

The 'perfect fit' – embracing authentic identities in online environments

*Dominator culture has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of risk, sameness instead of diversity. **Moving through that fear**, finding out what connects us, reveling in our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community.*

bell hooks

The context

'I notice that you use a shortened version of your name on your blog.' 'Yes... I do.'

When I first started at UAL in December 2021, I had some issues logging into my UAL account. A month passed, and after weeks of using my personal email and laptop and countless calls to MySupport, someone from IT explained that my name was 'too long' to fit in the system to create my username.

When Shani pointed this out in our second tutorial, it got me thinking. Why do I do that? And when did I decide to do that? Was it a choice I had consciously made, or was it one I had subconsciously taken to fit in?

Looking back, I've always tried to 'fit in' – be it in educational or professional, physical, or virtual spaces. I would choose which bits of my identity would fit, and which bits to leave at home. I wanted, and if am honest, still want to present in a way that allows me to 'fit in' into the systems. Sometimes, what that requires is communicated in subtle ways. Other times, it's presented as a system requirement i.e. my name being too long for the system. The result either way is Yasaman becoming Yasi. A move that lets me 'fit in' so that my name wouldn't appear so long or foreign in online spaces, and when coupled with choosing a profile picture, turns my identity into even more of a pick and mix.

This is just a snapshot of one moment in time. What about the other unseen moments at UAL where staff are made to feel like they must 'fit in' by the inherent design of technical, structural, and political systems? What if we were to challenge the narrative of 'who gets to be at home, who gets to inhabit spaces (Ahmed, 2007) so that it is not about fitting in but creating a psychologically safe space where you can be authentically and comfortably yourself?

These questions are crucial in addressing the systemic barriers that many staff members, particularly those with intersecting marginalised identities, face in academic and professional settings. Acknowledging these challenges means that we can start to shift the narrative by cultivating online environments where diversity and differences are not just tolerated but celebrated. This shift in perspective aligns with

bell hooks' idea of 'moving through fear' to elicit connections while revelling in our differences. How can we design online spaces that are habitable for all, where individuals can bring their whole selves to their work without fear of judgment or exclusion?

Whilst I cannot always change existing systems, in my role as an online learning designer I have a responsibility to design proactively inclusive learning experiences. By encouraging people to share their stories, it becomes possible to weave a rich autoethnographic threadscape of experiences, that may exist only in the online space, but have the potential to reach far beyond digital boundaries.

The intervention

Fears about yourself prevent you from doing your best work. Fears about others prevent you from doing your own work.

David Bayles

In many professional environments, especially academia, there's an unspoken assumption that those in power have a right to emotional and psychological comfort, often rooted in white, middle-class norms of professionalism (Garrett, 2022). This construct can pressure individuals, especially those from marginalised backgrounds, to assimilate or silence their authentic selves, forcing them to shape-shift in order to fit in.

What the data tells us

The UAL Staff Survey (Winter 2023) revealed concerning results regarding staff authenticity, sense of belonging and perceived value of their background and experience at work.

When asked to respond to the statement 'I feel I can be my true self at work', 15% of participants strongly disagreed and 22% of participants were ambivalent. UAL staff member's sense of belonging to UAL declined from the previous year's survey. This suggests that over a third of staff members may not feel comfortable expressing their authentic selves in the workplace and I think this warrants further exploration. Similarly, only 50% of participants felt that their 'background, difference and lived experience were valued at the University', with 30% actively disagreeing with this statement. (Appendix 2).

Intervention aims

Through my intervention, I aim to challenge this by creating a space where the sharing of lived experiences is actively encouraged and celebrated. I hope this might help dismantle invisible structures built on an idealised, yet exclusionary version of 'normal' and redefine professionalism in our digital learning spaces.

My intervention forms part of a continuous professional development (CPD) module called 'Fundamentals' which we ask unit leads who will be working with UAL Online to complete prior to starting the learning design process.

The intervention creates a space where educators can reflect on their own intersecting identities and lived experiences and consider how these shape and inform their teaching approaches. By bridging the gap between personal authenticity and professional practice, we model the importance of this approach for student engagement. We also foster a culture where vulnerability is rewarded and sharing the parts of ourselves that we fear 'won't fit' strengthens the fabric of care and compassion that underpins our teaching and learning.

How does it work?

