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Storying student belonging in UK higher education

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how storying can be used to uncover experiences of student belonging throughout their time in Higher Education. It adopts a framing of belonging that is fluid and which recognises shifting notions of belonging over time. A focus on storying is particularly useful for understanding belonging as it enables university staff to listen carefully and with empathy to what matters to students, what shapes their experiences, and how to communicate these in a way which invites positive action. Through storying with undergraduate student articulations gathered through a survey, interviews and focus groups at a university in the UK, the paper identifies the multifaceted and connected spaces of belonging, temporalities and relationships that come to affect student belonging. Ultimately the paper argues for the collective responsibility of staff and students to create a space of belonging for all, rather than the prevalent discourse which often puts the onus on an individual to “fit in”.

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Belonging; inclusion;
widening participation;
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Introduction

While most work addressing barriers to widening participation in UK Higher Education (HE) focusses on *entry* to HE, this paper is centred upon the ways in which storying can be used to uncover experiences of, and barriers to, widening participation (WP) while *in* HE. Using the power of students’ words, this paper shares critical insights and strategies on using storying to explore, communicate and engender informed praxis which centres issues of belonging in widening participation discourses. The empirical focus is Geosciences undergraduates in a Russell Group university in the UK, with insights relevant for wider efforts to support student belonging in UK HE.

The aim of the paper is twofold: First, given the increasing diversity of student bodies in HE (Trowler, 2010), this paper explores how storying enables university staff to listen carefully and with empathy to student experiences of belonging, and to promote stories as a means to communicate these in a way which invites positive action. Stories are useful because they, as Gabriel and Connell (2010, p. 507) write “economically communicate experience, ideas and emotions and help make sense of potentially perplexing situations”. Storying takes this further, allowing for the “making and remaking [of] meaning through stories” (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p. 7) which can amplify the presence of multiple student

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subjectivities and the temporally unfolding nature of student experiences. Second, through storytelling, the paper identifies the multifaceted temporal and spatial components that come to affect belonging in undergraduate Geography programmes. Drawing on Wainwright et al. (2020) work that addressed the materialities of WP, we explore how several of the physical, social, and indeed intangible, elements that came to matter to students were aspects that others may overlook or take for granted. Storying enables university staff to pay attention to these passing encounters and small acts which offer important lessons for all – whether as an individual educator, as a department, or as a wider institution which seeks to transform structures and cultures to improve students’ sense of belonging. The paper, therefore, makes a case for storying as method whilst also arguing for the importance of collective responsibility (of staff and students) to create a space of belonging for all, rather than the prevalent discourse which often puts the onus on an individual to “fit in”.

Part 1: belonging and widening participation in UK higher education

To make a case for foregrounding belonging, we must first situate WP within UK HE. As a prominent policy concern in HE, attention to widening participation is based on the premise that a university education reduces social and economic marginalisation of individuals (Leaney & Mwale, 2021). Whilst there is acknowledgement of the need to widen participation, efforts to do so have not yet yielded conclusive results leading to further UK government actions. For instance, the Higher Education Funding Council for England has developed a strategy for access and student success (BIS, 2014, p. 7) and in Scotland, the Commission on Widening Access was established in 2014 (see Scott, 2021 for its latest report).

Despite conspicuous WP policies across UK HE, the term “WP” is not used consistently with

(potential) students being categorised under the banner of widening participation according to ethnicity, (dis)ability, eligibility for Free School Meals, care experienced, socio-economic class or where they live etc. As a technique of power, categories include/exclude students with significant consequences in terms of university admissions procedures, assumptions made about students’ lived experiences and student progression. Meehan and Howells (2019) explain that these categories can infer a false and static divide and go on to argue that how categories intersect and coexist matters for individual student experiences. As we explore below, this intersectionality continues to matter beyond the initial transition into HE which Meehan and Howells (2019) address.

Institutions have unsurprisingly focused on fixing barriers to entry as a way of enabling access, through altering admissions processes and criteria and reducing institutional inflexibility (Leaney & Mwale, 2021; cf.; Wainwright et al., 2020). An enduring challenge is that barriers to participation are unequal in and of themselves – some students may experience more barriers, others less, and they interact in different ways for each student. Howieson and Minty (2019)’s research into transitions into first year HE in Scotland also shows that barriers are not “fixed” by the point of admission. On the contrary, they argue that negotiating participation is fluid, and it requires consistent and careful attention as the challenges faced by “non-traditional” students (i.e. – those who are not middle class, able-bodied, white, cis-gendered – categories which traditionally

