Connect, converse, collaborate: Encountering belonging and forging resilience through creative practice

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Abstract

This paper is a dialogue between two colleagues who teach drama and performance in Higher Education. Our work here has developed across a series of formal, semi-structured and informal discussions about our experiences of teaching and supporting students within the Drama and Performance department at University of South Wales. Instantly we connected on our commitment to prioritising student needs and our intentions to co-construct reflexive learning spaces. Within the disciplines of drama and performance, we (Allinson and Crews) see practice, collaboration and dialogue as equally important and core to all learning environments and encounters. Because of this we continually question how to hold a space for students through focusing on individual needs and difference, whilst simultaneously attempting to find connection through shared intentions and practices. Acknowledging individual and collective anxiety in learning environments is important because, left unchecked, these individual anxieties risk generating collective frustration, resistance to the creative process and fatigue. Openly discussing and agreeing on how to create spaces and structures for feeling heard and seen fosters belonging and in turn resilience, both in ourselves and our students. Here we propose that working within creative practices and exploring dynamic ways of holding space for ourselves and for students generates repeated experiences of successful encounters that build resourcefulness and resilience. This allows educators and students to collectively and mindfully encounter future situations and engage with them transformatively.

Practitioner Notes

Our paper invites thinking about critical listening, collaboration and alternatives practices in Higher Education learning and teaching. Here we explore:

- What performance offers pedagogical practices
- How spaces can be con-constructed to ensure participants are not overlooked in collaboration.
- What is belonging and why it matters

Keywords

neurodiversity, anti-racist, performance, theatre, collaboration

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This paper emerged from dialogues between two colleagues who teach drama and performance in Higher Education. Our work here has developed across a series of formal, semi-structured and informal discussions about our experiences of teaching and supporting students within the Drama and Performance department at University of South Wales. We share a commitment to prioritising student needs and our intentions to co-construct reflexive learning spaces. Within the disciplines of drama and performance, we (Jodie Allinson and Sarah Crews) see practice, collaboration and dialogue as equally important to the subject we teach and core to all learning environments and encounters. Because of this we continually question how to hold a space for students through focusing on individual needs and difference, whilst simultaneously attempting to find connection through shared intentions and practices. Acknowledging individual and collective anxiety in learning environments is important because, left unchecked, these individual anxieties risk generating collective frustration, resistance to the creative process and fatigue.

Openly discussing and agreeing on how to create spaces and structures for feeling heard and seen fosters belonging and in turn resilience, both in ourselves and our students. Working with creative practices to explore dynamic ways of holding space generates repeated experiences and encounters that build resourcefulness and resilience. This allows mindful educators and students collectively to encounter future situations and engage with them transformatively.

We begin the paper considering the underlying principles of the discussion: defining the experience of belonging and why it matters and laying out the epistemological and methodological context within which we position the work. We then move to each reflecting on our experiences of these principles in practice and what they might offer. As stated above, both Sarah and Jodie are lecturers at the University of South Wales as well as course leaders, for the BA Performance and Media and the MA Drama respectively. Sarah's background and interests are in performance, media, and sport. The innovate and interdisciplinary practices of Performance Studies underpin Sarah's teaching methods, research, and practice, prioritising the question of how we study and negotiate power relationships in creative/cultural practices. Jodie's background is in collaborative and devised performance making as well as community education. These practices emphasise the individual student as well as the collective group as the generator of creative material and see group dynamics and processes as central to theatre-making.

What is belonging and why does it matter?

We define 'belonging' as a felt sense of being a valued and necessary part of a community of purpose. As such, we consider how belonging is experienced and how the nature of this experience impacts upon ourselves as participants and facilitators of drama and performance teaching and research. Experiences of belonging that emerge from both specific moments and from cumulative teaching and research contexts intersect and inform each other. Belonging therefore is fluid, relational and transforms responsively over time. Experiences of belonging are also interconnected and in dynamic interrelation to those of 'not belonging'. Both belonging and its opposite are two sides of the same experiential coin and engaging with both is an essential part of a student journey in order to honestly address exclusion. To this end we position this research within a context of diversity and inclusion within education and performance spaces and refer specifically to anti-racist, anti-ableist and other exclusionary pedagogical practices. We propose that belonging matters not only because a lack of it generates anxiety and disconnect but also because it impacts on all aspects of the student experience.

