

Relational Reflections: How do we nurture belonging in creative Higher Education?

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Abstract

In this paper, we reflect on a strand of educational development work that aims to foster belonging and develop compassionate pedagogies within a UK creative arts university in response to COVID-19 and global calls for racial justice. We underpin our paper with our theoretical understanding of belonging as a relational phenomenon and explore how this aligns with anti-racist policies and practices. We present our rationale for the design of podcasts as dialogic, affective and asynchronous tools for use in educational development to respond to both practical and epistemic needs. Contributions from academic and support staff on 'myth-busting belonging' are explored as we consider the implications for educators in planning and delivering the curriculum. We position the role and responsibility of institutions to design and implement equitable policies and practices, to support staff to foster belonging, as central to this work.

Keywords: Belonging; creative education; academic enhancement; awarding differentials; social justice; compassionate pedagogy

Introduction

To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin (hooks, 1994, p.13)

In this paper, we reflect on the educational development work that forms part of the institutional enhancement approach at University of the Arts London (UAL). The Academic Enhancement Model (AEM) consists of three educational development offerings: Decolonising Pedagogy and Curriculum; Enhancing Assessment for Equity; and, the focus of this paper, Fostering Belonging & Compassionate Pedagogy. Grounded in developing equitable learning environments and anti-racist teaching practices, the enhancement programme supports the elimination of ethnicity awarding differentials i.e. the percentage point disparity that persists between home Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic¹ students and home White students in gaining a first or upper second-class degree (Bhopal, 2019).

In our role as staff-facing educational developers and the co-leads of the Fostering Belonging & Compassionate Pedagogy strand, we work with course teams to co-produce teaching and learning strategies and compassionate pedagogies that nurture student belonging within creative disciplinary contexts. We define belonging as a social and relational construct rooted in human connection. In this article we draw together, and critically reflect upon, the experiences of thirteen course teams across the six UAL Colleges (Camberwell College of Arts, Central Saint Martins, Chelsea College of Arts, London College of Communication, London College of Fashion, Wimbledon College of Arts). We reflect upon our conversations with academics and technicians and their experiences of fostering student's sense of belonging

during the past year of online and blended teaching in response to the pandemic. We have facilitated 23 synchronous workshops around the themes of 'Belonging Online', 'Debiasing', 'Microaffirmations' and 'Courageous Conversations' (Hill et al., 2020) and have curated a range of multi-media resources, including our own series of podcasts, that are provided for staff to engage with asynchronously.

We follow a constructive change approach (Lueddeke, 1999) and support course teams to reflect on teaching interactions (both staff-to-student and student-to-student) in relation to bias, racism, oppression and silencing (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; NUS/UUK, 2019). Launching in August 2020, our work came about at a critical moment in Higher Education; as the Black Lives Matter Movement globally amplified calls for racial justice in the wake of George Floyd's murder, and institutions were simultaneously in the turmoil of navigating COVID-19. When student and staff experiences of human connection changed so dramatically in our educational environments, creating a sense of belonging became of critical importance (Strayhorn, 2020). The Fostering Belonging & Compassionate Pedagogy strand was designed to establish space for academic staff to respond to these shifting contexts and to engage in a process of collaborative learning. We prioritise the relational aspects of dialogue and '*the role that discussions play in making meaning and understanding...*' (Hill et al., unpublished, p.11). As educational developers, we take a holistic approach to our work to '*embrace the whole person, the ontologies, epistemologies, and emotions, intellectual and personal, of the academics that we support, serve, and develop*' (Sutherland, 2018, p.262).

Despite the significance of belonging, several sources indicate that issues of belonging persist at UAL particularly for students of colour. Comments and experiences captured within the NSS/USS open comments, @UALTruths, Decolonising The Arts Curriculum Zines (Jethnani et al., 2018; 2020), UAL Creative Mindsets and UAL Student Voices, all speak to student feelings of

isolation, loneliness, not 'fitting in', being an outsider, and being stereotyped. In our paper we draw upon feedback and contributions that have been shared on open-source platforms and publications to reflect on the ways in which we can create a sense of belonging within creative higher education. We contribute to the literature by offering a detailed account of key learnings and recommendations for future practice. We begin by discussing our theoretical approach to student sense of belonging in Higher Education before we introduce our podcasts as a catalyst for dialogue. We follow this by myth-busting common misconceptions about belonging in higher education, ahead of offering a set of recommendations for sector-wide policy and practice.

