

Critical constellations: Thinking about belonging from practitioner perspectives

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This article takes the form of a conceptual account of belonging through reflection, theory, and suggestions for practice. It engages with philosophical, political, and sociological accounts of belonging, looking at how language has been used to denote experiences of belonging, and what these expressions might convey for educators and their learners. It suggests that, given the current drive to encourage and celebrate belonging in education, careful attention needs to be given to the operationalisation of belonging into discourses which are homogenised and strategic. The metaphor of a constellation of practices to envisage the different ways in which people might belong and not-belong to a university is offered as an alternative mode of thinking. For foundation year practitioners - people who value working in less traditional, often othered, learning spaces within larger institutions - more imaginative considerations of belonging are presented as being tactically significant for our learners, and for ourselves.

Introduction

This piece invites critical thinking about belonging from the perspective of practitioners working within HE. The term practitioner is used democratically to account for the wide range of educational work undertaken within university settings. Thinking about what connects practitioners to their students, their colleagues, and their institutions, contributes to broader questions of what it might mean to belong to a university. Specifically, looking at the experiences of practitioners working with learners whose trajectory into university is not always straightforward could offer a significant vantage point on belonging which is seen from the thresholds, the boundary places of learning. This line of enquiry contributes to emerging questions within belonging scholarship which point out that if educators want to cultivate a sense of belonging for their learners, then it is useful to reflect on what this might mean for those of us teaching and working within universities (Gravett et al., 2024; Morieson et al., 2013).

This article aims to challenge some of the notions of belonging instrumentalised within HE which often place belonging within language denoting personal or academic success (Masika and Jones, 2016; Thomas, 2012). I offer ways to destabilise dominant

and simplistic narratives of belonging at university through three inter-related approaches. Initially, I reflect on my own working practices as an FE and HE practitioner and the issues of belonging and not-belonging which this raises. Secondly, I provide examples of how belonging has been theorised from multi-disciplinary literature, using this to consider its position within HE-focused research. Finally, I share my own developing perspective of belonging as constellation of past, present, and potential clusters of practice. Picturing belonging as a constellated practice views how those working in universities navigate and connect with, but also disconnect from learning places, spaces, and communities. I suggest that the metaphor of a constellation of belonging generates original conceptual scope, whilst also building on an existing body of work alert to the fluidity of institutional belongings (Filstad et al., 2019; Gravett et al., 2024). I conclude with some examples of how thinking critically about belonging, through recognising the ambiguities of the concept and questioning some of the boundary issues implicit within it, could bring about a more 'educated hope' (Giroux, 2011, p.122) of the term from a practitioner perspective.

Personal starting points

This article builds on the thinking shared in my presentation on the 'Constellations of Belonging' given at the 2024 Foundation Year Network Annual Conference, and a first year of doctoral study. Therefore, the foundations for this paper come from having worked with learners in both further and higher education, rather than a sole focus of teaching on a foundation year programme. My approach to belonging is positioned from a background working in general further education colleges for most of my teaching career to date. In his recent editorial, Ingram expresses the value of interaction and scholarship within the foundation year network from 'those who teach or provide student support in other contexts' (Ingram, 2024, p.3) and it is from position that this piece is conceived.

Recently, having moved to a university where I teach on foundation, undergraduate, and postgraduate education courses, I have had the opportunity to reflect on being part of teams dedicated to providing alternative, often second, chances into non-compulsory education. I am interested in how people working within less traditionally prestigious spaces of learning express their sense of belonging, or not-belonging, to their institutions. In this article therefore, belonging is seen as a means to unpack what can be deeply held connections to a place of work, and how this may be configured in contradictory and complex relationships between individual practitioners, smaller subject or pathway teams, and the larger mechanisms of an organisation. Belonging in HE is approached here not in a definitive way but rather as a 'way in', heuristically, to analyse moments of consonance but also the disconnections which are constantly at play within the different stratifications of places of learning.

The growth (and narrowing) of belonging

Considering what it means for humans to have a sense of belonging within society has been a dominant trend within late-twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship spanning broad psychological, philosophical, and sociological disciplines (Bell, 1999). In this section I sketch out some of the broader theoretical accounts of belonging, considering how these have been taken up within educational, specifically HE-focused, research.