Epistemological framework and methodology

Considering lived experience as a felt, embodied phenomenon is the central tenet of our methodology; reflections on this are threaded throughout. We position our work alongside research into embodied knowledge, reflexive practice, and the phenomenology of performance (see, for example, Blair & Cook, 2016; Garner, 2018; Reynolds & Reason, 2012). These methodological traditions often explicitly position the researcher as central within the research and seek to directly engage with knowledge as contingent and constructed from this perspective. Being transparent about how we position ourselves in the research is essential to highlight how knowledge on this topic is co-constructed and emergent. We extrapolate emergent principles from our reflections to use as starting points for further questions and developments of practice in other contexts.

We position dialogue as central to facilitation and dialogic processes as ways of decentring power and engendering reflexivity in our own work, as well as modelling this with students. Dialogue creates space between positions and resists monolithic authoritative positions. It directly creates a space for difference. This in turn allows for acknowledgement and inclusion of diverse perspectives. It invites the unknown and raises questions – something we explore in detail later in the paper.

As our epistemological starting point is that experience and knowledge are co-constructed and co-created by all participants, whether designated 'lecturers' or 'students', we conceive of a 'framework' to contextualise our pedagogical experiences as fluid rather than a set of fixed principles. Thinking relationally allows us to focus on the relationships and dynamics between phenomena, as situationally positioned, rather than the attributes of discrete things in themselves. A relational framework also allows us to consider belonging as a time-based and contingent event. It allows us to engage in ongoing reflection upon the changing experience of belonging, as a constructed, lived and felt phenomenon. When reflecting upon a range of such events where we have each felt an experience of belonging, we have observed emergent principles of the structure of the event that facilitated this.

We reflect on these emergent principles on the basis that some may be useful to engage with in future events. However as each coming together of a set of people is unique each encounter needs engaging with anew, each set of practices needs exploring and reinventing, and each participant in the event of the 'grouping' will bring their unique contribution. Embracing contingency can facilitate a creative and fluid engagement with the lived experience of belonging, inviting an empowered and playful exploration of how it manifests within each grouping. Considering anxiety and belonging as practiced and relational responses to specific situations means that we can engage with them as places of possibility and dynamics to imaginatively engage with. Performance studies supports this work in offering a critical/creative lens to the study of peoples, behaviours, events and interactions. We engage with Performance Studies scholarship using these texts not as a literature review but as a provocation for considering experience.

Performance and performativity

When we refer to 'performance', we mean both a discipline that is connected to the more discrete subjects of theatre and drama *and* the broader understanding of culture as performative – a concept that is bigger than a specific theatrical event. The teaching of performance as a subject on our respective courses involves skills-based teaching in theatre making as well as methods for creating devised and collaborative original pieces of performance. We also use the term 'performativity' to refer to how a set of relations are enacted in a cultural context. When considering belonging we will look at moments of teaching the subject of performance, as well

as performative dynamics between participants within and through the learning environment. As performance scholar Schechner (2020) states:

> *Performance is a broad spectrum of actions ranging from play, games, sports, popular entertainments, and rituals to the performing arts, professional roles, political personae, media, and the constructions of race, gender, and identity in everyday life. To perform is to act in a play, to dance, to make music; to play your life roles as friend, child, parent, student, and so on; to pretend or make believe; to engage in sports and games; to enact sacred and secular rituals; to argue a case in court or present a PowerPoint in class . . . and many more activities, too.* (Schechner, 2020, p. 1).

An embodied awareness of performativity can mean that the process of developing and enacting belonging can be reflected on and explored playfully using this as a shared framework within subject specific teaching. As bell hooks states: 'Teaching is a performative act. And it is that aspect of our work that offers the space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts, that can serve as a catalyst drawing out the unique ele-ments in each classroom (hooks, 1994, p. 11).

