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Belonging to and beyond the digital university: belonging as situated practice

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Abstract: It is increasingly understood that concepts of belonging, and connection, are closely related to students' well-being and success at university. And yet, the disruption to higher education, as a result of Covid-19, means that belonging can no longer be understood in the same ways. Such times we suggest offer openings in which belonging can no longer be taken for granted as uniform and, as located within fixed times and spaces. Extending the international research attending to belonging, we engage concepts from the work of Massey, Braidotti, and Adam, in order to propose a reframing of belonging as situated, relational and sociomaterial. We suggest that discussions surrounding belonging often omit a consideration of those students who may not wish to, or who cannot, belong, as well as a questioning of the very boundaries of belonging. The session will offer insights for educators seeking to develop belonging, and offer suggestions for further research.

Paper: In this paper we offer a rethinking of a fundamental area of higher education research and practice: the concept of belonging. Our rethinking takes place within the altered landscape of HE, as a result of the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 crisis. Such times have seen a rapid move to emergency remote teaching, and, we suggest, offer an opening in which belonging can no longer be taken for granted as uniform and, as located within fixed times and spaces. Before this shift, belonging at least for face to face students could be contextualised through extracurricular activities (e.g. sports, culture, clubs), curricular belonging (e.g. engagement, peer friendship) and also the physical places and spaces of university campuses. With the shift online, however, these taken for granted spaces and places of belonging on campus have been displaced, and educators are increasingly preoccupied with questions pertaining to how to engage their students, how to foster a sense of community, and how to develop a sense of belonging within online and hybrid learning interactions. We suggest that it is now especially important that we consider the experiences of those students who may not wish to, or who cannot, belong, and we also invite a questioning of the very boundaries of belonging. In particular, we consider how an excessive focus on the social may be limiting research and practice that also takes account of the material (e.g. learning spaces, resources and objects) in constituting belonging for our diverse students especially when they learn.

We engage a breadth of theories to consider new ways of understanding belonging. Massey's (2005) theory of spatial concepts enables us to rethink ideas surrounding belonging, space and interaction. Massey's (2005, 12) conceptualisation of space as 'a simultaneity of stories-so-far' offers an irruption to notions of space and community as flat, neutral, and fixed. Instead, space is depicted as a fluid constellation of interactions, a simultaneity of many stories, a multiplicity of experiences. As Thomas

suggests, Massey's work enables us to understand higher education as 'diverse and unfixed, with potential for multiple versions of imagined belonging' (Thomas 2015, 41). We also explore the value of Adam's (1998) concept of timescapes. Timescape serves as a metaphor that enables us to imagine time and space as intertwined, and as lived experiences and practices: a 'lived generative temporality' (Adam 1998, 33). As Bennett and Burke (2018, 914) explain, timescapes allow for the ways in which time is 'caught within complex webs of social networks, relations and inequalities'. Employing these ideas, we ask: how might we see things differently if we understand time, space, and belonging not as fixed or uniform, but interweaving, relational, and as having a multiplicity of meanings, stories, and possibilities?

We also put to work Braidotti's (2019, 52) notion of 'process-ontology'. Braidotti (2019) defines process-ontology as understanding the subject as experiencing an ongoing and nomadic process of change or becoming. Individuals are always in flux, always evolving. Moreover, Braidotti's posthuman lens also enables a focus on the role of the material, as well as a move away from the primacy of the human, proposing a distancing from 'the rhetorical generalisations about pan-humanity' and instead advocating a focus on 'the situated and complex singularity of contemporary subjects of knowledge' (Braidotti 2019, 48).

Thinking with these ideas from the work of Massey, and Braidotti, and Adam, we propose a reframing of belonging as sociomaterial, relational and processual. Taken together, these rich theoretical concepts enable us to explore the evolving and situated nature of belonging. We consider what a troubling of the boundaries of belonging can offer us in rethinking how we interact with our students during this period of emergency remote teaching, and beyond. Specifically, we argue that more nuanced, situated, conceptualisations of belonging are necessary if we are to develop a richer understanding of how students learn and engage in higher education. We hope such a rethinking will also stimulate further debate and new conversations about the broader concepts of time, space and engagement within contemporary higher education. We close by considering future directions for fostering meaningful connections with students and for developing belonging. We also consider suggestions for further research in this area, that attends to the day to day practices of teaching and learning within the digital university.

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