Belonging: exploring students' ideas around belonging, comfort and discomfort in library and learning spaces

David Clover @davidclover
University of East London

The Belonging Project

As part of our ongoing student insight programme at UEL, we wanted to explore the experience of students who make both high and low use of physical library space and services. As part of this review, we were particularly interested in how a diverse student body views and expresses ideas of belonging, comfort and discomfort within university spaces. Research on closing the attainment gap for BAME students highlights the significance of a sense of belonging (or of not belonging). We also wanted to explore the experience of other groups of students or identities. We intended to use the feedback from these interviews to help us think about the ways in which we might most effectively uncover and explore issues of belonging on campus, and provide initial evidence to help plan changes and improvements to physical spaces and the ways we promote these.

We decided to use cognitive mapping techniques and individual in-depth interviews (up to about 30 minutes) to explore ideas of belonging and comfort with specific groups of students. At the time of writing this was an ongoing project, with students still being interviewed.

Emergent themes

Interviews with students provide both rich and diverse feedback, for example: some favouring space where they can see others working and a stream of activity; some liking quiet and secluded spaces; and others describing complex strategies to manage moving between busy and quieter spaces.

Interestingly, many use metaphors of 'home' to describe spaces in which they

feel a sense of belonging, and many also make explicit reference to the importance of helpful staff. Other initial emerging themes include:

- A continuum between social and individual learning – between desires for distraction and focus
- The importance of choice and control over spaces and environments
- Ideas around security
- The role of links to and views of outdoor areas and space
- The notion of territoriality (or student 'owned' spaces)

Student voices

Sara

Sara (all names changed and anonymised) is a British Muslim woman of Arabic background. She likes the second floor of the library and in particular the privacy accorded by closed off 'Cubbis' added to the library in a recent refurbishment.
She says:

> *"I like the second floor in the library because you have the, I still think it's referred to as the Skillzone area, because that is a collective area where people can meet up and there's a bit of a noise – and then the other side is like a silent area and you can sit on your own and just focus on your work and I like that balance. I wouldn't want just one floor of quiet…"*

So you like that ability to move between spaces?

> *"Exactly. Which is what I do pretty much every day. So I have a group of friends who like all to work together… And I understand the benefits of group work but I also like to sit on my own, so I like to hop in between. So that is really, really good for me.*

> *"I'm thinking maybe my collection of identities would mean that I prefer to be able to sit on my own rather than constantly being in a group. I couldn't say that confidently. I think it depends. But I would say that I'm less comfortable being in a group of people than someone else with a different identity. So they'd be happy to, say, sit in the Skillzone with five or ten people shouting, 'my idea's better than yours.' I'd rather sit down and get on with my work…*

> *"So, my course is predominantly male, but basically from the start of my course I have been working on my assignments and stuff and my studies with the females and with*

a few of the males, but the majority of them I don't really make any efforts to work with them. They are very rowdy and argumentative. I'm not slating them – they're just themselves… but if I have to work with those people then it is nice to have my things somewhere else and just go between…"

I asked what Sara liked about the Cubbis?

"… because it's my own space and I can like, I can basically control it. Now there's lamps in there, which I'm very happy about. I didn't suggest it… I don't know why. I never thought about it but those lamps are great, so obviously I can change the lighting as I want and also there's the things you can close… the sound barriers which you can open and close… For me it's particularly important if I know I'm going to be spending several hours in the library I'll use those sound barriers and you know I'll get a bit more relaxed, I'll take my layers off, I'll take this off, as well, my hijab off… to basically feel like I'm at home, again. And that's why I use those spaces as well. And obviously there are plugs right there. Because I usually come with a lot of electronics, a laptop, a tablet and my phone."

Sara's interview highlighted and interwove personal preferences in relation to space with gender and religious and cultural identities. It was striking how her powerful statement about being comfortable enough to remove her hijab sits for her between basic needs of being able to adjust lighting and having access to power sockets.

Akachi

Akachi, a postgraduate mature student and a British women of African descent, preferred to work in open-plan areas where:

"I can see what's going on… I'm that kind of person, I'm very social so I don't like being on my own. I like socialising. That's one of the things I like about the library, you can actually be socialising, without really socialising, because there are people always moving around so you don't feel like you are by yourself."

Akachi spoke about the role of staff. She prefers to sit at an area located by the help desk, and said:

"I know everyone that works on the counter so you know it's just a friendly area for me. So I feel comfortable there – people that work on the counter and behind I can easily go to them and speak to them and they're just, they feel like my friends, they don't know that but they do actually…"

I asked whether there was anything about the staff that made Akachi feel that way?

> *"It's the attitude – they're always willing to help… tolerant, you know they're very tolerant, you know when you want to approach someone it's… the attitude, they don't need to say anything, you know this person is OK."*

The interviews have talked about library staff in dialogue centred around staff attitudes, of being helpful, being available, going out of their way to help – around indicators of good customer service rather than a focus on any other personal attribute of staff. This finding needs to acknowledge that staffing at UEL libraries does broadly reflect London's diversity (if not more closely the diversity of our student population).