Gay McAuley (2000) describes how the "theatre and the spaces it encloses have a powerful bearing on the meanings created by the performance" (p. 90). This can be extended to the performative nature of learning and teaching spaces and how the spaces themselves either hold resonance and significance for students, or they can be alienating for students — both in terms of physical architecture and the dynamics that play out between individuals. For McAuley (2000), "[i]t is through the body and the person of the actor that all the contributing systems of meaning (visual, vocal, spatial, fictional) are activated [...] the actor/performer is without a doubt the most important agent in all signifying processes involved in the performance event" (p. 90).

Even though McAuley (2000) is referring specifically to the framing of a performance event wherein there is a clear distinction between 'performers and 'audience', the notion of the actor/performer as central agent in navigating and relating to the various theatrical components that establish the bigger picture for an audience, reveals an explicit negotiation of power/agency. In terms of how power operates in HE, undergraduate students have typically arrived from a system of education that sets out clear priorities for learning built upon the idea that the teacher holds the knowledge and the students' role is to access, learn and repeat it. Entering the university can shake up these familiar concepts, and without explicitly addressing these changes and discussing openly how power and structure are operating on seemingly new terms, students are likely to become frustrated and confused by these shifts, instead of empowered.

Applying McAuley's (2000) thinking about exploring the relationships between space and actor, and spectator and performance event, allows for us to see "the way that genuine exchange can take place between the human beings on the stage and those in the auditorium" (McAuley, 2000, p. 282). Understanding the 'student' as the 'actor' in this instance positions the student as agent in the learning and teaching experiences they encounter. Put another way, students are integral to how meaning is made in shared learning environments. When attention is drawn to this, an open conversation can begin about how to create a learning community that is based upon principles of equality and inclusivity, without overlooking or undermining how each individual student is experiencing the circumstances presented.

The role of creative practice and disruption

In performance making, we often utilise the idea of disruptions as surprises and opportunities within the creative process. Here disruptions are conceived as a generative force for creativity, imaginative thinking and change. We have found that disruptions within learning and teaching situations can be an impetus for collaboration rather than a problem to solve. Queer scholar Elizabeth Freeman shares an example of a how a seemingly problematic encounter with a

student offered an opportunity for meaningful exchange, discussion and potential transformation. For Freeman this was a point to reflect on in her teaching and an invitation to change how she had approached certain topics for some time. It was a transformative encounter. Freeman's anecdote is a key example of where a student disrupting the flow of teaching — be that to ask a question, to arrive late, to remove themselves from a situation or in any other instance – offers an invitation to *change the rules between teacher and student*. We cite at length to underline the issue:

> *A student came to see me in office hours, quite upset. She was in her late twenties, a few years younger than I, but she dressed like my feminist teachers I had in college. She stood before me in Birkenstocks, wool socks, jeans, and a women's music T-shirt, and declared that she felt marginalized and dismissed by my comment, that lesbians-who-give-potlucks described her exactly, and that I had clearly fashioned a more interesting identity with her own as a foil. I had thought that I was telling a story about being inadequate to prevailing lesbian-identity forms, or about allying with gay men, or perhaps even the lack of representational choices for signalling femme. But it turned out that I was telling a story about anachronism, with 'lesbian' as the sign for times gone by and her body as an implicit teaching text. Momentarily displaced into my own history of feeling chastised by feminisms that preceded it, yet aware that this student had felt disciplined by my jokes much the same way I apologized, and a long conversation about identification between students and teachers followed* (Freeman, 2000, n.p.).

Freeman's exchange with the student does not reference directly an overt disruption in a class, but the encounter nevertheless draws nuanced attention to the complex and multi-layered perspectives between the teacher and the student in just one instance. Multiplied to consider the 20 to 30+ students in any given class or learning environment, and we can begin to establish a picture of how many individual and potentially even competing narratives are happening in the same learning and teaching space at any one time. The key concern for us is how we *demonstrate and acknowledge* the presence of another. How do we interrupt our own internal narrative and be open to what else is going on in the space? As bell hooks states:

> *As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recog-nizing one another's presence … any radical pedagogy must insist that everyone's presence is acknowledged. That insistence cannot be simply stated. It has to be demonstrated through pedagogical practices* (1994, p. 9).

The pedagogical practices we are advocating draw on these philosophies in meeting interruptions and distractions as creative opportunities for uncovering power dynamics and becoming aware of how systems of power operate in practice. Once acknowledged, we have the potential to change and unlearn the ways of thinking, engaging and belonging in HE that exclude or marginalise individuals and communities.