dominate academia) continue after entering HE (ibid). With, as Holdsworth (2006, p. 496) notes, “the concept of a normative ‘student’ experience, as stereotyped by popular portrayals, . . . becoming less relevant, if it ever was”, it is increasingly crucial that research attends to the diversity of the student experience. As enduring stories and experiences of racism, ableism and classism illustrate, as a sector, we still have more to learn and enact, without putting the onus for change on marginalised student groups (Cunningham, 2013; Olaniyan, 2021) who, as Speirs et al. (2017) discuss in a Scottish context, often do not have access to the same high impact practices as their peers. Work which seeks to address this fluidity in participation and pays more careful attention to experiences beyond matriculation is therefore better suited to a vocabulary of *belonging*, rather than widening participation. Wilcox et al. (2005) argue that centring belonging enables attention for everyday experiences that have a significant impact upon how a student feels and identifies with university. Following Ahmed’s (2015) insights into the emotions intertwined in university experiences, we contend that a focus on belonging also centres student emotions as they shift over time.

Belonging as extending beyond widening participation

We recognise the existing body of geographical work which highlights multiple identities and the possibility of belonging in different ways to groups or institutions at different scales (see Mee & Wright, 2009). Therefore, with a focus on shifting feelings of belonging to different groups and bodies across the University, we adopt a framing of belonging that is fluid, that continues throughout degree courses and beyond and, most importantly, takes the onus away from one individual to fit in or adapt, and asserts instead a collective experience and responsibility to create a University where people might feel they belong. Talking about belonging in HE as part of, as well as extending beyond WP, has come to occupy an important position in conversations about how to create a more supportive academia. Belonging is about:

Students’ sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual. (Goodenow, 1993, p. 25)

Belonging therefore moves beyond access, and instead encompasses the spatial, social and relational settings of learning and encounters with peers and staff. Ahn and Davis (2020) found that students at a university in Wales identified belonging as first being accepting of difference, and second feeling like a person can talk comfortably, without feeling out of place. In their research in Australia, Burke et al. (2016) found that students’ feelings of acceptance and belonging enhance wellbeing and motivation, with other research also linking a sense of belonging to self-worth, progression and success (cf. Freeman et al., 2007; Osterman, 2000; Read et al., 2003), both when settling into university and beyond.

A Higher Education Academy and Action on Access report explains that belonging is achieved through supportive peer relations, meaningful interaction between staff and students, developing knowledge, confidence and identity, and having an

experience relevant to interests and future goals (Thomas, 2012). However, these well-placed intentions and practices tend to focus upon tackling withdrawal, or in seeing belonging as a precursor of positive academic outcomes and achievements (Lewis & Hodges, 2015) and can also put the onus on the students themselves to improve their own sense of belonging e.g. through networking. Other empirical studies have taken a broader approach to belonging such as Ahn and Davis (2020) who suggest that a sense of belonging is associated with surroundings: living space, geographical and cultural location and with personal space: life satisfaction, attitudes and identities. Negotiating a sense of belonging is often seen to require a building of social networks in order to feel accepted and valued (Brooman & Darwent, 2014; Meehan & Howells, 2019; O’Keeffe, 2013). However, negotiating social networks also means contending with social barriers such as opportunities and time to meet, where people are living, and feeling comfortable, confident and able to have conversations with others (Weiss, 2021).

Wainwright et al. (2020) outline how WP student belonging in the UK encompasses both the everyday experiences and intricate things that shape how a person feels and identifies, which reinforces our perspective of belonging as fluid and multi-dimensional. Belonging is not a linear trajectory, but rather it is made and remade through encounters and experiences. Being able to hold together the fluidity of belonging shapes how we talk about it. Cureton and Gravestock (2019) explore how belonging is in flux, changing over time and garnered by the perception which most educators will relate to – that students matter, and that they are listened to. To take an approach to studying belonging which enables this fluidity and temporality to be accounted for, and which centres around the student, the next section unpacks the potential and powers of storying – as a way of constructing understandings of different voices in belonging, and crucially, of listening to them.

Part 2: geography’s use of storying

Through the material and relational turns within the discipline, geographers have taken an enthusiastic interest in telling, and in listening to, narratives or stories. The literary devices of narrative and story have been used in different ways throughout Geography: as research method from (Lorimer, 2003), as a powerful teaching device (Daniels & Lorimer, 2012; Price, 2010), as an affective tool (Parr & Stevenson, 2014) and by feminist, cultural, economic, environmental geographers for the purpose of understanding the world and relationships around us (Cameron, 2012; Gibson-Graham, 2006).