Sense of belonging in Higher Education

Sense of belonging is a powerful affective state that drives human behaviour (Strayhorn, 2019). Since the 1990s, scholars have considered belonging to play an instrumental role in student learning and this is underpinned by a compelling evidence base that relates belonging to student success (e.g. Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000). Correlations between belonging and retention (Kane et al, 2014), engagement (Thomas, 2012) attainment and emotional wellbeing (Strayhorn, 2008a) are well documented. In UK Higher Education, belonging became a prominent topic following the publication of Liz Thomas' (2012) HEFCE funded '*What Works? Student Retention and Success Programme*' report. The report found that feelings of isolation and not 'fitting in' (i.e. unbelonging) were the most common reasons for students to consider withdrawal from undergraduate study. This was highly influential in changing sector discourse and positioning 'a culture of belonging' as an institutional obligation and priority (Thomas, 2017).

Whilst belonging is increasingly considered of importance, its complexity and ambiguous nature has contributed to a lack of agreement on how it can be defined. For the purpose of our educational development work, we have taken a predominantly psychological stance on the phenomenon, viewing

sense of belonging as an affective concept and basic human need (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Drawing on Strayhorn (2019) and Goodenow (1993), we define the phenomenon as *'students' feelings of being valued, respected, supported, included, and that they matter by teachers and peers, so that they feel part of the university learning community'* (Hill et al., 2020, p.4). We understand belonging as a transitory concept that can be lost and found on a student's journey (Cureton and Gravestock, 2019), and one which is at higher risk during moments of vulnerability and change. As belonging exists at different levels within Higher Education - such as to the university, to the course, and to the class - it is possible to feel both belonging and unbelonging simultaneously.

Sector research demonstrates the significance of belonging - as a psycho-social identity factor – that contributes to the inequitable experiences of students who are racialised and who already experience the painful effects of deficit models and stereotypes reinforced by the wider context of systemic, structural and individual racism (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; Lammy, 2017). Sense of belonging is experienced unequally. As Vanessa May states (2013, p.154) *'who can achieve belonging and where is always tied to issues of power and inequality [within society]'*. Due to the intersections of identities no student will experience belonging in the same way (Cureton and Gravestock, 2019). Belonging is an inherently individual experience (Riley, 2018) and, as there is not a 'one-size fits all' intervention to create a sense of belonging. In this work we collaborate with course teams as they design pedagogic approaches within their individual disciplinary contexts. Academic staff explore the complexity of belonging by connecting to conceptual ideas within the relational and psycho-social dimensions of teaching and then make changes to both individual and collective practices.

Central to our strand is the notion of belonging as social and relational (e.g. Thomas, 2019; May, 2013), as *'a feeling that flows from human connection'*

(Strayhorn, 2020). As such, our work with colleagues emphasizes how belonging can be nurtured through relational pedagogy involving meaningful dialogue with both staff and peers (Gravett and Winstone, 2020). Our educational development work aims to support staff agency in influencing this affective state *throughout* students' studies by maintaining supportive emotional learning climates that value students and encourage them to bring their whole selves to their learning. We draw on John A. Powell's stance of belonging as enabling students to be *'fully human'*, which *'entails being respected at a basic level that includes the right to both co-create and make demands upon society'* (Powell, 2019, p.37). By seeing everyone for *who they are* and co-creating learning experiences together, we believe we can signal to students that they matter (Strayhorn, 2019).