Acknowledging and unlearning power dynamics

Sarah Ahmed recalls her early experiences of racism as being that of "one who does not belong" (2012, p. 2). For Ahmed this experience is akin to feeling "out of place" (2012, p. 2). Here, the connection between belonging to both a physical space and a broader conceptual understanding of social connection to people and places are core to what it means to feel (or in Ahmed's case *not feel*) seen, heard, understood and included. Ahmed (2012) details her experience of racism in institutional spaces, and in drawing on interviews with others, unpacks the very real sense of not being included – not belonging – which is derived in this instance of an experience of not being white. What we can take from Ahmed's work is how the idea of belonging is inextricably

linked with who or what is given access and voice in any given exchange or encounter: who is included and who is excluded in the ways we practice, exchange, and configure our systems and spaces in HE. Ahmed's (2012) focus is, for the most part, derived from individuals who work within institutional spaces, primarily at an organisational and structural level. However, we – lecturers in performance – and our students navigate these same systems and spaces when we work and study. In other words, Ahmed's thinking directly applies to what belonging – or not belonging – might be like in learning and teaching spaces.

The invitation to think about belonging has been a welcomed opportunity to reflect on our own experiences of belonging as well as how we each attempt to facilitate safe working spaces for students. The discipline of performance can take for granted that the collaborative nature of our work means belonging and inclusion are a given. They are not. In the last decade, our subject area has started to address issues relating to power and privilege that have long been silenced or ignored. Collective projects such as 'Revolution or Nothing: An informal network of Black and Global Majority Scholars in UK Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies, 'Against the Canon' — a special issue edition for *Theatre, dance and performance training* (2020) have sought to address concerns around inclusivity and diversity (or the lack thereof) in academia. We see this, too, in the work of the Neurodiversity in/as Creative Research Network, as well as other conferences, publications and working group activities.

Performance practices are helpful in laying bare the performative nature of learning and teaching; they shed light on how we, individually and collectively, construct and navigate systems of power and perform privilege. Unpacking these ideas with our students is key to curating and holding space for collaboration and mutual exchange. This involves drawing attention to hierarchy, form, and privilege. Open discussion with students about how we learn power dynamics as well as how they operate structurally within institutions and artistic forms enables us to consider how we might do power differently.

The above principles challenge us as performance pedagogues to question the assumptions we have inherited and continue to practice. Statements of intent of inclusion become meaningless or counterproductive unless enacted, and this involves naming experiences of exclusion. This in turn requires participants to both enact and experience trust in a collective commitment to respect each person's needs. To ensure practices are congruent with intent and that micro and macro exclusions are addressed and transformed rigorous structures must be in place as well as a collective commitment to the bigger project of creating belonging. Commitment is demonstrated through enacting determination to work through the difficult moments together, and our experience is that this shared experience of commitment builds trust.

Within collaborative devising practices the establishment of trust and commitment is done as part of and in service of the goal of creating a piece of performance. At the beginning of such a process there is usually a starting point, such as a story, a theme, a specific event or a site, but the final form of the work is unknown at this point. The purpose of collaborative devising is usually to collectively imagine and create original work, one that all members of the group feel invested in and have contributed to. Starting a project without knowing the end point demands collective commitment to creating something new, a willingness to let go of habitual ways of thinking and doing, and the ability to listen and respond to the others within the group. This can be a scary venture to embark on, and one in which group members are asked to be open and responsive in the creative process. An understanding of notions of performativity within individual and group processes can provide a safe lens through which to view the moments of conflict and difference that will usually emerge. The establishment of trust and a commitment to creatively imagining and enacting new visions as principles of collaborative devising practices makes this kind of performance uniquely positioned to engage with experiences of exclusion and belonging and explore how to constructively transform from one to the other.

Alternative practices

In this section we discuss our experiences of the enactment of the above principles in the research and teaching situations we are part of or draw inspiration from. In this section I (Sarah) write on how the works of queer and feminist scholars Jack Halberstam (2011) and Sarah Ahmed support my practice and commitment to readdressing the balance of power between student/teacher and director/performer. Halberstam (2011) and Ahmed (2012) address systemic issues of privilege and the (in)accessibility of some spaces and practices in HE. They explore issues and experiences of exclusion that they have seen and felt independently in their roles as students, teachers and scholars.

