

# Ecologies of Care - The Art of Belonging in a Studio Classroom

Victoria MacLynn, MSc Art Psychotherapy, Graduate in Residence, Belfast School of Art, Ulster University

Pamela Whitaker, Lecturer Art Psychotherapy, Belfast School of Art, Ulster University

"Student wellbeing has a direct impact on whether a student decides to withdraw from university. Building student belonging and engagement can contribute to enhanced student experience and retention. Mental health is the most common reason given for a student to drop out of a course. Student mental health problems have tripled" (Douwes, et al., 2023).

## Purpose

An ecology of care is an environment facilitating comfort and rejuvenation within a classroom and university campus. The purpose is to support belonging within a higher education homeplace that respects the studios of home (domestic making) and the material culture of students. An ecology of care offers an inclusive practice encouraging learners to share their life stories through an installation composed of nature, refreshments and relational objects. As a centerpiece for gathering and conversation an ecology of care is a curation of mattering, designating learners and educators as artists in residence within the classroom. "Research demonstrates that feelings of belonging and mattering may impact a student's intention to persist with their studies" (Zawada, 2024).

## Methods

Place based care should be a priority to support student access requirements and their educational experience. The co-production of a hospitality focused art installation for focus, social engagement and active learning compensates for learning environments without personalities. Developing a community of practice art installation, encourages students to remain engaged in their education, as participants in the design of both their learning and emotional landscape.

"Going to university is about a student's social and emotional development. Rather than giving everyone the same thing, the sticky campus is focused on giving everyone the spaces and places they personally need" (Plumridge, 2024). An ecology of care classroom installation promotes comfort, a reduction of anxiety and promotes an educational homeplace.



**Disclosure Statement:** All materials included in the poster represent the authors' own work and anything cited or paraphrased within the text is included in the reference list. This work has not been previously published nor is it being considered for publication elsewhere. There are no conflicts of interest that might have influenced the authors in reporting their findings completely and honestly.

## Outcomes

1. User led and student-centred educational environments which bring to the table a student's life experience and cultures of home in the form of life materials.
2. The promotion of vitality, agency and choice within the learning environment challenging the role of the educator as being the designer of the classroom.
3. Encouraging students to be the artists of their learning and the spaces within which they learn.
4. Flexible learning interiors with zones for care, rejuvenation, connectivity and educational achievement.
5. Encouraging student voice and retention through shared artistry and a collaborating re-making of the learning environment for active learning.
6. Supporting influencer, changemaker and thriving individual graduate attributes.

### References

- Douwes, R., Metelaar, J., Hardika, G., Pijnenborg, M. and Boonstra, M. (2023) 'Well being of students in higher education: The importance of a student perspective', *Cognate Education*, 10(1), pp. 1-17. doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2190697
- Gavett, K., Taylor, C. and Fairchild, N. (2021) 'Pedagogies of mattering: Reconceptualising relational pedagogies in higher education', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 29(2), pp. 388-403. doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1989590
- Harrickson, L., Jennings, C. and Bewick, B. (2024) 'Belonging through Creative Connections: A feasibility study of an arts-based intervention to facilitate social connections between university students', *Cognate Education*, 11(1). Available at: doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2373181
- Isitt, R. (2024) Designing spaces for higher education: 10 key principles. Available at: <https://www.ukim.co.uk/insights/designing-spaces-for-higher-education/> (Accessed: 8 April 2025).
- Ou, S. and Shreeve, A. (2017) *The sticky curriculum in art and design: Identity and engagement*. London: Routledge.
- Plumridge, L. (2024) *The Learning Hub and the Sticky Campus*. Available at: <https://hinarichitects.com/what-do-we-mean-by-a-sticky-campus/> (Accessed: 8 April 2025).
- Sing, S. (2019) *The Art of Self-Care: A Heuristic Investigation*. Department of Creative Arts Therapies. Unpublished MA dissertation. Montreal: Concordia University.
- Tax, M. (2019) 'Art and Design Education in the Ecology of Care', *International Journal of Art and Design Education*, 38 (4), pp. 678-686. doi.org/10.1111/jade.12273
- Wang, H.S., Tseng, M. and Wei, S.H. (2023) 'Promoting student wellbeing: Exploring participatory arts in a higher education institution', *Psychology in the Schools*, 61(4), pp. 1336-1347. doi.org/10.1002/pits.23115
- Zawada, C. (2024) 'Student drop out and feelings of belonging and mattering in UK undergraduate allied health students', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 3(1), pp. 1-22. doi: 10.47408/jlde.v3i1.1172.