Students' perceptions of blended and remote learning and its impact upon sense of belonging

Alicja Syska
University of Plymouth, UK

Christie Pritchard
University of Plymouth, UK

Presentation abstract

Blended learning has been widely recognised for its 'transformative potential' (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004) in higher education, especially when it comes to its versatility and increased opportunities for distributed learners. Nonetheless, the technological challenges it poses, alongside issues linked with policy, resources and support structures, have led to considerable resistance to the concept of blended practice. Despite this mixed reputation (Antunes, Armellini and Howe, 2021; Lomer and Palmer, 2021), few studies have attempted to explore students' perceptions of blended delivery, with most research focussing on staff experience (Torrisi-Steele and Drew, 2013).

The session reports on a small-scale evaluative study on student perceptions of blended learning that we conducted in the academic year 2020/21. A critical realist framework that considers both agency and structure has been applied to situate these perceptions while our mixed methods approach offers a multi-layered insight into the captured diversity of experience. The aim of the conference session was to discuss with the participants the implications of the findings for future practice and, more specifically, consider the role of Learning Development in enhancing post-pandemic student experience.

Community response

The audience reflections on this presentation underline the broad significance of this investigation into students' experience of the transformative impact of blended learning during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. By adopting a 'Critical Realist' model of research

which explores agency (of students) within structures (of blended – remote with face to face – higher education learning), the authors engaged audience members in an examination of the importance of students' experience of 'belonging' in higher education. From their comments, it appears that this perspective led audience members towards fundamental questions about the purpose and value of higher education. Several recommendations for key texts that deal with these questions were made by audience members and accepted gratefully by the authors as they take forward their research into blended and remote learning. As with perhaps all the presentations at ALDCon22, the participants felt they had only just begun to 'scratch the surface of this conversation', as the authors put it in a response to one of their attendees' reflections. The conversation here engages with themes that are also explored in the Biggins and Holley paper on 'technostress' in this issue.

Critical realism as a theoretical paradigm

CB: Critical realism was a new area of theory for me, so I was interested to see it applied in this context. It appealed to me in its privileging of perspective and experience on the part of the students included in the study, without recourse to the objective metrics that so often dominate higher education decision-making these days.

What is clear, from my own experience as well as the findings of this fascinating study, is that blended learning is not simply a mode of delivery but rather a way of being at university, and we need to do more to address this in our own work. I am a big fan of the [Manifesto for Online Learning](#) (Bayne et al, 2016) (not least since Sian Bayne was a keynote speaker at the ALDinHE 2016 conference, and inspired the creation of our own Manifesto for Learning Development at Solent University). In the context of this paper, I particularly like the line 'distance is temporal, affective, political; not simply spatial.' It seems to me that the shift online caused many (including Learning Developers) to forget what we already knew about socialising students into higher education, and focused only on the 'online' part of online learning. The critical realism lens provides a really helpful way to pull us back to that broader perspective. This feels to me like the opening move to an approach which could be extensively developed.

SR: I would have really welcomed more time for a detailed discussion of the critical realist (CR) perspective. I agree very much with the presenters that CR provides a rich set of (meta)theoretical resources for educational research. Jennifer Case's (2013) [*Researching student learning in higher education: a social realist approach*](), for example, employs Margaret Archer's CR framework (e.g., 2000) for thinking through the relationships between structure and agency in student learning. Case's close attention to the development and negotiation of agency, within structures that both enable and constrain this agency, seems especially apt for Learning Development research. It is highly relevant, I think, to the presenters' concerns with the complex and multi-faceted relationships between students' sense of belonging and the different contexts within which their learning takes place. An example of this is how the agential work of belonging might be encouraged and sustained, or inhibited and frustrated, by the various structural factors that condition this work.

Blended learning as a transformation of practice

GK: A key concept I found useful early on in this presentation was the distinction between seeing blended learning as a 'transformation' of practice, instead of a 'translation' of practice. My experience is that, during the urgent switch to blended learning in the context of the pandemic, this subtle but fundamental nuance was lost (or, at least, took a secondary place) against the need to deliver the intended course outcomes, especially considering that there was limited time for many academic staff to digest the implications of a blended learning approach. It may be, therefore, that the experiences of 'blended' learning were quite varied among cohorts, programmes, and/or institutions during the year of the pandemic.

SR: I found this a really interesting and timely session. I particularly appreciated the exploration of factors that tend to be ignored or at best marginalised by more narrow, instrumentalist treatments of 'remote' or 'blended' learning. The interpretative framework outlined towards the end ('national factors', 'institutional factors', 'individual factors') invited us to engage with the complexity of the themes under discussion, and served as a warning against narrow, reductive approaches to making sense of students' varied, context-dependent, experiences.