Halberstam's and Ahmed's respective works share a commitment to understanding how to do learning and teaching differently, seeking to transform practices that are steeped in histories of privilege and hierarchy. This approach requires us – teachers and students – to not only understand our own position to structures and practices in HE but also so interrogate our positionality and our responsibility to each other.

In addition to unpacking the various ideas about university cultures that are assumed and taken from granted, Halberstam and Ahmed argue for alternatives ways of designing inclusive learning practices and spaces. They view HE as an interrelated network of structures, systems and practices that grant some bodies greater agency to move and within than others. Halberstam and Ahmed ask us to think about how we consider ourselves in relation to those structures – as well as others. Moreover, their works consider how we put these ideas into practice to create genuine, meaningful change – bridging the gap between what Ahmed describes as the gap between symbolic commitments to diversity and the experience of those who embody diversity. Indirect and allusive 'commitments', says Ahmed, allow for abuses of power, such as racism, harassment, bullying, and unequal working conditions to prevail as they thrive in universities at a structure level. Halberstam and Ahmed suggest that the overt and subtle abuses of power that are carried out, protected, or ignored, are responded to creatively and pragmatically. To be clear, neither Ahmed or Halberstam have published a 'how to do inclusivity and diversity work'. However, in drawing attention to the multiple instances of how *not* to do diversity and inclusivity both scholars seek to inspire alternative practice and modes of operating in our work with students and each other.

The invitation to unlearn is something that we can take up with and do our students. For Halberstam the collective commitment to *unlearn* sets us on a path alongside our students, instead of adhering to the performance of hierarchical dichotomies such as the formal distinctions made between student and teacher, or learner and holder of knowledge. Halberstam suggests that this alternative education pathway, or what they refer to as a 'path so twisted' is co-created and involves positioning adventure, connection and surprises at the forefront of the process. In practice, what this might look like is developing a curriculum that is open and responsive to student interests and ideas as well as creating space to interact with social, political, and cultural ideas that are already part of the students' experiences. Doing so invites current social anxieties into the space to work through collectively creatively. Co-creating curriculum content with students is possible if course designs are flexible and project-orientated. During the revalidation of the BA (Hons) Performance and Media degree at USW, the team developed the curriculum design around these principles of collaboration where students work together and with staff in terms of shaping module content. We ensured that learning outcomes and assessment criteria were robust but that there was flexibility in module content. Being responsive to student interests, needs and the dynamics of each cohort suggests to the students that there is room for them to be seen and heard. Moreover, if extended as a meaningful gesture to collaborate and unlearn/learn together, rather than, implementing a 'symbolic commitment' (to use Ahmed's phrase) to creating inclusive learning and teaching practices, co-constructing curriculum necessarily challenges the outdated but nevertheless prevalent assumption that there is a particular type of knowledge to aspire to. Contra the notion that there is only one way to learn and that the teacher/lecturer knows in advance what the outcome of that learning *is* and

should be, the gesture of co-creating curriculum says to students that there are different types of expertise and knowledge and that we can all learn from different sources and diverse range of experience.

We have seen similar projects undertaken in several UK-based universities this year, with the specific aim of working against canonical texts. The long overdue work of 'decolonising the curriculum' has been taken up in different departments in institutions across the UK. However, if this work is approached as being done *for* the students, rather than *with* the students, these efforts are still adhering to traditional assumptions of what Michel Foucault terms 'power/knowledge' — that is to say, the same voices/practices are being privileged even in the act of recreating the same pedagogical practices that these very projects are seeking to disrupt. Taking active steps towards inequality and injustices in learning and teaching requires confronting attitudes to pedagogy that suggest we (teachers and lecturers) and working either on or for students. Co-creating curriculum content is just one example of a practical invitation to work *with* students. In a research context, performance scholars Royona Mitre and Broderick Chow (2021) developed on their work in Anti-Racist HE and began a collaborative project on 'critical listening'. Prior to their joint Annual Lecture for 'Critical Pedagogies' Chow and Mitra (2021) undertook a practice of exchanging a series of voice note conversations.