We turn to compassionate pedagogy as a form of praxis that offers a socially just approach to building such relationships. The philosophical and spiritual roots of compassionate pedagogy derive from diverse historical and cultural perspectives and offer a lens to reflect on how we learn, teach and build social relations. We take Paul Gilbert's (2005) definition of compassion as the *'noticing of distress and/or disadvantage to self or others, and a commitment to take action to reduce it'* (p.189). In essence, compassionate pedagogy concerns judgement and focuses on transformative action as it seeks *'to make a concrete difference in sufferer's lives'* (Zemblyas, 2013, p.515). Therefore, we encourage educators to nurture belonging by creating conditions that acknowledge structural oppression and reduce their impact on students. This compassionate approach to cultures of belonging through human connection, has likeness to bell hooks's (1994) concept of teaching as caring for the soul of students and Paulo Friere's (1970) concept of a pedagogy of love. By entering into a *'loving dialogue'*, a conscious ethical appraisal of who and what is valued can engender a *'liberating humanization'* (Schoder, 2010, p.80). This ethical appraisal requires continual reflection and

action which we endeavor to harness through our collaboration with colleagues.

The role of podcasts, listening and dialogue in fostering belonging

The Fostering Belonging and Compassionate Pedagogy strand of educational enhancement work consists of six interconnected workshops that provide multi-dimensional perspectives to the theme of belonging. Course teams are invited to attend two workshops (Belonging Online and De-biasing our Course) before picking a third that addresses course needs identified by the staff: Whiteness; Courageous Conversations; Micro-affirmations and, for leadership, Creating the Conditions for Compassion (Hill et al., 2020). Prior to attending the initial workshop, staff are asked to listen to two podcasts (asynchronously) which we (the authors) produced in collaboration with Digital Resource Developer: Attainment, Gemma Riggs. The podcasts explore the topics of Belonging in Higher Education (Bunting et al., 2020a) and Belonging in Online Learning Environments (Bunting et al., 2020b) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and move to digital modes of teaching and learning. In the podcasts, we curate a collection of interviews with education professionals from across the globe as well as UAL staff and students with contributions from Jennifer Williams-Baffoe, Dr Neil Carrant, Hansika Jethnani, Jess Moody, Dr Gurnam Singh, Dr Bonnie Stewart, Professor Terrell Strayhorn, Professor Liz Thomas and David White.

The design and use of the podcasts to develop a culture of belonging was informed by sector literature on educational development, change management, critical and digital pedagogies and arts-based research methods. We identified 4 benefits that informed our rationale as we aimed for the podcasts to be dialogic, asynchronous, affective and to address epistemic and procedural needs. Below we expand each of these areas.

1. Dialogic

From a critical pedagogy lens, dialogue is key to developing transformative relationships. Freire roots dialogue within horizontal power structures between student and educator to break *'with the vertical patterns characteristic of banking education'* (Freire, 1970, p.53) and to align problem-posing education with the quest for social justice. The podcasts provide a polyvocal dialogue, which continues beyond the podcast itself as listeners explore the relationships and construct their own meaning for their teaching and learning practice. Jesse Stommel states that *'Critical pedagogy cannot be defined by a single voice, but rather must gather a diversity of voices'* (Stommel, 2014) and this decentering of authority can challenge dominant pedagogical beliefs and practices to achieve small social justice transformations (Tate, 2019).

2. Asynchronous

In the design of Fostering Belonging and Compassionate Pedagogy we wanted to respond to the challenges staff faced with workload pressure were influenced by Maha Bali's and Bard Meier's thinking that *'synchronous learning is biased'* as it ignores difference in time zones, can be culturally unaware, is problematic for those with families, is elitist when involving audio-visuals and relies on linguistic capital (Bali and Meier, 2014). Podcasting as asynchronous learning is convenient and the option of reviewing sessions can enhance learning (Jalali et al., 2011). As the pandemic and subsequent global shift to online learning focused institutional attention towards the affordances and challenges of digital pedagogies, compelling research and personal experiences strengthened our desire for asynchronous approaches to be compassionate and consider those who have caring responsibilities, who are sick, who share technology and workspace during the pandemic and beyond (Harris et al., 2020).

3. Affective

Corradi Fiumara reminds us that, *'If we were apprentices of listening rather than masters of discourse, we might, perhaps, promote a different sort of co-existence'* (Fiumara, 1990, p. 57). We wanted to build on the importance of 'listening', as an ethical, arts-based method and also a place for transformation and change (Rogers, 1980). We wanted to challenge dominant, logo-centric approaches and acknowledge that the act of embodied listening provoked an affective response from voice, accent, tone, timbre, atmosphere and that this opened space to further reflect on values of compassion and empathy. The emotional response gained from auditory and arts-based methods *'have the ability to change our minds—inspiring us to take on different perspectives and to reimagine our worlds'* (Nossel, 2016, p.103).