The activity is called 'Voices of practice' and is designed, built, and hosted on Moodle. It is a standalone, modular activity that could be integrated into any CPD course tailored for teaching, technical or support staff. It is designed to be run asynchronously and is created using the 'Database' activity type on Moodle. (Appendix 1)

Culturally relevant pedagogy and mattering

The learning design approach brings in critical and culturally relevant pedagogic principles, encouraging teaching staff to bring their existing knowledge, whole selves and lived experiences to their professional praxis, much like we ask students to do (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The intervention embraces the principle that 'mattering is not about if you fit or not, it is about being valued.' (Felton and Weston, 2021). The concept of mattering as opposed to belonging is far more nuanced, especially for marginalised individuals who are historically disempowered and who might feel that 'belonging to a community' is beyond their reach.

Theoretical framework

Critical pedagogy and intersectionality are valuable frameworks for starting to engage with these issues. One of the strengths of intersectionality lies in the recognition that unique lived experiences and challenges faced by individuals with intersecting identities shape their perspectives on and their approaches to education and educational spaces. I argue that this recognition (and what my intervention hopefully addresses) could be a step towards empowering 'teaching staff [...] to bring the things that make them the most human to their planning and instruction.' (Martin, 2020) whilst eliciting the 'potential coalitions' between intersecting identities and teaching praxis. (Crenshaw, 2006).

Activity design

The activity makes use of 'stem statements' to prompt open-minded reflexive thinking as opposed to 'one-and-done' answers that are given as answers.

Instead of asking:

'What has your journey in online education been shaped by?'

We can change this to:

'My journey in education has been shaped by... (this could include personal experiences, cultural background, or professional achievements).'

This is a small change of phraseology which promotes open-ended reflection, rather than answering the question for answering the question's sake. Stem questions don't have right or wrong answers – and is a small linguistic change that can result in big changes. I managed to get one response to the activity within the timeframe for writing this report, which I thought was interesting in it's depth of response (Appendix 3).

The selected photo was taken at LCC whilst studying MA in Academic Practice and I remember when I nervously hopped onto the tube expecting to have eyes judging me, but it is surprisingly quiet. At the universities in England wearing a sari is quite unheard of and, given it was my first experience of this, I felt strangely nauseous, exposed, and apprehensive – yet comfortable. After hearing compliments from peers, I felt at ease. Thereafter, I came to a decision by choice to wear the sari at UAL not because it has been imposed on me, but in essence, I am showing who I am in the sari and I'm owning it with pride in the UK and showing that it is professional attire for a UK university and/or any employment outside of India.

I embark on learning and creating high quality opportunities that are required for students learning across online courses, modules and degrees. I will look to develop spaces that encourage and support inclusive practice in a variety of subjects. My expertise is in leveraging in-depth knowledge and experience in Textiles, Art, Fashion & Design to provide relevant information and first-hand experience. I have used blended learning for the number of teaching assignments delivered at UAL since Covid and I am continuing to improve ways to deliver and promote engaged learning ensuring students have an enjoyable educational experience.

Anonymised response

Reflecting on feedback

My tutorials with Shani helped me in terms of revising my proposed intervention. Originally, I wanted to design an activity around developing feelings of psychological safety for online students. Upon reflection, I think that my desire to 'fit in' with the others in my peer group and across my cohort influenced my thinking. I wanted to do something with students to 'fit in' with my peers who all work closely with students either in a teaching, technical or support capacity. But, my only interaction with students is indirect, and not in a teaching capacity. After presenting my originally proposed intervention to my peer group, it was interesting to hear that many of their suggestions around facilitating psychologically safe environments were largely rooted in residential and tangible practices (sending booklets to students, etc.), which prompts the question of whether it is possible to facilitate such environments online.

Final thoughts

In the future, this activity could be expanded into a resource or workshop to help teaching staff develop a critical professional praxis. This approach would encourage educators to consider the 'moral, social, and political aspects of their actions, leading to more coherent and informed teaching practices' (Francisco, Forssten Seiser and Grice, 2021). Additionally, it could include resources that promote reflexive thinking about identity in relation to professional praxis.

Moving beyond the concept of 'fitting in' towards designing environments where individuals can be authentically themselves, aligns with Lorde's powerful statement that 'the visibility that makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the greatest source of our strength.' (Lorde, 1984). Only by willing to stand out, can we be outstanding.