Stories are not always fictional tales, and can instead be descriptions and memories of emotions and experiences. Their telling allows us to listen to different perspectives and understand different lifeworlds, or as Phillips and Bunda (2018, p.6) put it, stories are “the gifting of new insights that matter”. Gibson-Graham (2006) describes how narratives enable individuals to experience other affective, embodied and emotional constructs that they may not know themselves. This fits well with the relational, temporal and lived experiences that Wainwright et al. (2020) have been shown to be important to belonging. As Cameron (2012, p. 574) explains, “stories express something irreducibly particular and personal, and yet they can be received as expressions of broader social and political context, and their telling can move, affect. . . Stories are both singular, ‘true’, and felt, and

crafted, disciplined, and generic”. This sense of being both felt and carefully crafted means that stories can be a powerful way of holding a light up to experiences that might otherwise be overlooked.

Whilst some of the authors cited above use the terms “narrative” and “stories” interchangeably, others draw out important distinctions in meaning. For Phillips and Bunda (2018), the term “narrative” has an academic and pretentious connotation whereas storytelling is more accessible, open and common in everyday language. As this paper aims to reach a broad audience and to reflect on how this can be achieved, as authors we have affinity with this preference for stories above narratives. We also align with Phillips and Bunda’s use of *storying*, as a verb, which is defined as “the act of making and remaking meaning through stories [...] it is living and active rather than fixed, archived products. Stories are in constant unfolding” (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p. 7). Broadening the scope of *storying* further to encompass all aspects of the conceptualisation of research, we use *storying* to denote an active meaning making process which understands “story as theory, as data, as process, as text on the ethical grounds of accessibility and foregrounding the marginalised” (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p. 7). This raises important questions around the authorship of stories, which stories are collected, by whom and how they are collated and shared. In considering stories’ agency and power, Chawla (2011, p. 16) argues that “We can control them to the extent that we choose the stories and the times we tell them. But even when we punctuate, reframe, retell or edit, we cannot but let them escape.”

In academia today, the process of listening to experiences around belonging in institutional conversations is not new, but it tends to take the form of consultations focussed on narrow metrics of “satisfaction” (Wainwright et al., 2020). Stories, however, enable opportunities to listen to perspectives that fall beyond particular agendas, instead allowing them to be seen as situated and specific. Emotions, as Ahmed (2015) argues, are shaped by cultural histories and memories and so are also best understood through stories which offer less restricted space for sharing and connecting. Stories are powerful as they draw the listener in and offer connections between storyteller(s) and listeners, around shared experiences or emotions (Phillips & Bunda, 2018), or through painting a vivid picture of what may be happening to others. Harrison and Waller (2017) found that measurable outcomes of WP activities are often privileged by institutions, and Leaney and Mwale (2021) show that “successful” WP is often viewed as employability, student mobility and financial sustainability. The use of story challenges such reductionist approaches to evaluating such initiatives.

Listening to different perspectives is not always easy. Stories are well positioned to address contested and difficult topics – for example, Alderman et al. (2021) uses reflective storytelling in anti-racism, or Pinkster (2016) explores belonging and loss through stories about neighbourhood. Using and writing stories offers a critical space, as well as a creative potential, and if they are to reflect the world, the stories within them must be constantly jostled with and critically discussed. As Prior and Leston-Bandeira (2022, p. 76) describe, it is “dialogic, and circular rather than linear; not a ‘broadcast’ nor a ‘correspondence’, but a dynamic”. It is a political act, with inescapable power dynamics, giving responsibility of construction and interpretation to the author, primarily, but also the audience who engages with it.

Stories accordingly require a process of engagement which attends to subjectivities and situatedness: they might teach us something that is outside of our locus of attention, and indeed our comfort zone. The challenge, therefore, is being open to this. Haraway (1994, p. 62) distils this well: “the point is to get at how worlds are made and unmade . . . The point is not just to read the webs of knowledge production; the point is to reconfigure what counts as knowledge”.