4. Addressing epistemic and procedural needs

Deneen and Boud's (2014) study on epistemic, procedural and pragmatic resistance highlighted the different needs that academic staff bring with them to educational development. Some want a more practical approach and others a more theoretical exploration of the rationale, revealing tension between 'how do I do this?' and 'why am I doing this?' In our podcasts we consider both of these needs. This speaks to the relationship between the *'procedures and lived realities'* that McArthur explores in her work on assessment for social justice (ibid, 2018, p.4).

Myth Busting Belonging: Reflections from Academic and Support Staff

In this section of the paper, we draw on contributions by staff across the institution to explore what we term 'myths' around nurturing belonging in creative arts higher education. These tacit assumptions and often unexamined normative practices are key sites for transformation, particularly from an

educational development perspective, as they offer insight into where and how change to pedagogy might be most impactful. The staff reflections are taken from an open-source, public Padlet page where staff from across the university can anonymously write their reflections after listening to the podcasts.

Rethinking Myth 1: Peer relationships are paramount for belonging.

It surprised me that the sense of belonging was more impacted by the student/staff engagement (quality of relationship) than the student/student. (Staff workshop participant)

This comment highlights a response to fostering student sense of belonging that we found prevalent amongst many staff from all job roles across the institution. The emphasis was previously on facilitating positive peer interactions rather than considering the strength of our relationships as educators with students at an individual level. Whilst peer relationships have long been established as playing a role in sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter 1997), staff-student relationships are claimed as being most influential in establishing a sense of belonging among students - particularly for Black students (Strayhorn 2018; Carrant, 2020). As the human interface between the individual and the university (Thomas, 2019), these relationships have symbolic value (Field and Morgan-Klein, 2012). In art and design, staff-student relationships are furthermore intrinsic to the emotional task of developing creative work (Finnigan and Richards, 2016).

The unexamined importance of the academic role in fostering belonging by proactively connecting with students was found to be overwhelming by some staff as they realised that the *'onus is on me'*. This represented an important shift in thinking. As one academic workshop participant reflected, *'Belonging*

is continual negotiation about who you are in the different spaces and us as academic staff we need to facilitate even more meaningful interactions and fully engage with the intersectional qualities. Pre-existing concerns about boundaries and becoming 'friendly' with students are exacerbated by the hyper-availability of being in the online context due to the pandemic. Teaching in unfamiliar digital spaces has prompted staff to reflect on how 'hard' building relationships is in virtual spaces as, for some, 'creating a really personal connection online is very difficult with current limits of technology' (Staff workshop participant).

Rethinking Myth 2: Extra-curricular social events are a priority in fostering belonging.

[I was surprised by] the complexity of the commuter student experience. Belonging [is] less likely to be a feeling that resonates for this portion of the cohort as a result of prioritising academic engagement over social and institutional non-academic opportunity engagement. (Staff workshop participant)

Connected to a focus on building peer relationships, is a problematic emphasis on arranging extra-curricular social activities. Issues associated with focusing on nurturing belonging outside of the core curriculum were surfaced in workshops, as colleagues reflected on how extra-curricular activities might not be accessible to many of the student cohort, in particular Black and minority ethnic students, due to financial, cultural or health reasons (Currant, 2020), and consequently may unintentionally deepen inequalities. A study by Broadhead at Leeds Arts University highlighted that whilst the design studio could nurture friendships through 'horizontal discourse' (Broadhead, 2018, p.18), personal responsibilities prevented many students from spending time in the studio, beyond their scheduled classes. This highlights the need for

socialisation to be designed into learning. Indeed, many theorists propose that belonging should primarily be nurtured in the classroom through relational practice such as active learning methods, facilitated groupwork and opportunities for collaboration (Maunder, 2018; Harding and Thompson, 2011; Freeman et al., 2007).