Figure 1. A visual reflection on the session by Jacqui Bartram.
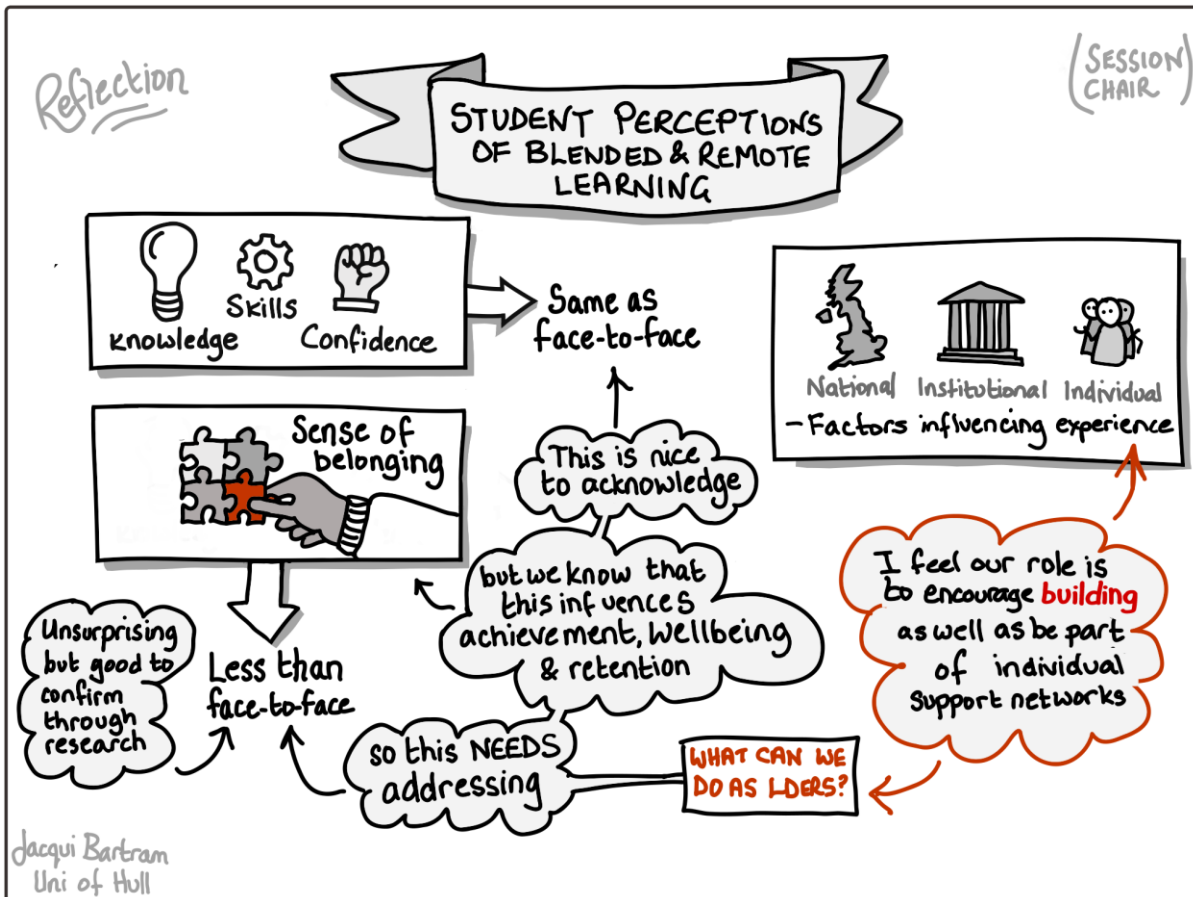
Student belonging and how to promote it

GK: I found it very telling that the data reported in the presentation showed that the highest negative impact of blended learning during the months of lockdown was on sense of belonging. The presenters interpreted this mostly as the result of remote learning. I find this convincing, considering that informal interaction opportunities (between classes and in corridors, for example) seemed to me the most difficult element to address in online classrooms. I tried holding optional 'virtual cafes' in spring 2021, which were intended to provide an online space for peer-to-peer interaction, but invariably ended in becoming Q&A sessions. The questions students asked, for example, about the dissertation process, indicated a degree of uncertainty about their role and activity which was not being mediated by implicit knowledge of what their colleagues were doing. This example would probably fall under the category of 'sense of belonging in my course', although arguably all

levels of community (friendships, programme identity, institutional belonging) are interdependent.

CP: I was interested in finding out what students' perceptions were of learning online during the pandemic. As my research interests lie in digital education, I was familiar with Garrison and Kanuka's (2004) work about blended learning. I think that the types of activities used by educators in blended learning can improve students' sense of belonging. In this respect, I have found Bayne et al. (2020) [The Manifesto for Teaching Online](#) to be really useful.