Storying belonging

These reflections on stories and storying in Geography, offer much potential for theorising, collating, presenting and sharing experiences of belonging in HE. Stories might be used not to critique content or to undermine another’s experience, but to construct and listen to these stories with more empathy. Transformative learning scholars such as Mezirow (1997) posit that those listening to the stories (learners) need to actively incorporate the new insights gained into their already well-developed frame of reference, which involves thought, feelings and disposition. This can ultimately lead to a new “line of action” when learners adapt their frame of reference to be more “inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective and integrative of experience” (ibid, p.5). The storied excerpts in this paper may not be those which you, as reader-learners, immediately relate to, recognise, or see as “correct”, but they are accounts from students which matter. Extending Freire’s call for solidarity (Freire, 1990) entails thinking with students from non-traditional backgrounds who have been deprived of their voices (Leaney & Mwale, 2021). Through our own contemplation (as authors) of the perspectives expressed through the stories later in this paper, we support Fritzsche (2021) in arguing that a reflective approach to anti-oppressive approaches to teaching, such as use of storying, without trying to control or judge the narrative, challenge dominant structures and discourses, reveal inequalities and injustices, and centre marginalized perspectives and experiences.

hooks argues that:

To recognise that we touch one another in language seems particularly difficult in a society that would have us believe there is no dignity in the experience of passion, that to feel is to be inferior, for within the dualism of Western metaphysical thought, ideas are always more important than language. (1994, p.174–175)

Yet, in incorporating and imparting the emotions (of both authors and audience), storying has the potential to open-up conversations around belonging and be used as a means of learning between peers, or in this instance, amongst university staff and students. We take hope from Dahlstrom (2014) who reflects that, whilst currently unconventional in the sciences, stories, anecdotes and narratives are important in science communication with non-experts as they can pique the interest of the audience, are easy to understand, help to develop theories, and support longer-term retention in memory. “Words impose themselves” (Hooks, 1994, p. 167), and in doing so have the power to excite, stimulate or resonate with the audience. As others, such as Fritzsche (2021) have found, *listening* to personal experiences can be emotional for both students and university staff. Individuals communicate best by choosing ways of speaking that are

informed by the particularity and uniqueness of whom they are speaking to and with (Hooks, 1994). Stories are of course not appropriate for all audiences and situations. They do, however, provide a unique way of communicating the lived realities of students we (as university staff) work with.

Methods

The story presented in this paper is produced by exploring student belonging in a UK HE Geoscience department. During 2021 and early 2022 we conducted an online survey consisting of closed and open questions, virtual interviews and three in-person focus groups with students from across undergraduate degree programmes offered by our department: Earth Sciences, Human and Physical Geography, Ecology and Environmental Sciences. The survey received 24 anonymous responses, 10 interviews were conducted, and 18 students took part in one of three focus groups from across degree programmes. The deliberate focus on belonging rather than WP designation led us to democratise participation and invite all students from across the department to participate. We used multiple channels to recruit students: student associations, direct emails, staff in contact with students and feedthrough participation from the survey.

The interviews were held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lasted between 45 minutes and 97 minutes. The focus groups lasted approximately one hour and were held at times convenient to students. We followed a loose semi-structured approach to both interviews and focus groups so that students could talk about what mattered to them around themes of inclusion, exclusion and belonging. We (the authors) sought to be open with students about our own stories and encouraged them to treat the interaction as an informal “to-gather” (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p. 1) rather than a formal interview: stories were thus *gathered* in our coming *together*. Interviews and the focus groups were facilitated by the second author and a research assistant who were not in teaching roles, to allow students to speak more freely about their experiences. The research was approved by the School Ethics Committee.

This focus on student engagement rather than partnership with students in the methods was deliberate. In this instance, amidst covid disruption, industrial action and when seeking to include WP students who have been shown to be already overburdened with commitments, the decision was made to be authentic in acknowledging that students did not need an additional task. We therefore offered a token £10 “thank-you”, in the form of a voucher and (latterly at the suggestion of the participants) direct cash payments, for interview and focus group participants. While the research was led by us as authors, we remained open to methodological suggestions. Early feedback identified that students were experiencing survey burnout during the pandemic and encouraged us to shift from the initial survey to interviews and focus groups which students felt were less extractive and offered them space to have their voices fully heard. Drafts of outputs were also sent for comment to those involved in interviews and focus groups before being circulated to staff involved in the research.

