to celebrate and learn from them accordingly.

### Notes on contributors

**Christina** is a former secondary drama, dance and English teacher and now the Coordinator of Dance and Drama Education (Secondary) with the School of Education at Edith Cowan University. Christina's research interests include: pre-service education, drama education, teacher career trajectories and narrative methodologies. [c.grey@ecu.edu.au](mailto:c.grey@ecu.edu.au).

**Geoffrey** is a Senior Lecturer/Researcher in the School of Education at Edith Cowan University. He has written a number of award winning music education reference texts, and his academic interests include motivation theories, community education and staff and student wellness. [g.love@ecu.edu.au](mailto:g.love@ecu.edu.au).

**Peter** is an Honorary Lecturer/Researcher in The School of Education at Edith Cowan University. His academic and research interests include pre-service teacher education, school leadership, community education, and mentoring teachers and leaders in schools. [p.prout@ecu.edu.au](mailto:p.prout@ecu.edu.au).

**Sarah** is a former Head of English and Literacy Co-ordinator. She is currently a Unit Co-Ordinator for the Master of Teach Secondary at Edith Cowan University. Sarah's current research is examining the positive coping strategies of Veteran West Australian teachers. [sarah.jefferson@ecu.edu.au](mailto:sarah.jefferson@ecu.edu.au).

### ORCID

Christina Gray  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8464-1961>

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