One perspective that I think is particularly relevant concerning belonging involves moving beyond the notion of the university campus as a container. Instead, the campus consists of people, curricula, networks and connections, not only buildings. I am left wondering how we can change students' perceptions of what they think a university should be. For example, to what extent do educators provide opportunities for socialisation for students? This might improve students' sense of belonging. I am also left wondering what kinds of opportunities students themselves prioritised in their responses to the research and how these opportunities could be adapted to enhance students' sense of belonging?

CO: It was useful to hear evidence about what has been impacted during Covid-19/lockdowns for students. I felt it unsurprising that student belonging would have suffered a negative change and I think this really does highlight the importance of building strong student communities – whether that is online, in-person, or a mix of both. The importance of peer support and how this grew with time, in my opinion, echoes the needs we had as Learning Developers as well. We initially were focused on getting the tech up and running, moving our in-person sessions online and understanding how to deliver in these new spaces. But very quickly we also realised our peers/our team was massively important to how successful this was going to be. Teams catch-ups or zoom calls over a cuppa were needed as we navigated our way through remote teaching. I refer to Lizzio's (2006) *5 Senses of Success* in one of the sessions I run with students; Sense of Connectedness is one of those five senses and really does sum up how important it is for students to feel part of something or to belong.

Authors' reflection

This session was a continuation of the conversation we started at the ALDCon21 (online) where we introduced our research design for the first time and experienced considerable interest in the results we were about to obtain over the course of the year. Consequently, being able to present our findings this year was a thrilling opportunity for us. This excitement was quickly tested, however. As second presenters in the panel, we witnessed the formerly full room alarmingly emptying as the participants of the earlier presentation moved on to other rooms. We got flustered for a moment but did not lose our composure, which was rewarded by a stream of new colleagues steadily entering the room and refilling it to the brim. It would be an understatement to say that we felt relieved to see this newly formed beautiful crowd in front of us, and although a full room is not necessarily a measure of a session's value, it certainly lifted our spirits and helped us deliver our message to the best of our ability. It also made us reflect on how easy it is to be thrown out of kilter by contextual factors out of our control, even when all the elements – knowledge, passion, content – are firmly in place.

Seeing the audience's interest in what we were reporting on created a lively dynamic in the room. Every participant's nod and scribble on the page made us want to delve deeper into the topics we discussed. The formal and rigid words we had written for the publishers about our research acquired new and deeper meaning when shared with colleagues, which reignited our commitment to continue exploring the topic. The post-presentation questions addressed both known and unknown elements of our work and made us think more about the larger issue of what universities are for (Collini, 2012) and how we can all contribute to making them a place where every student can feel like they belong, whether studying in person or remotely.

The session, in many ways, reflected what students were articulating when they adjusted to change. This was the first conference paper back in an in-person environment and we were both slightly apprehensive standing at the front trying to recall the data from our foggy brains of a two-year timeline that seemed to last forever without being punctuated by the normality of life. Students are no doubt feeling that too. The engagement, discussions and thought-provoking questions and comments from the audience demonstrated exactly how we benefit from being together again though, and we come away with new ideas, research to follow up on, and a newly sparked energy to continue with this project.

We will definitely engage with the recommendations by participants to look at Bayne et al. (2020), *The Manifesto for Teaching Online* and Lizzio's (2006), *5 Senses of Success*, and we have already incorporated Jennifer Case's (2013) ideas in our revised article. What our study evidences is what we all now expect to be obvious but was so difficult to keep at the forefront of everyone's minds at the time of crisis. In crisis mode, we usually resort **to ensuring survival** – securing the most basic necessities (cannot resist thinking of Maslow, 1943, here) **rather than** more complex needs, such as **a sense of belonging**. What we are suggesting is that belongingness is actually a basic necessity when it comes to securing a satisfactory university experience.

We appreciated the words from Sian Bayne (quoted by CB): 'distance is temporal, affective, political; not simply spatial.' Our research findings support CB's observation that the shift online caused many in universities, including in Learning Development teams, to sometimes forget what we already knew about socialising students into higher education, leading to a narrower focus on the 'online' part of online learning.

Acknowledgments

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Author details

Christie Pritchard is a Senior Fellow of Advance HE and an Associate Professor of Higher
Education. Her research and practice focus on promoting student success through
creating a sense of belonging, designing inclusive curriculum and assessment, and
developing social learning spaces for transformational learning. As well as leading the
Academic Development department at the University of Plymouth, she contributes to the
strategic development of cross institution education policies and projects. She champions
academic development and student experience at an institutional and national level,
focusing on understanding students' learning in a relational way. She has recently taken
the role of Co-Chair of ALDinHE.

Alicja Syska is a hybrid academic, combining her role in Learning Development with
lectureship in History at the University of Plymouth. She is a Senior Fellow of Advance HE
and a Certified Leading Practitioner of LD. Her research interests include writing in
disciplines, blended learning, student perceptions of their university experience,
community building through writing, and the development of LD as a discipline. She serves
as Co-Lead Editor for the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*.