Results: student voices through a composite story

Learning from Bosanquet et al. (2017, p. 893) we decided to create a researcher-constructed composite story which uses “direct quotations which are brought together thematically” and portrayed to produce a single tale of multiple subjectivities. We (the authors of this paper) therefore become authors as well as researchers in the creation of this story. Storying in this way is “generative” (Philips & Kara, 2021, p. 44), offering “not only the representation of a life, but also an orientation device” (ibid, p.48). In our practice this means that we worked with the individual stories that had been collected, coding them as we would have in other qualitative research analysis. Where our practice pushes us further into storying is in the crafting of a story with those words. For us, crafting entailed assembling these multiple stories into a form which would itself communicate the experiences of the students. Rather than using dislocated quotations, our engagement with storying allowed us to include the essence and emotions of students, as well as their words. In doing so the story was crafted by us, the authors, to enhance flow while maintaining the complexity and diversity of student experience within the writing. The story is thus a collective output of researchers’ and participants’ words and therefore bears witness to a cohort, at a particular moment, rather than any specific individual. This stitching together of stories is deliberate for two reasons. First, we chose to do this on the grounds of ethics – it ensures that a single student is not identifiable within the story of the collective (De Leeuw et al., 2017). Second, we, like Bosanquet et al. (2017, p. 893) “believe the use of multiple first-person accounts here draws attention to the diverse identities and experiences” of students and writing through story allows us to demonstrate how belonging is not a single pathway or perspective, but how experiences of belonging at university are made up of multiple moments that matter to an individual and a collective, without a claim to generalisability and representativity: all stories matter. Stories are about expressing experiences, tracing the relations, and transforming and understanding the social, situated world. The openness to interpretation also means being open to critique – that is, that not everyone will relate to these stories, and they may even push back against them. Conversations around what “those stories represent (and distort), but also for the becomings such stories might nourish, and those which they might undermine” (Cameron, 2012, p. 586) could help to encourage deeper discussions around belonging in HE.

The following story is positioned in a GeoSciences department where the social sciences and humanities sit aside the physical sciences (Cupples, 2020). It is also a story from within a university in Scotland where a degree, most commonly, takes 4 years: two years of pre-honours during which students are encouraged to take a wide range of courses, including beyond their degree programme, and two honours years. It begins at the point of first arriving at university, and traces this through different moments that punctuated students’ experiences throughout the course of their degree. This temporal approach allowed a focus on key transitions and enabled the story to highlight areas for potential interventions. The story has been crafted to illuminate, rather than to challenge or “fact-check” student perspectives.

I didn’t go to private school, I didn’t even go to an open day, and so I didn’t realise that my school, would be an issue. But I really noticed that in first year, that divide between private and state school and I feel like it’s probably one of the most defining factors, you feel kinda

segregated at uni. And I do, you know, I feel uncomfortable whenever I'm in a room surrounded by really rich people. This department has so many who went to private school and it feels dominated by it. I feel like I can't join in on conversations because they're about things I've never experienced. So, my first day was, erm, pretty daunting. Mum moved me into halls, and stayed with me as we couldn't afford a hotel. I hadn't realised that would be odd but it seemed like it was. I mean, I got a job straight away which was super lucky, but we didn't get the class timetable until really late and it made it really difficult to plan work shifts.

I did meet people though, in the first few weeks, it was scary but slowly with the odd hello at the start of the lecture there would be people I recognised. I found one person in my halls who I walked in with. Halls are a really friendly place, my halls was just like one big family. It's one of the halls that's a bit further away so you'd kind of make friends through coming in together which was nice. Not everyone did that though. Loads got Ubers – I can't even fathom the cost of that. I did get the bus sometimes but it always takes so long. In terms of first impressions of teaching I was pretty intimidated. Especially in tutorials where they want you to speak. Someone can say something not that smart but it just sounded so smart because of their accent. And so I just thought, well I'm not going to speak, but I'll admit, when the tutor for the tutorial is working class they often make me feel much more safe and I don't feel as if I'm going to be gawped at. My personal tutor was good though and there was the geography society, they made a real effort to include freshers and made me feel seen and wanted at a time when I was really lonely.

The school being all over the place made feeling included difficult though. And that sort of all over the placeness didn't help with the loneliness. It was a nightmare to commute. There wasn't even like a place that I got to feel comfortable in. Like I don't even know where the toilets are, or anything like that, and then having to wait 45 minutes' for the shuttle bus between buildings...so annoying...

The split building was shit, but there were times I was made to feel more "at home" if you know what I mean. One of the most memorable things about first year though was the fieldtrip. Overnight, to some place north of here. Being thrown together for a weekend meant you got to know people, but even then, there were moments when I felt way out the norm. We walked into the room and one guy said, "it's just like boarding school", the others all nodded like that was something we could all relate to. I couldn't. I definitely feel like they already know each other, or have similar lives already, and so that can be quite daunting.

Some of this stuff is really obvious on fieldtrips and they didn't start until year 2. So you know you have different options for field trips? So we have a year group chat. And they're supposed to be free, paid for by the uni. And someone put in the chat, "if someone wants to swap with me so I can go on the option you got I'll pay you £100". They just think they can pay their way in – it doesn't work like that!

