

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0259

First Year Students' Longing and Belonging During the Pandemic

Rola Ajjawi¹, Chie Adachi¹, Margaret Bearman¹, David Boud¹, Susie Macfarlane¹, Harsh Suri¹, Vivek Venkiteswaran¹, Karla Wells-Duerr¹

¹*Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia*

Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: Eighteen months into the pandemic, educational practices at university have been disrupted and have fragmented students' sense of belonging. This context affords studying how students connect with others and materials at a time of flux. No longer can we rely on normal campus life to automatically create a space of belonging, students' experiences are diverse, multiple and more mediated by technology. Students' entanglement with a breadth of nonhuman actors is made more visible within a digital context. The paper considers how do first year students experience connection and belonging in disrupted times? Experiences of belonging were heterogenous, dynamic and constituted through sociomaterial arrangements. Whilst belonging fluctuated for students, they all described reaching out and making efforts to connect. Understanding students' diverse ways of responding to disconnection, and the work of connecting (which sometimes is possible and sometimes not) is useful to illuminate the subtle ways in which students may be marginalised.

Paper: Belonging is considered important for student success and retention. Ensuring student connection is particularly important for first year undergraduate students to overcome the transition from high school or work (Kift, 2015). Pre-pandemic, students' face-to-face belonging could be contextualised through extracurricular activities (e.g. sports, clubs) and curricular belonging (e.g. engagement, peer friendship) in campus and near-campus spaces. However, disruptions to physical attendance necessitate different ways of thinking about belonging as relational, in flux and processual (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021).

Much research into student belonging conceptualises the phenomenon as binary, psychological and individualistic. However, this conceptualisation of belonging is changing. Ahn and Davis (2020) identify four domains of belonging: academic (e.g. curriculum, lecturer); social (e.g. participation in communities, societies); surroundings (living space, geographical location); and personal space (life satisfaction, personal interests). These domains might be in conflict, for example for students from working class backgrounds fearing losing touch with their original communities (Bunn, Threadgold, & Burke, 2019). Conflict might occur when expectations for belonging are in dissonance with the material constitution of belonging. Therefore, in this study we examined the work of connecting in physical and digital hybrid learning spaces to illuminate the subtle ways in which students may be excluded.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with twenty first year students commencing in trimester 1 2021. Maximum diversity sampling was used to recruit students based on age, gender, attendance

mode, degree, full /part-time status, domestic/international. Interview questions sought to unpack students' experiences of connection and disconnection, longing and belonging in the varied learning spaces of their course. Learning spaces can be conceptualised as enacted processes that are co-constructed in activity, used and maintained by learners (Damşa, Nerland, & Andreadakis, 2019). Data analysis was iterative and interpretive, informed by the sociomaterial and spatial turns in education research that highlight the role of materials in learning; that is, how objects and artefacts transform and modify people's learning trajectories (Fenwick, Edwards, & Sawchuk, 2011).

The majority of the 19 participants were female (63%), domestic (89%), under 25 years of age (61%), studying full-time (84%) and across diverse discipline area. While seven students were studying in online only mode, the remainder were studying in various 'blended' modes. None could be considered campus only given the hybridity of the digital in all curricula, plus the frequent lockdowns that forced all students to online study. Students described an overall sense of feeling welcomed to the university and recognised the effort that teaching staff invested to maintain continuity of connection. Predominant academic connections were with teachers and peers. Social connections included friends and family, and peers/friends within the course or university. Learning spaces were curated in bedrooms, living rooms and cafes as well as on campus for some, lockdowns permitting. These spaces were not always productive due to various physical and digital interruptions. Unsurprisingly, digital forms of mediation played a large part in the connections. Personal space included an orientation towards reaching out to others and joining in with various activities.

Students described various ways of connecting such as a school leaver living in residence who made friends in person during orientation: "We just go play basketball, watch a movie, study, because a lot of us are doing similar courses or units." (S2). His academic and social domains strongly overlapped and oriented to a traditional campus student imaginary of learning spaces. In contrast, a mature age student studying online described feeling disconnection when other students formed groups through Facebook, which he rejected instead forming other connections: "I set a discussion post up asking for other full-time workers that were doing it via Cloud [online], and sought to get a distinction or high distinction" (S27). For this student, his academic and social domains were distinct and connections strategic. An international student described keeping Australian time to connect with peers and classes from her bedroom which simultaneously isolated her from her family. She described strong connections to the study materials and course.

Academic, social, surroundings and personal space interplayed to constitute belonging moment to moment that related to their sense of self as a student. There was much labour expended by students to curate learning spaces for connection, for some resulting in a sense of longing when their participation was in conflict with their expectations. Longing is a sign that belonging is important. Whilst belonging fluctuated for students, they all described reaching out and making efforts to connect, indicating a level of social capital that not all students may equally possess. Implications for educators, institutions and students, is to attune to the hybridity and possible ruptures of connections.

References: Ahn, M. Y., & Davis, H. H. (2020). Four domains of students' sense of belonging to university. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(3), 622-634. doi:10.1080/03075079.2018.1564902

Bunn, M., Threadgold, S., & Burke, P. J. (2019). Class in Australian higher education: The university as a site of social reproduction. *Journal of Sociology*, 0(0). doi:10.1177/1440783319851188

Damşa, C., Nerland, M., & Andreadakis, Z. E. (2019). An ecological perspective on learner-constructed learning spaces. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 50(5), 2075-2089. doi:10.1111/bjet.12855

Fenwick, T., Edwards, R., & Sawchuk, P. (2011). *Emerging Approaches to Educational Research: Tracing the Sociomaterial*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Gravett, K., & Ajjawi, R. (2021). Belonging as situated practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-11. doi:10.1080/03075079.2021.1894118

Kift, S. (2015). A decade of Transition Pedagogy: A quantum leap in conceptualising the first year experience. *HERDSA Review of Higher Education*, 2, 51-86. Retrieved from www.herdsa.org.au/herdsa-review-higher-education-vol-2/51-86