A focus on belonging opens up the opportunity to explore who we are in relation to other people, to conventions, and to our physical surroundings in a modern world which is constantly in flux (May, 2013). Belonging is rarely conveyed as one single thing; instead it is frequently presented as a tripartite of qualities, such as Miller's anthropological sketching of the three 'senses' of belonging (Miller, 2003, p.217), or Wenger's modes of engagement, imagination and alignment (Wenger, 2000). Whilst iterations of belonging often share starting commonalities, such as a sense of ease or fitting in, they also reflect a lack of overall agreement. The malleability of the term, which enables it to be fitted to both particular and wide-ranging purpose, is important to recognise. As Reay et al. (2010, p.107) argue, 'a sense of belonging' can often only be 'partially absorb[ed]'. Indeed, it is the very diverse nature of belonging scholarship which informs Allen's integrative framework on the 'competencies, opportunities, motivations and perceptions' of belonging (Allen et al., 2021, p.92). Here, the authors view the enhancement of both personal and group belonging as being of explicit moral benefit for a healthy society, arguing that not-belonging reduces people's mental and physical wellbeing and life expectancy.

When belonging is viewed in terms of its all-encompassing potential, it is perhaps not surprising that it has become a frequent focus of interest within educational research. Yet whilst the scope of belonging is applicable in many contexts for both learners and educators, within HE its uses have been more frequently concentrated on how student belonging can be linked to course completion and continuation rates (Thomas, 2012). It is useful to recognise that implicit within a 'What Works?' (Thomas, 2012, p.4) agenda is a view of belonging as inherently positive and necessary to cultivate (Gravett et al., 2024). This approach to belonging is rooted in Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of human needs and draws on Baumeister and Leary's seminal definition of belonging as a 'fundamental human motivation' (1995, p.497). In this context, belonging is seen as both a biological and social need. This means that belonging is increasingly valued both as a predictor of university success and as something that can be measured and improved upon (Meehan and Howells, 2019; Ahn and Davies, 2020; Winstone et al., 2022). Arguably, this approach carries the potential to identify learners who may feel isolated, or who have barriers that practitioners at universities can help to overcome. However, within examples of research looking at the sense of belonging HE learners express, the term is often coupled with other watchwords such as 'belonging and engagement for student retention and success' (Masika and Jones, 2016, p.139) and 'belonging, personal development and academic success' (Morieson et al., 2013, p.90).

Considering this direction of focus, I suggest it is important to remain alert to the conflation of encouraging a discussion of the values of belonging with *belonging as a value* in itself. Whilst the former expresses the potential for multiple perspectives on how people might differently value belonging, simply seeking to increase belonging risks flattening the concept. Belonging has become a benefit-driven term for universities, just as it is in the corporate workplace: the new ‘driver for better business results’ (Herbert, 2022). When belonging is operationalised as a value, it is viewed through a ‘deficit’ lens (Meehan and Howells, 2019, p.1376). It is seen as something which individuals will be more – or less – successful in achieving. Arguably, this outlook results in belonging becoming something which is *done* to learners as part of a menu of induction and through-year activities, sign-posted through displays and events, and measured through surveys and polls. Such approaches are clearly intended to be welcoming for learners. Yet they also reflect some of the ways in which belonging activities may be seen as another panacea for improvement within university performance indicators, viewing belonging as a problem to be ‘fixed’ (Gravett et al., 2024).

Expressions of belonging

In a countermove to some of the ways in which belonging has been approached through the metrics of success, I suggest that a practitioner view of the work that they do with learners could be better situated within a broader, multidisciplinary body of work which argues that belonging is always something that is ‘partial, fragmented, or segmented’ (Fridlund, 2014, p.267). Acknowledging the range of different belonging experiences is one way to unpack more instrumental assumptions of the concept from a practitioner perspective. Engaging with theoretical accounts of belonging illuminates the ways in which writers have approached something that is intangible, constraining, and enabling, all at the same time. This kind of exploration into the scope of belonging is both personally and professionally useful: in the sense that this might help to navigate the pre-existing multi-dimensional ‘thickness’ (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2013, p.6) of the term, alongside constructing a working and tentative appreciation of belonging from a practitioner lens.

Whilst the range of expressions used to depict belonging is creatively rich, there are repeated resonances within them. As Antonsich (2010) points out, belonging is frequently referred to through the trope of the home. Feeling ‘at home’ (Antonsich, 2010, p.646) does not necessarily indicate an exact, physical space, but rather is used to convey a notion of fellowship and comfort within one’s surroundings. hooks lyrically conveys this as ‘my place in this world, a sense of homecoming, a sense of being wedded to a place’ (hooks, 2009, p.2). This territorial aspect of belonging is taken up by Yuval-Davies, who distinguishes between ‘belonging and the politics of belonging’ (2006, p. 197). Here, Yuval-Davies draws on Benedict Anderson’s understanding of national belonging being as one of ‘imagined communities’ (1983, p.x) to express how belonging will always be constructed through assumptions of shared experiences and values. The politics of belonging ‘is all about potentially meeting other people and

deciding whether they stand inside or outside the imaginary boundary line ... whether they are “us” or “them” (Yuval-Davies, 2006, p.204). Therefore, an explicitly sociopolitical perspective on belonging draws attention to the complementary implications contained within the term: for everyone who belongs, there will be a someone who does not. In a similar vein, Crowley (1999) compares belonging to the experience of queueing up to get into a nightclub, whilst Probyn (1996, p.13) troubles the affective dimension of belonging further through pointing out the morphology of the word: the ‘longing in belonging.’