The uni does acknowledge some of the issues, like with money and stuff. It has tried a little bit with things such as the bursary, but it also categorises students based on their parents' income, however many people have more complicated home circumstances, like my mum's in a 1 bed flat so I can't stay at home for long, there just isn't space...but like, I also don't think there's much diversity in the staff, like in terms of being taught by people of colour... I think it's really interesting and deeply problematic.

It's funny that feeling, who should be here. I think accents come into that a lot here. A friend of mine was teased on a fieldtrip for being Scottish, she said, some peers can't understand her Scottish accent so that has meant she felt excluded from some conversations. And there really aren't many Scottish students, and it's odd. Even more so especially because in geography we'll learn about Scotland so much, but there's sometimes not a single Scottish

person in the room. I'd never really thought about accents until then but then again, I never thought I had a northern accent until I came to uni.

But in third year I got way more involved in the department, the people you're around are a big part of belonging. I got involved in the staff liaison committee, and being in that developed my relationships with the staff. I am aware though that the staff who come to staff liaison committee are proactive, they're the ones who would probably listen anyway. A friend is on the equality and diversity group, so hopefully, it'll become a bigger thing with a bigger impact. There was also once this Women in Academia event where staff told us their life journeys. It was great. So many talked about imposter syndrome, about students not understanding their accents and about their struggles. Hearing their stories as people helped me feel like I should be here . . . oh yeah, and the uptake of academic staff putting their pronouns in their email signatures means I feel heard.

But that's not to say everything improved. There were still moments where I remember feeling really peripheral. Frequently in class we would be discussing something such as council estates, working class pub culture or class and the way in which my peers spoke of these things as if they are an interesting object to be considered for an hour and then go back to ignoring again was really frustrating, it made me feel as if I cannot comment with my real life experience because I understand that this will be shocking, if you've never even been to a council estate then the product of one (me) is shocking.

I mean obviously the pandemic was a huge thing for my 4th year. None of us were unscathed. And, it really made some stuff clear. A friend got an email from the university like, in our records we don't think you can afford a laptop, I mean it wasn't worded like that but that's what she told me it came across as and it was a bit like oh. But great that they're doing it. And I mean, our internet is terrible, so I struggled to take part in group discussions, sometimes I could barely understand what people were saying.

Analysis and discussion

HE is a "radical space of possibility" (Hooks, 1994, p. 12) but it must remain so for all. Each person's sense of belonging in university does not start from an identical or equal position. Equally, this story has shown how belonging at university is a process of constant negotiation around particular punctuating points, as well as through more mundane, everyday happenings. One of the survey participants articulated particularly powerfully why providing opportunities to listen to different perspectives matters:

"often discussions on diversity issues or on the lives of those who aren't represented at university are taken from a neutral point of view, but education isn't neutral, from the start of each discussion reminding us that the people sitting in that room to have the discussion aren't a random even cross section of society, but a product of an elitist higher education system/society, down to who was encouraged to apply, who got in".

As highlighted here so eloquently, "the educator has the duty of not being neutral" (Freire, 1990, p. 180): staff have the responsibility to listen to those students who are not heard and acknowledge that centering these viewpoints more commonly silenced is a political act, and integral to a politics of care in academia (Askins & Blazek, 2017). The storying process reveals experiences not reported in formal course feedback or national student surveys. They have no existing outlet.

Learning from this story

Listening to, and hearing, this story of belonging gives us privileged insight into the experiences that students might face through their time at university. The purpose of this paper is however not to “disassemble it via an academic anatomy of its construction” (Parr & Stevenson, 2014, p. 573) but rather to emphasize the different temporal articulations of belonging that storying can reveal. This story reveals belonging as being constituted through larger actions like the university-wide framing of COVID-19 affecting experiences – as well as the smaller passing moments of being able to use a desk, or the inclusive language used in a course. These experiences are fluid and are not universal, nor could they ever seek to be, since students are a heterogeneous group. Recognising this, attention is paid in this paper to the connected spaces of belonging, temporalities and relationships.