The short recordings of music, sound and text prompted an exercise of what Alexandra T. Vasquez (2013) calls 'listening in detail', a method aspiring to opening up rather than pin down. The exercise also responded to the call by Rajni Shah (forthcoming, 2021) to theatre and performance studies for an attentiveness to words, worlds, and actions through a commitment to not-knowing. The form of this exchange was an attempt to move away from colonial models of knowledge production and exchange such as debates, panels, keynotes towards a coalitional space of growth and learning (Chow & Mitre, 2021).

Questioning form and structure is key to artistic agency and broader practices that seek to empower individuals in collective environments. As a teacher, learner and creative practitioner, challenging traditional modes of knowledge production and encouraging inventive and interdisciplinary approaches to learning and teaching is key to how I (Sarah) engage students in the collaborative task of creating, shaping and establishing inclusive and dynamic spaces to work within. I use communal observation and structured improvisation as tools for responding to how we operate within, and navigate, what Ahmed outlines as the sometimes rigid and overbearing structures in education. I begin by making explicit to students the already performative nature of learning and teaching — for example, how I perform the role of lecturer, how they embark on a performance of good scholarly practice and how structural systems function. The aim here is to invite students to engage with these ideas with critical focus and curiosity. Applying this critical/creative lens allows us to consider collectively the bigger picture of university structure, and the other forces at play within their degree experience.

I use the Six Viewpoints theory and practice, developed by dancer Mary Overlie, which at its core, works to understand how we move away from what Overlie terms 'vertical' (hierarchical) forms of artistic process and expression. Overlie invite us to think about horizontal (democratic) forms of artistic practice, wherein 'Space, Shape, Time, Emotion, Movement and Story' — the Six Viewpoints – are viewed as collaborative materials that have equal importance to the participants themselves. Overlie explains that the practice and theoretical underpinning of the Six Viewpoints 'aid in the expansion of the artist's process', allowing:

> *artists the opportunity to approach making art from a field of knowledge that is presented in a horizontal, non-hierarchical language ... The Viewpoints create a study and work process that encourages the artist to function and define themselves as "observer/participants," trading in the traditional "creator/originator" function held in modern and classical eras* (Six Viewpoints Website, 2021).

Echoing Mitre and Chow (2021) above, Overlie's approach to collaborative and creative exploration involves 'listening in detail', 'opening up' instead of pinning down and taking time to pause and reflect before responding to stimulus. One way in which we put this idea into practice is by using one of the Six Viewpoints – I usually begin with Space – to renegotiate how we might work together without first designating a leader. Space is a particularly important conceptual and physical tool for shaping my encounters with students and co-constructing learning and teaching environments.

After giving students a brief introduction to using Viewpoints as a means of artistic collaboration and promoting a democratic creative environment, I give them the deliberately ambiguous instruction of leaving the space we are in (and maybe even the building) and finding a space collectively to settle in and observe for 15 minutes. Students are instructed to undertake the exercise without talking and on their return, they are asked to perform the space they have observed without preparing how to bring this together as a performance. The rollercoaster of creative outcomes and reflective discussions following the presentation of work oftentimes produces a host of unexpected and provocative results. Typically driven by curiosity, negotiation, and a fear of getting it wrong, the conversations tend to reveal a sort of creative rawness and collective vulnerability that fosters a lasting sense of community and rapport.

The exercise is never to do with producing something polished or making something to develop and work on for assessment purposes. Rather the intention is to expose the already performative nature of the classroom, drawing students' attention to 'the classroom' or studio space as a place for collaboration and curiosity — a place to question openly the role of not knowing, failure and getting things 'wrong'. This shared, iterative process of co-constructing working spaces and methodologies (without recourse to assumptions of what form those spaces and methodologies should take) requires collective investment and commitment which is, in itself, generative of belonging, even though individual experiences within this may differ.

