53 Belonging, agency and purpose in the digital university

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

Belonging is increasingly understood as important for students' success at university; however, in this presentation we examine the value of thinking in new ways about this elusive idea. Our research evidences how learners often enact belonging in ways that challenge institutional expectations of the essential nature of belonging, or of the fixed nature of 'belonging spaces'. Drawing upon empirical data from interviews, and video blogs with students, we foreground the relational and multiple ways in which students create and enact belonging, and how belonging is entangled with material spaces and artefacts. We consider how challenging dominant discourses around belonging is particularly important at this pivotal moment in higher education, where, as we emerge from a global health crisis, the very purpose of higher education is being reframed. We argue that interrogating the nature of belonging is needed if we are to understand students' diverse experiences in more meaningful ways.

Full paper

Recent research, policy and practice has begun to engage the complex concept of belonging in ways that are having significant impacts upon higher education (Gravett and Ajjawi 2021; O'Shea 2021). Recognising the urgent need to support diverse populations of students, belonging has become a term that appears to promise a great deal – if we can just support, or 'build' it effectively. However, belonging is a complex concept, and a troubling tension exists between sectoral desires to fix and foster an abiding 'sense of belonging', and the relational ways in which individuals experience both belonging and space. In this presentation, we share our research from a SRHE funded project that sought to discuss and navigate the concept of belonging with students themselves, in order to learn more about how students experience, create and conceptualise belonging. We tease out some suggestions for more nuanced ways in which we might understand students' diverse experiences, to avoid belonging joining the 'encrustations of buzzwords' (Maclure 2010, 278) that pervade contemporary education discourses.

Emerging from the pandemic, there is renewed scrutiny of the purposes of higher education. And yet, against this background, notions of belonging continue to be individualistic and with the university positioned as 'subject' of this belonging. Despite the diversity of the student body and the dynamic and temporal nature of belonging, a relatively homogeneous perspective that focuses on positive and uniform narratives of belonging, dominates. These discourses that inform 'best belonging practices' elide both the diversity and the politic of belonging. Belonging is often tied to notions of power in terms of who has the power to define who belongs and how belonginess is conveyed (O'Shea, 2021). In this paper, we contend that we need to handle notions of belonging and non-belonging with care, to understand both when non-belonging equals exclusionary practices that are harmful, and equally, when non-belonging is either a choice or just a natural experience as we evolve between connections (Gravett, Ajjawi and O'Shea under review).

Our research was conducted in two universities, in Australia, and in the UK. Thirty students took part in semi-structured interviews and/or a video-blog. Vlogs are a 'participant-directed method' (Sutton-Brown 2014, 170) which

captures the material and affective aspects of participants' everyday lives. These short video narratives are made with the video function on a mobile device and accompanied by brief self-narration. In their vlogs, students were invited to show themselves or simply their spaces and objects of belonging. The conversation prompts provided in the interviews and vlogs included:

1.   Tell us what a 'typical' day of study might look like for you?

2.   Tell or show us your learning spaces? What specific objects do you need when studying?

3.   What does belonging look and feel like in these spaces?

4.   Who / what helps you to belong to the course, university.

Reflexive thematic and visual interpretation methods were used to inform data analysis.

Our research shows that students define, enact and experience belonging in diverse and sophisticated ways. Our data identified the ways in which students actively curated their experiences of belonging. Students described actions that were purposeful and strategic, and that created spaces and practices that were meaningful to them. Some of the actions that were described included: seeking purposeful connections, emotionality and taking risk, and curating safe and personal spaces from which to connect with self and others. For many students, the connecting from a sense of safety was important. Crucially, students showed agency in creating and curating multiple and flexible experiences of belonging, in different times and spaces. Belonging was shown to include multiple sensual, affective, and material dimensions.

As a result, while belonging still holds significant value as a concept for informing contemporary theory-practice in higher education; this concept needs to be handled with care. Given recent overuse, there is a real danger belonging will simply be reduced to a buzzword that functions as a shorthand for simplistic ideas that do not resonate with the granular lived experiences of contemporary students. Our research showed belonging to be a concept that was flexible, situated, multiple, evolving, purposeful, experienced in both micro practices and as a sense of something larger. We suggest that educators consider how belonging operates as a nuanced and complex concept: as 'a matter of concern' (Latour 2004) as opposed to a 'matter of fact.' In such a framing, belonging needs to be considered as something we are concerned, curious and care about, as opposed to something that can be easily fixed, fostered or measured.

References

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