Belonging is clearly geographical. The spaces which students move through affect how comfortable and familiar they feel (Wainwright et al., 2020). Even when these moments are transient and temporary – such as passing through a particular place, occupying a lecture theatre or lab for an hour, or waiting in a corridor – they piece together to shape belonging. Space (taken in the literal sense) is perceived here as featuring both in the formal education setting, as well as in terms of living spaces. Instead of seeing these spaces as separated or disconnected, through storying belonging they become tangled and connected together to a web of “fitting in”. Through storying, moments of connection are revealed in terms of a community of halls as spaces of living: but also, an othering of those in different halls associated with wealth – and the impact which this distinction has in terms of what one knows. The spaces of learning (buildings, lecture theatres, labs) intersect with this because it requires entry into spaces which can evoke or revoke feelings of familiarity. This is intimately shaped by the connections which can be established within spaces, but also the architecture and spaces themselves. Those that are unfamiliar – rarely visited, belonging to another discipline, or which lacked a sense of warmth – destabilize a sense of comfort and belonging. There are minute and everyday aspects which feed into this too – knowing where the toilets are, or when there are not enough desks in familiar study spaces. There are also spaces of labour, outside of courses and university, which cannot be separated from them, but which are often overlooked in blinkered approaches to belonging and student lifeworlds. In practice, this story illustrates how occupying spaces of working is impeded by practices within the walls of institutions, like not releasing timetables with sufficient notice to negotiate one’s sense of getting to other places, and being allocated to buildings across the city which disable a sense of getting to know a place because of the pressures of time and spatial distance to rush to the next place (of work or responsibilities).

This story also allows us to identify and unpick the complexity of spaces of home. The assumption of “going home” is a narrative that surrounds students, and which university perpetuates directly (term-time only accommodation; asking for “home and term time” addresses), and indirectly (such as asking where home is). Spaces of home are not equivalent to spaces of belonging – and so this story acts as an important reminder that home is complex (Holton, 2015), that it does not equate to community and safety. Equally, due to care, financial, health or other reasons such as feeling most comfortable there, some students will, for part or all, of their studies, commute in from where home is

for them and thus navigate University differently (Holdsworth, 2006). This more complex picture of spaces – of living, learning, travelling and home – illustrates the constantly changing transitions, mobilities and experiences that students navigate. Rather than focusing upon discussions of home or of halls, it is beneficial to think about spaces as part of a network which comes to establish belonging, but also threatens it. A “sense of place” can be seen as one of close relationships, and intimate place-based connections (Anderson, 2015). Indeed, the story in this paper illustrates how a sense of place (belonging) is shaped by both the familiarity, and the connections which constitute them, as geographers have revealed in other contexts (see Mee & Wright, 2009).

However, as Pretty et al. (2003, p. 274) remind us “location itself is not enough to create a sense of place. It emerges from involvement between people, and between people and place”. If we accept that, “institutions are not neutral” and over time institutional values “come to reflect those of the dominant cultural or social group within that institution” (Holdsworth, 2006, p. 499), then this story highlights how staff can affect a sense of belonging through challenging this institutional habitus (Reay et al., 2001). This work must be recognised as emotional labour, which is seen as a persistent feature of university staff workloads (often unacknowledged), and yet is rarely supported (Berry & Cassidy, 2013). This story illustrates how staff labour can hold together a student’s sense of belonging. It must also be valued, remunerated, and recognised within structures that focus upon the metrics and research outputs without valuing the interpersonal connections, pastoral care and student support (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). It is telling that neither metrics nor research outputs featured within any conversations or encounters throughout this research. Instead, it was the connections, care and support by staff that tied together belonging (or threatened to unravel it when students did not feel it to be there).

Learning from storying

As hooks reminds us “the engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself” (Hooks, 1994, p. 11). It is constantly important to consider how the story is shared, the audience it may reach and how they might respond. In this case the “world beyond itself” was reached through presenting at a School meeting, the university-wide Learning and Teaching conference attended by staff and students, and a podcast for our university teaching network. It has therefore been heard by a range of colleagues, including those receptive to understandings of student culture and belonging, those couched in pedagogic philosophies, and those whose immediate reaction to such topics is encapsulated in the phrase “not for me”. Each listener jostles with the story through their own experiences and emotions, which risks what geographers Parr and Stevenson (2014, p. 567) call the “unpredictable audienceing of stories”, yet also offers hope for change through the “moving force of stories” (ibid). It is worth reiterating here that the listener’s role is not that of fact-checker or judge of correctness, but rather as hearer of sentiment, emotion and new perspectives.