I suggest that the language deployed to theorise belonging can be categorised across two loose semantic fields. Firstly, it can be presented as something which is grounded, rooted, even ontologically embedded within us through the notion of a place where we authentically dwell and ‘find ourselves along with other persons and things’ (Malpas, 2006, p.28). Here the idea of having roots is treated in a topological sense – the origins of this kind of thinking about belonging are found in the phenomenological philosophy of Heidegger (1971). Whilst there is not the space here for a full account of Heidegger’s contribution to the experience of place, attributing belonging **only** to the attachments of home (or a homeland) carries negative, as well as positive, potential. There are both past and recent examples which illustrate some of the detrimental consequences of demarcating individuals or communities to solely distinctive places and traditions (Relph, 2015). From a foundation year perspective there could also be a danger in inadvertently fixing both educators and learners on specific university pathways in terms of always being identified from that position.

Secondly, belonging tends to be viewed as a process, a relational network such as a ‘web’ (McClure and Brown, 2008, p.7), or through the model of a rhizome (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016, p.236). Belonging is seen from this perspective as something which is active, which ebbs and flows, or ‘flickers’ as Gravett et al. express it (2024, p.1971). Within this second category, Gravett’s work is particularly pivotal in promoting more transient and problematising constructions of belonging within HE. Although these linguistic fields represent a spectrum rather than distinct binaries, the representation of belonging as a process – whilst remaining alert to narratives of straightforward progress – is perhaps a more useful and potent way to consider expressions of belonging within a university.

Belonging as a process of critical constellations

In this section, I offer a consideration of belonging as a process which is non-linear and continually evolving using the metaphor of a constellation. The term constellations to represent belonging has been used both generally to indicate ‘social boundedness’ (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2013, p.2) and more specifically in terms of a ‘stellar’ simile by Gherardi and Nicolini in their research on workplace ‘alignments’ (2002, p.419). I am interested in how Gherardi and Nicolini’s mode of thinking raises questions of belonging which could enrich practitioner understandings of the term. The use of constellations to consider the range of alignments experienced by those learning and teaching in universities accounts for both belonging and not belonging, as well as the

spaces in between these two senses. Imagining belonging through different constellations of practice accounts for the connections and disconnections often experienced on an everyday basis working and moving around large institutions with groups of learners. As Gherardi and Nicolini (2002, p.420) argue,

comparing among different perspectives does not necessarily involve the merging of diversity into some sort of synthesis – harmonizing individual voices and instruments into consonance or unison – but rather contemplation of the harmonies and dissonance, consonance and cacophony, that may coexist within the same performance.

Conceptualising an overview of belonging through the interplay of different constellations illustrates the phenomenon as a multi-dimensional and refracted process. It opens up belonging as a dynamic means to consider past, present, and future connections of a person's life course that can shine intensely, but might also combust, gradually fade away, or be outside of their grasp. Relating this to the experiences of a university practitioner could focus on a particular constellation of professional belonging, without neglecting an appreciation of the ways in which this will intersect with other configurations of the self which are continually evolving. The ways in which we connect with our learners will inevitably be experienced in different ways according to the everyday, micro-level tensions of teaching, but will also encompass broader concerns around the value of our labour (in both abstract and actual terms) within the wider world of the university. Thinking about belonging in this way, therefore, problematises some of the limited ways the word is contained within organisational strategy and policy. To conclude, I now sketch three theoretical constellations of belonging to invite professional reflection and praxis.

Constellation one: belonging as infinitely complex

In contrast to a value-based conceptualisation of belonging, an acceptance of the term as a 'semantically complex notion' (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016, p.234) is something that could be more tactically valuable for people working in HE. This offers an alternative approach to accounts of belonging which seek to locate and stabilise the concept through activities in which belonging is rated and coded. Instead, acknowledging the lack of consensus on how belonging should be defined can be viewed as a part of its rhetorical strength rather than a weakness. Rather than asking our learners if they feel like they belong we might instead begin by acknowledging that belonging is something that can often be 'taken for granted' (Antonsich, 2010, p.644) and that this, implicitly, creates a problematic discourse for those who do not experience belonging in this way. Rather than viewing belonging as some 'thing' to attain, we could situate thinking about belonging within intersecting categories of the place, language, culture, and symbols of a university. This would involve recognising that belonging might be temporally abrupt rather than an experience which becomes more strongly defined over time. Looking at belonging over the course of a foundation year from a multidimensional lens could enable a perspective which weaves across individual, interpersonal, and structural spheres which might be peripatetic or even 'accidental' as Becker has advocated (Becker, 2021, p.25).