A central focus of our discussions has been to identify opportunities within the 'academic sphere' to facilitate socialisation in order to mainstream belonging activities within everyday academic activity (Thomas, 2012). Reframing belonging as a pedagogic approach, rather than an additional or add-on 'intervention', emphasises the significance of seemingly small changes to teaching practice, such as welcoming every student by name when they enter the class. This discussion also makes space for whole course teams to acknowledge the sizeable burden involved in arranging and running extra-curricular events and the emotional and physical burden of individual staff members who often give above and beyond at times to the detriment of their own wellbeing. Indeed, the ethics of delivering extra-curricular activities online or face to face has been heightened for both students and staff given the trauma of living through a global pandemic.

Rethinking Myth 3: Fostering belonging is about helping students to fit in.

[I found it surprising] that BAME students in particular may have had a negative experience before coming to university in prior education settings.
(Staff workshop participant)

Avoid making assumptions as to what a 'typical' student looks like, eg we can miss that often black and ethnic minority students have family commitments and responsibilities that others don't have. (Staff workshop participant)

Belonging is often associated with perceptions of congruence or cohesion within a group, and this aligns with interpretations of Tinto's (1987) model of becoming whereby students are 'incorporated' into academic communities. This projects an opinion onto students of what it means to belong at university and can result in pressure being placed on students to 'fit in' (Strayhorn, 2019) and gain cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) by conforming to pre-existing norms of the global North. Colleagues commented that '*the difficulty is engaging those who are of another language or culture who find it hard to fit in...*' (Staff workshop participant). This brings with it assumptions about who our students are and the value they bring.

To address this, our conversations with staff actively focus on acknowledging the multiplicity of unique experiences of our students when they enter the university, including prior educational experiences and the structural barriers they face. This has led to some colleagues connecting with, '*The idea of education as a form of healing*' (staff workshop participant) and exploring how personal and collective agency can be harnessed to initiate change. Through these dialogic and collaborative discussions, we reassess how we demonstrate who and what we value through our teaching and learning. Considering how we might co-create and co-own rules/structures with students, enables students to bring their authentic selves to their learning by flattening hierarchies and power dynamics. This is paramount if institutions are to become racially just from the offset, rather than replicate structural inequality (Naylor and Mifsud, 2020).

Belonging and Compassion: Implications for Creative Educators

To return to Deneen and Boud's (2014) exploration of epistemic and procedural needs, in this section we present practical ideas for changes to practice. These were proposed by academic and support staff as they aimed

to create a sense of belonging and apply compassionate pedagogies. We reflect upon comments made by staff prior, during and following workshops. These are generated from the Padlet pages, conversations during workshops and in the development of course team strategy documents and cover the following: listening and understanding; planning curriculum; assessment and feedback; communication and structure/agency.

Listening and understanding

Staff discussed the importance of listening attentively and facilitating teaching and learning environments where all voices can be heard and valued. This included being able to speak about, and explore, their own opinions and identities (Freeman et al., 2007). One colleague commented *'really hearing each other seems vital - listening skills are so important'* and another, *'Love the idea of being steered away from a 'neo-liberal' version of caring and putting 'soul' into our teaching.'* Course teams decided to integrate time for social chat and activities within their teaching sessions. These ranged from general discussions about music and food, to creative icebreakers (Thomas, 2012) such as 'what's in my bag' self-portrait, and activities that check-in on students' moods. The need to design spaces and frameworks to encourage students to build listening skills were seen as key factors in creating compassionate, anti-racist learning environments and discussed Gilbert's micro-skills on compassion as an example (Gilbert, 2016). As a colleague commented, *'[the] Student's interview has really highlighted the notion of empathy.'*

Planning curriculum

Course teams questioned the assumptions that the curriculum communicated: who is valued and who is not? They reflected on whether, and in what ways, students, and in particular students of colour, could see themselves represented within the curriculum (Arday et al., 2021). Within an art and design context, this expanded to the ideas and practices that are given, and

create value, within the curriculum (Orr & Shreeve, 2018). Different ways of facilitating diverse and cross-racial interactions were explored – through group work and in digital spaces – to share experiences and collaborate (Strayhorn, 2008b). Course teams noted that *'there is a greater difficulty in building presence and belonging in online environments because in a digital room you are not as embodied'*. They identified the importance of designing belonging into the curriculum before the *'pressure of teaching and delivery takes over'* (Staff workshop participant). Colleagues wanted to flatten power dynamics and create less formal teaching spaces so that learners could interact as equals. This was done by embedding play and co-creating artefacts, such as playlists to be played during teaching sessions. Co-creation was seen as a powerful tool to foster belonging, as John A. Powell (2019) explains. One team member observed, *'Never assume 'one size fits all' regarding the students' needs.'*