The reaction from colleagues was overwhelmingly positive. Some academic and administrative colleagues in the School meeting expressed the impact of this “affectual intervention” (Parr & Stevenson, 2014, p. 566) through calling the story, “heart-breaking” and a “powerful insight”. The message of the presentation resonated with some

colleagues' own experiences: "I could very much identify with your case", and "felt many of these during my student days". The storied form was called "amazing", "fantastic", "great", and "excellent". For one colleague, writing months after the presentation, it "definitely influenced my teaching [...] made me more aware of why people might not speak up even if 'coaxed'". This story, and the paper built around it, highlights that storying is not only a useful method for researching student belonging but also that storying is particularly effective in settings not accustomed to its usage. We have shown that storying has an ability to draw in an audience and embolden listeners to recognise the importance of an issue they might normally overlook. Returning to Dahlstrom's comment, more creative, qualitative forms of communication can, in situations such as this, be "not only more appropriate but potentially more important" (Dahlstrom, 2014, p. 13614). The responses from colleagues highlight that stories open-up space to listen to different perspectives and talk to one another about topics which might normally be held apart from work-based discussions.

It is important to note that the story presented in this paper is not a critique of an individual or of a specific practice, but instead challenges university staff as educators to expand their approaches to teaching, acknowledge the different ways they can understand belonging and subsequently seek to enhance it. This is not to write out the experiences of (not) belonging that staff may also hold, embroiled within the tensions of higher education: they can be part of the same story. With the timely publications on "belonging" amongst HE staff (e.g. Anadu et al., 2020; Campbell Galman & Moreau, 2022; Hamilton, 2020), staff will also each have their own stories of belonging: these may share similarities with students, or they may highlight and weave in new threads to the fraying tapestry of HE. No story takes away from another's.

Conclusion: continuing conversations as/and praxis

Stories such as those included in this paper are useful not for their representativeness (they cannot be such), but as embedded and embodied tellings, that is, written of a place and time by a particular set of people, to offer rich understandings of different perspectives. Stories are powerful tools if we (universally as university staff) collectively, make the space to listen and value them. The conscientisation that stories produce must, however, be matched by praxis. While it cannot be guaranteed that all of those who engage with the story will relate to it, or get on board with the message that it conveys, it would certainly appear that stories have the potential to reach a broader audience than other presentation methods. However, just as the onus is not on the student to "fit in" nor is it solely leveled at the individual staff member to create a perfect environment for belonging to flourish. The central goal of our work is to increase the sense of belonging felt by all students in our school, therefore wider institutional support is needed to deploy any changes in the teaching, administration and broader culture we (the students and staff) work and learn in. Some changes can happen within existing structures to reinforce ongoing efforts, for example centering belonging in pedagogy training and enabling the sharing of inclusive teaching techniques. However, this story reveals that well-intentioned information sharing e.g. about campus resources, and support from particular staff, is not in itself sufficient as student experiences and the meaning they attach to such information is shaped by an interweaving of spaces of belonging, temporalities and relationships. More

significant change requires shifts in culture and systems to listen to student narratives, and to privilege this data in program reviews and student support, more usually dominated by reductive quantitative survey data. Ultimately, in the words of a student, “I don’t think things can get truly more inclusive until the university is pro-active in addressing these issues, rather than just responding to complaints”.

Thinking about these stories of belonging is also imperative: throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, students have been surrounded by a dominant narrative in which it is assumed they will go “home” (without recognising the sensitive dimensions of home discussed above) or facing pressures to reveal spaces that they’re living in through computer cameras. Storying reveals that experiences of belonging have been detrimentally changed by a lack of access to resources, different spaces and locations of “home”, and a loss of employment. COVID-19 has shone a light on inequalities, shifted the university environment and has (or should have) made dealing with them more urgent too (Corbera et al., 2020).

This paper re-positions belonging to a university (at the various scales this entails) as a collective endeavour, and something which staff and students all affect and enable, and thus hold a responsibility for. Senior management needs to play a crucial role in supporting those who most directly shape belonging – those teaching, as well as those in charge of timetabling, facilities and supportive administrative roles. This should empower (not undermine) decisions made by those working directly with students, as storying reveals the importance of these student-staff relationships and the shortcomings of one-size-fits-all centralised initiatives. However, it is unsustainable and circumnavigates a collective sense of belonging if this labour continues to fall on the shoulders of certain individuals. Such efforts challenge the neoliberal university, centring as they do, compassion and moral responsibility (Giroux, 2010) above seeing (particular) students as consumers, or above viewing widening participation narrowly as merely being about graduate employability (see also Leaney & Mwale, 2021).

As educators we can embrace an engaged pedagogy which recognizes that every classroom, department, and university are as different as the cohorts who travel through them. Strategies to create an inclusive culture must therefore be mindful of this, and so too must these stories continue to challenge neoliberal structures, highlighting voices, and engaging students in the process of change, becoming, and belonging.

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