

The drive to 'belong': How do students narrate and visualise belonging within the academy?

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

Globally, the early departure of students from university is an enduring problem, this is particularly the case for learners from more diverse backgrounds (Sokolova, 2024). Undoubtedly, learners depart university for a myriad of reasons but increasingly the need to develop a 'sense of belonging' with an institution is touted as the key ingredient to both retention and academic success. Our research questions this assumption by critically interrogating the ways in which belonging is enacted at an individual lived level. Drawing on data from both the UK and Australia, this presentation will highlight the diffuse ways that students consider belonging and offers alternative perspectives of this state informed by compassion, collegiality, and care within higher education settings.

Full paper

Whilst we know that the concept of belonging is both complex and relational, the increasing calls to measure and assess students' belonging within university settings contradicts this understanding. Indeed, the drive to foster belonging across diverse student cohorts is now exhorted as the key ingredient to student retention and academic success (see for example: Morgan, 2024). This focus on belonging is a global phenomenon; accompanied by measurements, scales and tools designed to provide universities with the data to evidence this illusive sense of belongingness. However, as researchers, we question how belonging is understood and translated in these contexts. Drawing on student narratives and video blogs (vlogs), we provide alternative perspectives on belonging informed by the ways this state was embodied through the actions, behaviours and artefacts of students themselves. These deep and reflective understandings have informed scholarly publications (Ajjawi, Gravett, & O Shea, 2023; Gravett, Ajjawi, & O Shea, 2025) and a series of resources designed to provoke alternative belonging perspectives.

The initial project was funded by the SRHE (Gravett, Ajjawi, & O' Shea, 2021) and was framed by the following research questions:

- What assemblages of belonging do students create?
- In what ways did the boundaries of belonging shift as a result of the shift to online learning during Covid-19?
- What do students' day-to-day material interactions with the digital university look like?
- How do students actively create belonging when learning in hybrid mode?

Using a video blogging method (or vlogging) at two institutions, the University of Surrey located in the UK and Deakin University in Australia, participants were asked to produce a short vlog under the broad theme of belonging and, offered the opportunity to participate in a semi-structured interview. A total of 30 undergraduate students (15 in each institution) agreed to participate in the study; 22 producing vlogs and 19 engaging in interviews, with some learners doing both (interview and vlog). All vlogs and interviews were then transcribed with data imported into NVivo12, each of the co-researchers read the transcripts independently and then met on two occasions to discuss and compare initial insights. The next stage involved inductive line by line coding, informed by preliminary readings and discussion. A process of reflexive thematic analysis was adopted (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The visual data was then analysed using a close sociomaterial reading to enable insight into the 'ordinary' of these students' lives. We were also attentive to the material content of the video data: what is literally on show and how it is shown (Rose, 2014).

The second part of the study was funded by an ESRC Impact Acceleration Grant from the University of Surrey. This support enabled the creation of a website (see: <https://www.belongingtouniversity.co.uk/>) and a series of pedagogical resources (including conversation cards) designed to encourage reflection and discussion related to the nature of belonging. The website and resources are popular, with almost 1000 views annually, and feedback about the resources' critical value and utility for educators and students in terms of fostering visibility and understanding of the topic.

Given the diversity of both learners and the spaces in which they learn, interrogating the nature of belonging is urgently needed if we are to understand diversity and inclusivity in education in more meaningful ways. This presentation will initially highlight the shades and modulations of how belonging is understood and depict the multiple, micro, and meta belongings students experience, which disrupt dominant discourses of simplicity and uniformity. These reflections on belonging will facilitate discussion about how belonging could better reflect the unique and complex contexts of HE students who are from under-represented groups. Utilising *conversation cards*, attendees will be challenged to reflect and question their own understandings of belonging. A key facet of this discussion will be the need to consider what non-belonging might look like and question the value of a 'belonging self'. Our research suggests that belonging and non-belonging really do matter to students, but more attention is needed to unpack this complex area in compassionate ways that reflect the diversity of our student populations.