Assessment and feedback

Course teams wanted to support students to bring their heritage, identity and experience into their creative work and to do this by ensuring students have autonomy in choosing topics of personal interest (Currant, 2016). Assessment literacy was seen to foster belonging, particularly through peer assessment discussions and small group exercises. One colleague suggested, *'Asking students about what kind of feedback they want in the moment – using teaching as a sort of common ground between the teacher and the student.'* Collaborative approaches of introducing the terminology of assessment briefs and criteria were suggested, such as translating these into different languages and sharing constructed meanings. Compassion was spoken about often, particularly the need to be mindful and empathetic when giving assessment feedback.

Communication

Across all the discussions held with course teams, compassion featured prominently. Individuals shared how they use a kind and compassionate tone of voice in emails and in communications with students. As Strayhorn reminds us, *'...our words matter'* (Strayhorn, 2019, p.169). We discussed how language and tone can signal judgement or acceptance (Riley, 2018) and that affirming, respectful and warm interactions are perceived as positive and supportive (Hurtado and Carter, 1997; Freeman et al., 2007). We spoke of the importance of using the correct pronunciation for student names. Some staff had attended the Name Pronunciation Training Session delivered by the Language Centre at UAL. Whilst creating cohort group photos helped staff to learn names. Individuals spoke of showing their own vulnerability to be authentic and to take risks together with students to connect and form genuine relationships (Gravett and Winstone, 2020). One lecturer stated that:

Gurnam Singh's ref to 'un-belonging' evoked how important belonging and trust are. I think being prepared to share and take risks, as we are asking students to do, is one of the keys. The complexity of how we read situations, the social cues is really challenging. Critical reflection, self-reflection really helps. (Staff workshop participant)

Structure/ agency

Conversations with colleagues surfaced tensions around structure and agency. This prompted us to further explore how we conceive of compassion and belonging within the whole institution as we increasingly engage in how compassion can inform policy design, implementation and enactment. One colleague commented; *'I think such a conversation represents a big shift in the university's culture, but it's not easy to quite know what to do with it yet.'* In discussions with colleagues, structural barriers to creating belonging were recognised as staff tried to bridge the gap between a *'rhetoric of belonging'*

(Thomas, 2019, p.83) and how the institution actually works. Teaching, technicians and support staff have experienced an exponential increase in workload in order to respond to institutional demand and student need arising from COVID-19. Yet, the '*constant pressure*' to lead online and blended sessions with large cohort groups that are '*fun*', '*social*' and '*inclusive*' is not reflected in workload models and institutional policy. One colleague commented that;

Belonging online is more difficult now as the current policy of encouraging students to attend has created a divide between those attending and getting more contact time with the staff and interaction with other students, vs those who are interacting solely online and feeling isolated. (Staff workshop participant)

To create a culture of belonging, the institution needs to take responsibility in designing policies and infrastructure that can engender it (Thomas, 2012).

Conclusion

Our reflection on the enhancement strand, Fostering Belonging and Compassionate Pedagogy, offers insights into how academic staff are fostering belonging through their anti-racist teaching practice within the creative arts institution. The contributions from staff were instigated by exploring theoretical approaches to belonging by listening to the podcasts and participating in dialogic workshops. By sharing these learnings with the wider sector, we hope to develop a more nuanced comprehension of fostering belonging in creative arts higher education; gaining understanding of the plurality of compassionate, relational practices and model pedagogies that nurture sense of belonging.

The importance of ongoing reflexivity at an institutional level to challenge myths and normative assumptions around fostering belonging cannot be

underestimated. We recognise that institutional support and commitment from senior leadership to develop compassionate policies and practices for staff is essential to effect structural and cultural change, and to create racially just environments for students and staff. And, finally, we encourage the use of creative arts-based methods for educational development to remind each other that *listening* is a force for change (Rogers, 1980).

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¹ We recognise the contested use of terminology that homogenises diverse populations.