Neurodivergent or crip practices in practice-as-research

In this section I (Jodie) discuss my work in creating teaching and learning spaces that are accessible for students who identify as neurodivergent. Intertwined with this is my own experience of belonging when participating in communities that specifically challenge neuro and physical typicality in pedagogical and performance practices. For both I have considered my experience of performance pedagogy that is constructed for an assumed neurotypical or physically normative participant. The abilities that are often assumed can include (but are not exclusively) the following:

- Sustained and consistent physical and mental energy
- Sustained concentration
- Capacity to accurately understand and interpret verbal instructions in written or spoken form
- Fast cognitive processing
- Capacity to remember and retain information
- The ability to do the above well whether working individually or in relation to a group
- The ability to do the above without support or interpretation, and
- If support for the above is needed it means the participant is functioning at a 'lesser' capacity than other participants.

My experience of neurodivergence and fatigue follows a brain injury which impacted on my energy, pain levels, processing speeds (particularly of verbal information) and memory. This impacted on my capacity to participate in group work in ways that I experienced as normal prior to my brain injury. My immediate experience of these differences was of dislocation and not belonging. My experience of collaborative performance-making processes however (ones which value the creative input of each participant) gave a basis to explore other modes of

participation. Previous experience of working with students assessed with dyslexia also gave me creative strategies to draw upon as did an awareness of work that was being done in the field to address inclusion and accessibility in performance pedagogy. There is not the scope within this article to survey the range of practices which have begun to address this in performance pedagogy.

In this section I consider how belonging was generated from these experiences and the impact of this. Firstly, I consider my experience of participating in the Cloudspotters' Café —Bookclub edition, run by Unchartered Collective (2021). This was a three-month online project for participants to creatively explore living with chronic fatigue and/or pain. Whilst otherwise engaging in an ongoing process of navigating difference in collective situations dominated by normative working practices, I found that participating in the Cloudspotters' Café where all members identified with these experiences generated safety, connection and belonging. It invited radical thinking about how normative practices could be transformed to become inclusive and to expand participatory modes of engagement. Experiencing community in relation to my neuro and physical 'divergence' was liberating, in that this divergence was firstly positioned as the norm (and not needed to be negotiated as the deficit in relation to another norm), and secondly as filled with creative possibilities. I experienced the group as a space to contribute to the reimagining of cultures of participation and communication. It was a liberating shift in perspective that transformed feelings of shame associated with 'not fitting in', and instead celebrated my difference as a unique offering.

Positioning differences as an offering rather than a problem allowed me to explore my transformed capacities as contributing to diversity of expression, which was an empowering experience. As Aimi Hamraie (2022), introduced to us during the process to frame our practice, states:

> *I call in the power of crip access. Crip access as refusing normalcy, access as the flow of radical love and hospitality. Crip access as the element of facilitating belonging together for all of us and refusing to leave any of us behind. Crip access as flexible, ingenious, creative, and world-changing* (Hamraie, 2022, n.p.).

Participating in Cloudspotters has also informed work I have been doing to de- and re-construct my pedagogical practices. For example, when teaching improvisation in the past I have often started an exercise by giving a stimulus (for example a word or an image) and then inviting a creative response in a specific mode, for example through the creation of performance text. This requires all participants to respond using the same form, which limits diversity to a narrow field. Belonging partly emerges from the valuing of conformity to a task, and potentially excludes those whose preferred mode of response might be different. The methods employed during Cloudspotters however invited greater diversity of response. For example, if an instruction was given to express an idea in words, and words were not accessible then we were invited transpose the articulation of our response to a different modality, for example to draw it or dance it. Working this way communicated valuing each individual, rather than for conforming to a pre-established 'norm'. This felt different to workshop practices I learnt when younger where 'good' participation meant execute instructions exactly as give. Instead, inviting such a freedom of response required trusting that belonging is generated by commitment to sharing space and time together, by valuing each participant's contribution, and through the understanding that all experiences could create value for participants.

Another example is how I have re-evaluated specific performance practices I previously learnt and taught which place value on participant's being still and quiet when observing others presenting work. This action is often taken to be normative and indicative of respect for the work, and 'pay attention to others when they speak' (with the assumption that paying attention entails quiet stillness) is often assumed. However, stillness and quiet is not always possible for

every participant, and for some moving and making sound is essential to processing information. A failure to unpick normative ideas about what constitutes an expression of respect in the performance space can leave some participants feeling misunderstood and excluded, and others feeling frustrated. This can contribute to hidden exclusions, and opportunities for more diverse group connections and expressions will be missed.