For now, the focus is on designing moments that show respect and care for the souls of our educators (and in turn, our students). This approach acknowledges that tutors, like students, bring valuable, diverse experiences to the learning space. As Martin (2020) asks, 'How successful can teachers be in honoring student backgrounds if their own are disregarded?' By creating a space for tutors to explore and express their intersecting identities, we empower them to bring their whole selves to their teaching practice.

A genius is the one most like himself

Thelonious Monk

With all that being said, let me re-introduce myself. Hi, I am Yasaman...but as I don't want to break the system ;) you can call me Yasi.

[1624 words]

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Screenshot of the activity in Moodle

Welcome to 'Voices of practice' - a space designed to celebrate our journeys in online education.

As educators at UAL, we recognise that each of you brings unique experiences, perspectives, and identities to your work. This activity aims to create a psychologically safe space where you can authentically share your story, acknowledging that our differences enrich our collective learning environment.

✔ Activity – voices of practice

We invite you to contribute by sharing a **photo** and a **short narrative** of your experience of online teaching and learning. Consider these prompts as you reflect, perhaps focusing on one or two to shape your response:

- My journey in online education has been shaped by... (personal experiences, cultural background, or professional milestones)
- I bring my whole self to online teaching when... (moments when you've felt most authentic in your role)
- My approach to inclusive online learning is influenced by... (how your unique perspective informs your teaching practice)
- In my role as an online educator, I challenge traditional norms by... (how you are contributing to positive change in online education)
- My intersecting identities contribute to our diverse learning environment through... (reflect on how multiple identities can diversify your teaching approach)

Remember, this space is about **celebrating** our **diversity** and **creating connections**. There's no 'right' way to share – your authentic voice and perspective are what truly matter.

Select the photos below to view contributions from others, or [add your own](#).

🕒 This activity should take approximately **30 minutes** to complete.

Appendix 2: Screenshot from the UAL Staff Survey 2023

Summary and results in detail

Diversity and Inclusion

	■ % POSITIVE (STRONGLY AGREE OR AGREE)	■ % NEUTRAL (NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE)	■ % NEGATIVE (DISAGREE OR STRONGLY DISAGREE)	UAL Survey 2022	+/- HEI (EXTERNAL BENCHMARK)	+/- LONDON HEI (EXTERNAL BENCHMARK)
I feel I can be my true self at work	63%	22%	15%	↓-1 (64%)	↓-7 (70%)	↓-4 (67%)
I feel I belong at University of Arts London	58%	28%	14%	↓-1 (59%)	↓-5 (63%)	-- (--%)
I feel that my background, difference and lived experience is valued at the University	50%	30%	19%	→0 (51%)	↓-21 (71%)	↓-16 (67%)
UAL is committed to providing equality of opportunity for all staff	49%	27%	24%	↓-3 (52%)	↓-19 (68%)	↓-15 (65%)
I feel able to speak up and challenge the way that things are done	38%	29%	33%	↓-4 (42%)	↓-11 (48%)	↓-9 (47%)

Appendix 3: Screenshot of tutor response

Hi, I'm

and this is my story...

The selected photo was taken at LCC whilst studying MA in Academic Practice and I remember when I nervously hopped onto the tube expecting to have eyes judging me, but it is surprisingly quiet. At the universities in England wearing a *sari* is quite unheard of and, given it was my first experience of this, I felt strangely nauseous, exposed, and apprehensive – yet comfortable. After hearing compliments from peers, I felt at ease. Thereafter, I came to a decision by choice to wear the *sari* at UAL not because it has been imposed on me, but in essence, I am showing who I am in the *sari* and I'm owning it with pride in the UK and showing that it is professional attire for a UK university and/or any employment outside of India.

I'm here because...

I have joined UAL university-wide

I embark on learning and creating high quality opportunities that are required for students learning across online courses, modules and degrees. I will look to develop spaces that encourage and support inclusive practice in a variety of subjects. My expertise is in leveraging in-depth knowledge and experience in Textiles, Art, Fashion & Design to provide relevant information and first-hand experience. I have used blended learning for the number of teaching assignments delivered at UAL since Covid and I am continuing to improve ways to deliver and promote engaged learning ensuring students have an enjoyable educational experience.