Reflecting on the research process

In thinking about and reflecting on the process of this research to date, I've been looking through the lens of questions of diversity and inclusion, and in particular also been guided by ideas of positionality. I've been touched by Kim England's article, 'Getting personal: reflexivity, positionality, and feminist research', in which she critiques the positivist ideal or idea of 'impersonal, neutral detachment,' and argues for scholarship that embodies ideas of intersubjectivity and reflexivity – the 'self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher' (England, 1994).

Positionality: Who am I?

At UXLibsIV I wanted to not only talk about the project itself but to reflect on and explore some initial and developing ideas about 'positionality', about identity and difference (and perceptions of power) in the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. So it is important to acknowledge who I am.

I'm a member of library staff and a senior manager within the UEL Library, with a job title, Head of User Engagement, that reflects an overall focus on library users.

I'm a white man (in a suit!) and I'm also Queer, of working-class background, of a first generation to attend university, and a migrant to the UK. I'm a parent of a young child. It is important when we talk about identity as it relates to our users, to acknowledge our own identity or identities and the impacts of both our privileges and disadvantages. It is also important to understand and recognise that our identities and experiences are rarely those of our users.

So my question is how does my identity or perceived identity (as positioned by gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, status…) affect, impact on, or guide this research. And I think this is an important question to ask and acknowledge as we recruit and make arrangements with students, as well as during the actual interview. I'm also conscious that I'm interviewing students in some ways selected as belonging to potentially marginalised groups – in particular because of concerns about potential barriers for those groups. So I'm mindful that my experience and perceptions are not those of our students.

Talking about race

I'm conscious of the general difficulty in talking about race. That my interviewees may have much experience of talking to white people about race and facing defensiveness and a lack of change, of what Reni Eddo-Lodge describes as 'the gulf of an emotional disconnect that white people display when a person of colour articulates our experiences' (Eddo-Lodge, 2014). Or simply why should they have to talk about race again to someone who doesn't understand or listen, or effect any change as a result.

I've found it useful to start with articulating aspects of my own identity as well as making clear from the beginning that we are talking about belonging and identity – to structure the interview by talking about belonging generally and then look specifically at identity and how it interacts with belonging – using the interview to build rapport and actively demonstrate a position of listening and acknowledgement of the experience or the 'truth' of my interviewees.

It is useful to acknowledge this may be uncomfortable.

And I don't take it for granted. I note after each interview or set of interviews my own feelings and thoughts and questions – comparing for example discussions about sexuality and race, and reflecting on what belonging and identity mean in an institution that is diverse in student demographics. At UEL, our student population is 34% Black, 33% White, 21% Asian, there are a high number of mature students, and many are in the first generation to attend Higher Education. It is also an institution which BAME students in our recent Race Equality Charter survey still talked about not feeling as though they belonged. So while I suspect I would get different responses and issues discussed in a predominantly white institution, I'm not making assumptions that our student demographics are some magic bullet.

Some of my research practices are also influenced by ideas about decolonising

research and the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith. For example, I sent complete transcripts back to interviewees for comment and so that they have a record of this (Smith, 2012).

The problem of labels

Identity is complex and I try to keep my questioning open (or, as I say in the interviews, deliberately vague). Respondents identify in differing ways:

> *"So I identify as I'm a poet. And I really like that one, because that one doesn't put on me a label that other people are putting on me but one I that I choose for myself."*

> *"I'm thinking maybe my collection of identities would mean that I prefer to be able to sit on my own rather than constantly being in a group. I couldn't say that confidently. I think it depends."*

One thing I've identified is a discomfort with talking about labels – identity is often seen as broader than a list of protected characteristics or labels – and interviewees

© David Scott

often talked about identities based on values. In addition I noted a need to recognise intersectionality and how a combination of identities impacts on experience and perception.

Our students are (quite rightly) reluctant to be pigeonholed into simplistic categories – yet in some ways that is something the research questions seem to expect of them. The advantage of a qualitative approach is that this can be acknowledged, made explicit and described.

An ongoing project

At the time of writing, interviews were continuing and at the same time some of what we have learnt has already influenced decision making. We're interested in any comparative opportunities with other institutions but guided by the practical question of 'How can we make the library a space that adapts to difference, rather than asking only some of us to adapt to the library instead?' (Drabinski, 2018)

Our challenge is to look at our libraries critically and to make the changes that may be needed to better meet the needs of our users, and I would say particularly those users who are potentially marginalised by our current practices – that we adapt the library rather than ask our users to adapt to our way of being. Regardless of the difficulties and challenges such work brings, I remain convinced that it is essential and central to our mission and purpose.

Acknowledgements

References

Drabinski, E., 2018. Critical Art Librarianship conference, May 2018 [online]. Available at: <http://www.emilydrabinski.com/critical-art-librarianship-conference/> [Accessed 3 June 2018].

Eddo-Lodge, R., 2014. Why I'm no longer talking to white people about race [online] 22 February. Available at: <http://renieddolodge.co.uk/why-im-no-longer-talking-to-white-people-about-race/> [Accessed 25 May 2018].

England, K., 1994. Getting personal: reflexivity, positionality, and feminist research. *The Professional Geographer*, 46(1), pp. 80–89.

Smith, L.T., 2012. *Decolonizing methodologies: research and indigenous peoples*, 2nd edition. London: Zed Books.