

# Rethinking Belonging and the First Year Experience

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# context

- how is research - retention and part-time, mature undergraduates relevant to 'the first year experience'?
- undergraduates most vulnerable to withdrawal in first year
- significant differential in full/part-time withdrawal rates
- non-traditional students more likely to be returning to education after a break/have non-standard entry qualifications
- **implications for transition and induction?**
- key research theme – a critical approach to discourse of 'belonging' in retention literature – rethinking belonging

# why rethink belonging?

- the discourse of 'belonging' in retention literature is problematic in relation to part-time, mature undergraduates in English higher education (HE)
- a borderland analysis (Abes, 2009) interrogates 'belonging' in relation to part-time, mature undergraduates through ideas of power, identity and space/place
- **how can an enriched understanding of 'belonging' - the complexity of belonging in contested space be acknowledged in 'first year experience' induction and transition?**

# why is 'belonging' problematic?

- Tinto (1975) - integration and congruency as conditions of student persistence;
- Thomas (2012) - *'a sense of belonging is ... critical to both retention and success'*
- uniform and universal discourse of belonging based on dominant idea of HE student as full-time, young, time-rich, residential
- who belongs and to what? **what practices of belonging are recognised and validated in institutional discourses – (and in transition/induction)?**

# part-time, mature undergraduates

- highly diverse cohort: age, gender, ethnicity, educational background, qualification aim, employment status, parental and/or caring status...
- a 'highly instrumental approach to HE'
- part-time, mature students' 'difference' and 'absence' viewed as problematic
- **what assumptions do transition/induction procedures make about engagement with HE/the institution/other students?**

# a borderland analysis



**difference power**

gender ethnicity CLASS

*identity place* territory

**'home' SPACE**

*'to realise the complexity of student development it is important to use multiple theoretical perspectives in conjunction with one another, even when they contradict'*

Abes, 2012:190

# Bourdieu/Brah/Massey

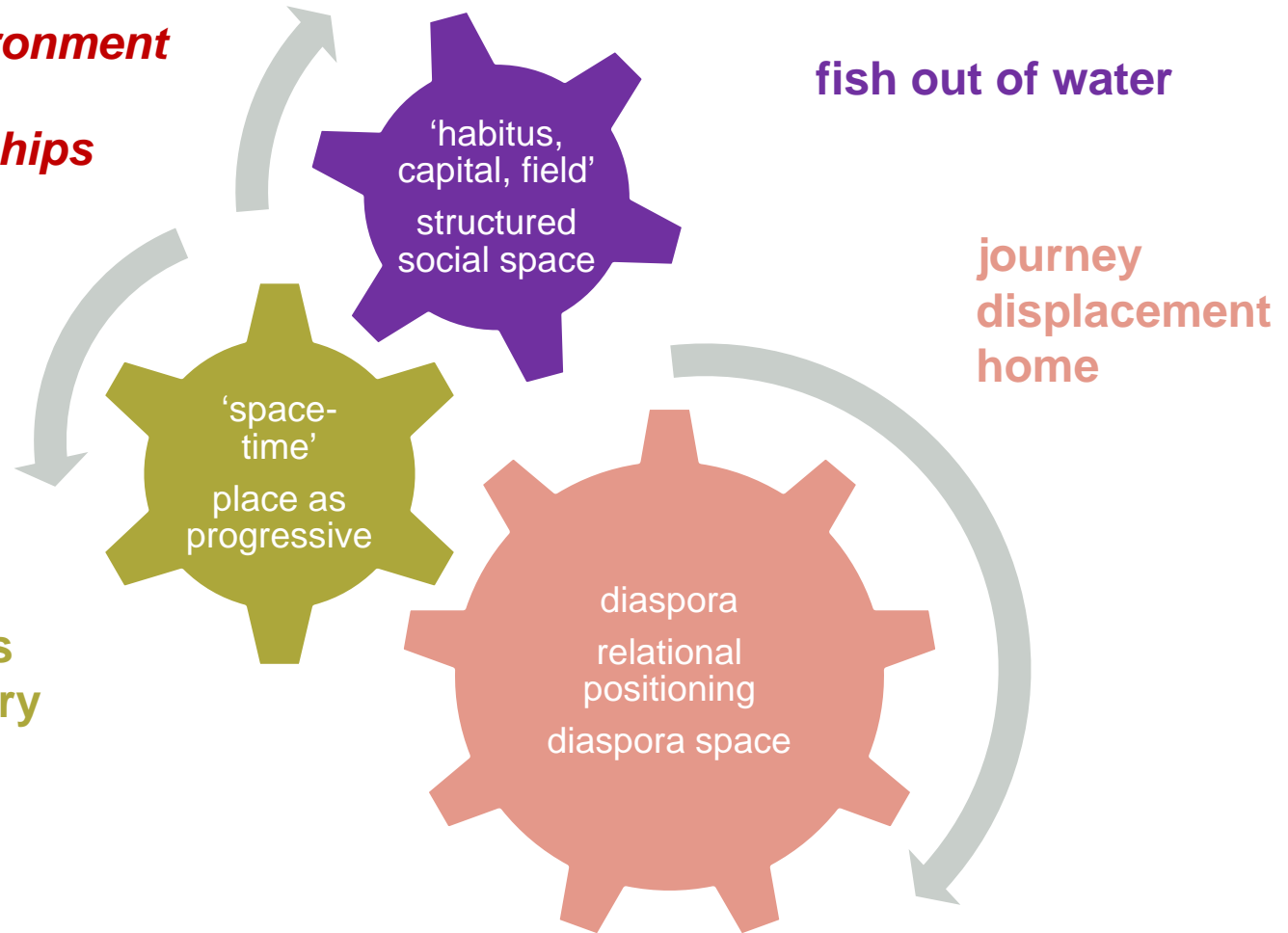
*individual/environment*

*power relationships*

*transformation*

*multiplicity*

*activity spaces*  
*power geometry*



# rethinking belonging

This borderland analysis

- supports ideas of identity as multiple, fluid, complex
- considers spatial dimensions of identity and belonging
- understands HEIs as diverse, unfixed with potential for multiple versions of belonging, some more powerful than others
- shows belonging to be a continually renegotiated process
- argues diversity and complexity are counter-intuitive to universal statements of belonging
- **what practices of belonging are outside the institutional gaze?**
- **to what extent are they recognised by induction/transition processes?**



# theory into practice?

- what is the geography of power within the institution – who / what is seen as problematic?
- how are part-time, mature undergraduates positioned within the institution?
- what spaces/places do part-time, mature students occupy/create for learning, sociality, development?
- how is belonging experienced/imagined by part-time/mature/first-year students?
- **what versions of belonging are promoted/defined through transition and induction processes?**
- **how might alternative versions of belonging be acknowledged?**

thank you.

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