As mentioned above I have also worked with students who identify as dyslexic, who often report experiences of belonging when working on performance making, but of 'not belonging' in relation to academic writing. Many report that the challenges with written language that they associate with their dyslexia lead to feeling different from their peers, and that this is problematic and generates separation within specific learning situations. Failure to examine normative practices around academic writing can lead to hidden experiences of not belonging and miss opportunities to explore alternative practices that draw on the strengths of all participants. Even when exploring such practices, it is important to be vigilant in uncovering assumptions, and to always facilitate open expression of when 'not belonging' is occurring. An example of this would be my experience of facilitating a workshop with participants who voluntarily identified as dyslexic.

The workshop, which explored improvisatory approaches to working with academic language, involved an exercise where participants wrote individual words on scraps of paper, which would then be used to form an 'ideas installation' in the space. I introduced this activity with the statement 'please don't worry about how you spell the words, in this space spelling doesn't matter'. This statement was intended to reduce stress, on the assumption that if the facilitator verbally took away the importance of spelling this would consequently take away that pressure for the participant. However, one of the participants responded that spelling did matter to him, because of his history of being corrected for 'bad spelling'. He explained that me saying spelling did not matter did not take away that anxiety, and in fact negated that reality and his right to express it. This led to a useful conversation about the differences in experiences of education and their impact, from which place it was possible to negotiate a more useful instruction for the exercise that acknowledged this reality. To enact belonging in a meaningful way therefore requires everyone in the group to articulate what inclusion is and feels like, so that practices can be negotiated from this place. As Preston states: "critical pedagogy analyses contexts in terms of the way in which they (re) produce values and systems or enact regimes of truth that benefit certain groups over others" (Preston, 2016, p. 21).

To do this, therefore, requires a commitment to examining these 'regimes of truth' collectively. I developed the practices employed with students assessed with dyslexia in response to interviews I conducted with them about their experiences of studying and relating to written language. From their responses I developed alternative working processes that utilised their strengths in practical work and applied these to working with written language.

To do this required me to critically reflect on my own assumptions and teaching strategies and to enter into a place of 'unknown' with the students. As such we worked together as co-researchers to create changes in teaching and learning practices, which often required letting go of hierarchies of knowledge or ideas of academic status. This was not without its challenges for all of us engaged in the project, and as Preston (2016) states this work requires "cultivating the personal resources to *feel*, *act* and *be* in the moment, especially during moments of difficulty and challenge" (p. 81) and that this "takes work and requires that the practitioner is able to see the dilemma's s/he is experiencing as part of a political whole of which the self is an important but not by any means the sole element". (p. 81). *Belonging,* in the sense of being collectively invested as co-researchers in a shared project to transform educational practice around working with written language, formed a vital factor in the 'political whole' Preston (2016) is referring to. It allowed us all to take risks, be vulnerable and so be creative and experimental when dismantling practices and creating alternative ones.

Conclusion

In this paper we have attempted to capture key questions and themes that emerged from our ongoing dialogue with each other about belonging. We have made a case for the role of creative practice in how we foster belonging, introducing the performative nature of roles and practices in Higher Education as a means to developing alternative ways relating to one another. We understand that discissions about belonging are fluid and require critical focus and action-based principles for establishing and re-establishing practices and spaces that encourage students that it is safe to be themselves.

In terms of curriculum content and timetabling design, these conversations might take away from what we would once consider 'core' material for any given course. But without dedicating time to how individual students manage their learning and teaching experiences, we run the risk of overlooking fundamental concerns and anxieties that are already occupying the space whether we chose to bring awareness to that or not.

In short, *how* students learn and are invited to participate is just as important (if not more so) than *what* we decide to teach them. Here we are suggesting that future thinking about belonging requires dedicating space, time and resources to engaging students in these ideas. Further directions for this work will consider where these practices can go beyond our subject area, and how our work can be applied in different contexts and establish connections with broader disciplines and practices in learning and teaching. Examining practices of power and privilege and co-constructing equitable teaching and learning spaces are fundamental to engendering transformative experiences of belonging, and the performance-based practices examined above offer starting points for further pedagogical exploration.

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