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

‘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

‘habitus, capital, field’ structured social space
‘space-time’ place as progressive
diaspora relational positioning diaspora space

fish out of water
journey displacement home
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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