Constellation two: the iterations of belonging and identity

The relationship between belonging and self is a second constellation which could contribute insights into the ongoing construction of learner identity at university. It is useful to consider how some theorists present belonging as moving beyond the 'categorical concept(s)' of identity (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2013, p.6). Therefore, alongside activities which encourage students to positively identify as foundation year learners, conceptualisations of belonging could ask different questions of learners' experiences of acceptance and sense of connection to their university:

...belonging actually entails not only issues about attributions and claims (as does identity) but also allows more clearly questions about the actual spaces and places to which people are accepted as members or feel that they are members.

(Anthias, 2013, p.7)

This view of belonging poses questions to educators working within HE institutions which can be both welcoming and alienating at the same time. Personally, it encourages some tougher thinking about what belonging means for my learners in terms of their day-to-day experiences. It prompts me to remember that on any given working day I will have an oscillating experience of moving between classrooms and meeting rooms and different groups of people where my own sense of connectivity will inevitably both wax and wane. Anthias is careful to point out that her argument is not to position belonging above identity, but to consider the nuanced relationship between them. That noted, whilst identity offers categorisations, belonging instead envisions how we are constantly in a process of tacitly 're-shaping' ourselves within our social world (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2013, p.4). The extent to which this re-shaping is chosen by learners or exerted upon them through the external structures of a university is a dynamic worth grappling with in future research.

Constellation three: the imaginary tactics of belonging

The third constellation offered here suggests that reflection and collaboration around experiences of belonging could be approached as a tactic of everyday resistance. This constellation draws on Certeau's notion of belonging as being a 'process of transformation of a place' (Fenster, 2005, p.243) and links with Gravett et al.'s (2024, p.1974) argument that 'belonging is bound up and created via imaginaries.' In a similar way to Gravett's attention on the 'micro-moments' (2024, p.1981) of belonging, for Certeau belonging is configured through accumulative and changing everyday experiences. Certeau is interested in how belonging takes place through personal activities such as walking, reading, or cooking, in which people enact their own responses and movement within spaces to counter the more official, standardised narratives of society. He proposes that it is through such everyday 'tactics' that it is possible to go beyond the imposed 'strategies' of dominant consumer culture, suggesting this constitutes 'the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and

makeshift creativity of groups or individuals caught in the nets of “discipline” (Certeau, 1988, p.xiv).

This approach lends itself to developing creative, more playful ways of thinking about belonging and of representing the concept. For some of my own learners this recently took the form of a discussion-based activity where groups were invited to consider and compare their understandings of belonging and not-belonging based on previous experiences of being at school. This then led onto considerations of how they remembered feeling when routines of belonging were imposed upon them. Interestingly, one group labelled their sense of non-belonging in terms of a level of subtle withdrawal – something a teacher would be unaware of – focusing on how they saw non-belonging as something they could inwardly switch to, tactically, if they wanted.

Conclusion

In this piece of writing, I have set out some starting points which are intended to encourage further thinking about belonging for foundation year, and other, university students in ways which are alert to the dynamics at play within the concept. As May (2013) points out it is rare for those positioned at the top of societal hierarchies to question their sense of belonging and this has important resonances for foundation year learners and practitioners within the strata of a university. I am alert to the fact, at this stage in my own research journey, that this work comes from a theoretical and personally reflective position, and I look forward to approaching more empirical considerations of belonging in the future. For now, I invite practitioners to develop their own tactical ways of reclaiming belonging from institutionalised and strategic definitions through activities, conversations, and interactions that challenge and provoke. Coming to belonging from a place of imaginative enquiry expands the possibilities of the term, asking our learners to explore their own agency within the connections and boundaries that constitute learning at university. Obviously, this work needs to take place safely, and from a context in which we are trying to make learners feel welcomed, supported, and seen.

A final aside: during the writing of this piece, I came across the recent film *Crossing* (2024). The film tells the story of an aunt who is searching for a lost child, known as Tekla, now living another life in a foreign country. The film is about many things, including traditional boundaries and the choice of belonging to different places. In one scene the aunt is asked whether she is sure if Tekla actually wants to be found; the considered answer is ‘No, but she deserves to know someone is looking for her’ (*Crossing*, 2024). Perhaps this is a useful note to conclude with, that as practitioners we cannot assume that every learner will belong or even want to belong in the same way at university, but we do have a responsibility to open up the spaces and ways in which they feel they can.

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