

Rethinking Belonging and the Student Experience

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The discourse of 'belonging' is closely linked to student retention in the UK. Thomas states: 'a sense of belonging is considered critical to both retention and success' (2012:1) and that 'belonging' is 'closely aligned with the concepts of academic and social engagement' (ibid:12). This approach is influenced by Tinto's interactionist theory of student departure (1975) which highlights integration and congruency as conditions of student persistence. This paper argues that the discourse of 'belonging' is problematic in the context of a diverse higher education (HE) student population and in particular, for part-time, mature undergraduates whose multiple identities, cross-cut by age, gender, race and class, position them on the periphery, restricting access to means of belonging prioritised in dominant institutional discourses.

This paper emerges from doctoral research which aims to develop and enhance theoretical understandings and practical and policy implications of the impact of English universities' retention strategies on part-time, mature undergraduates. The research is a response to a dearth of literature addressing the impact of institutional retention strategies in HE in general, but particularly in relation to part-time, mature undergraduates. The research adopts an interpretive sensemaking (Welch *et al*, 2011) approach to a multiple case study involving four English universities offering face-to-face, part-time, first degree provision.

The paper seeks to theorise belonging in a way which captures the particularities of part-time, mature studentship. It does so through a 'borderland analysis' (Abes, 2009, 2012) requiring the researcher to 'straddle multiple theories using ideas from each to portray a more complete picture of identity...a new theoretical space' (Abes, 2012:190). Abes suggests that, since all theoretical perspectives are incomplete, 'to realize the complexity of student development it is important to use multiple theoretical perspectives in conjunction with one another, even when they contradict' (ibid). I argue that a borderland analysis combining Bourdieu's theoretical framework with Brah's conceptualising of 'diaspora' (1996) and Massey's approach to space and a progressive sense of place (1993, 1994, 2005) both interrogates 'belonging' through ideas of power, identity and space/place and 'rethinks' belonging in relation to part-time, mature undergraduates and retention.

Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' (1977, 1990) of habitus, capital and field, theorise belonging as a relational concept, a practice and product of the relations of power embedded in the field of HE, constructed around the privileged identities of the 'authentic' student: young, full-time, residential. When 'habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a "fish in water": it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:127). The habitus of young middle-class people predisposes them to 'belong' in HE and 'dominant discourses of the authentic "student" often present the first-year higher education entrant as a school-leaver with little or no familial responsibilities' (Read *et al*, 2003:261). What of those who do not fit this model? The concept of belonging is problematised by 'practices of boundary making and inhabitation which signal that a particular collection of people, practices, performances, ideas are meant to be in a place' (Mee and Wright, 2009:772).

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Part-time students in English HE are not easily classified. They are 'defined as much by what they are not: full-time young, as by the diverse attributes of the cohort as a whole' (Callender, 2013). Although a Bourdieusian analysis is effective in portraying the differential positioning of student populations within the stratified field of HE, I argue it is overly mechanistic to adequately theorise the lived experiences of part-time, mature undergraduates and the complexity of inhabiting marginal space.

Brah's concepts of diaspora and diaspora space (1996), build upon the relationship between individual and environment suggested by Bourdieu's habitus and constitute the second element of this borderland analysis. Brah's diaspora is not a descriptive category of historical experience, but 'an interpretive frame for analysing the economic, political and cultural modalities of historically specific forms of migrancy' (Brah, 1996:15). This frees the concept from 'particular maps and histories' (Clifford, 1994:303) to do the work of mapping contested territories and trajectories of privilege and disadvantage in social contexts. While sensitive to diaspora's emergence from contexts of migrancy and post-colonial experience, I argue it resonates with the marginalisation of part-time, mature undergraduates in HE. Diaspora asks 'not simply who travels, but when, how and under what circumstances?' (Brah, 1996:179) while diaspora space is inhabited both by those who have migrated and those who claim legitimate belonging. Within diaspora spaces 'regimes of power operate to differentiate one group from another; to represent them as similar or different; to include or exclude them from constructions of ... the body politic' (ibid:180). Diaspora's subtexts of 'home' and 'displacement' interrogate the complexity of belonging in a contested space, asking 'what is the difference between feeling at home and staking a claim to a place as one's own?' (ibid:190).

The third element of this borderland analysis strengthens the spatial dimensions of belonging still further. While power is at the centre of Brah's 'diaspora', for Massey, space itself is the product of social relations shaped by power. Space is inherently temporal, 'space-time' (1993, 1995, 2005) is 'always under construction...never finished, never closed' (2005:9). Place is a 'particular moment' in wider networks of social relations. Universities are 'extroverted' places, reflecting the hierarchies, discourses and practices of the HE sector; 'activity spaces ... within which there is a geography of power' (ibid:55). Massey describes place, which like diaspora space, is 'a meeting up of histories' (2005:59) as 'progressive'; unfixed, contested and multiple, offering the potential for negotiation and re-negotiation of belonging.

In summary, this borderland analysis offers a rethinking of universal statements of belonging in HE. It shows belonging to be a continually renegotiated process and HE and universities as diverse, unfixed spaces/places with potential for multiple versions of belonging, some more powerful than others. Diversity and complexity are counter arguments to universal statements of belonging and if it is to fully meet the needs of a diverse student population, institutional strategy and practice must recognise multiple practices of belonging.

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